

Recommended Movie

"Island on Bird Street". In many ways, perhaps, this movie is not overtly sensational. What made it especially challenging to me, however, is that it is a true story of a specific chapter within the early teenage years within the life of a professional writer and author. Superficially, this is a story of surviving within an abandoned ghetto, the dark and lonely weeks and months (and years?) of World War II.

The basic question the movie addresses is every bit as relevant for everyone who dares to live with above-average awareness of the depth, meaning, and experience of life--the question of how one can coexist with a world which has quite literally lost its mind and abandoned its soul. The ultimate accomplishment seems to be that one is simply one of the survivors when the war is over, who is therefore available to assist in the healing and rebuilding which must follow every war. The focus of the movie, however, and the focus of each person who deeply understands what the boy faces, is not upon the greater implications but simply upon finding a way through and past each present situation.

A perhaps unlikely element which supports the boy's survival, is the ability to view things objectively without any apparent emotional judgement. Events are nothing more than events and people are nothing more than people, such that there is no energy wasted on anger toward those who don't understand and therefore act with violence. It's as if the boy understands that in the bigger picture of life within the world, evil-doers don't matter as much as they think they do. They may create the historical landscape within which the rest of us live, but they do not create us. Our souls and their expressions can reflect a more transcendent and divine source.

Chief among the specific challenges to survival, are the tasks of redefining basic elements such as family and friendship, and of holding to basic principles such as trust, hope, and faith. Any creature, it seems, may become one's dearest friend, the loss of which seems unbearable at the time. Even strangers who remain strangers may in some sense

temporarily become family. Perhaps during times of clear and apparent war, all definitions become more flexible and yet more durable than any of us could imagine under any other circumstances. The very quiet and yet undeniable victory is nevertheless that we are in fact still alive, when the war is nothing more than a memory and the abuse of people by other people mere historical events rather than current realities. Life and love (as always) remain, which is why we press silently onward toward a new world, which could never even be imagined by the enemies who oppose it.

We must imagine it and thereby create its seed. Then we must be willing to plant that seed, each and every day, in a hundred different ways. Somehow, we must go on filling the world with love or we will soon find ourselves living in a

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Sister Who's Perspective

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Life is a collaborative effort, encompassing more than we know. In a time of abundant "information overload," news, communication, and travel across great distances, we often talk at each other without listening, communicating, or understanding. Humanity needs its icons, but also its iconoclasts to grow beyond the good and bad qualities that now limit and describe us. The essences of both God and us remain, in the midst of questions, to be discovered, experienced, and expressed. Please share in this ongoing dialogue, remembering to indicate whether and how you wish to be identified. Blessings, love, and peace to you.

--Sister Who

Living Within the Sunshine of One's Own Heart (especially when no other sunshine seems to be available)

I recall hearing a quote from Anne Frank some years ago, the little Jewish girl who was killed in a World War II Nazi death camp but whose diary has inspired millions of people every since. As told to me, she said that each time one of the Nazi soldiers hit her and she didn't die, she considered that she had won a small victory of some sort.

In a similar way, I recently commented to a new friend that smiling at one's enemies can be just that sort of small victory, specifically and intentionally declaring to them that your spirit lives, that they have not succeeded in reducing you to despair by their acts of oppression.

It is very important to distinguish this from what I might call "the smile of denial" which is that facial expression which accompanies psychological and emotional dismissal of challenges legitimately requesting attention. When one relates life struggles and problems currently faced to another person and the person responds with a brief smile and immediately turns back to whatever he or she was doing immediately before, it's a fairly safe assumption that concern for the first person and his or her struggles has been completely dismissed.

In my own experience of such things, my immediate mental response is usually to ask myself why I bothered telling the person what I did. The answer is usually that I was inviting them to be a true friend. The unfortunate reality is that many people

apparently don't wish to make the effort to be a friend. The end result, however, is an increasingly fractured world in which more and more people drag themselves through life feeling unloved and unwanted and the gifts God has hidden within them go unshared. The divine sunshine within their hearts touches nothing and remains unseen, even by themselves.

Reconnecting with one's own inner sunshine may require a deliberate choice to engage in a particular song or perhaps even a dance (perhaps even a deliberate choice to persist in songs and dances until inner sunshine returns). Stated in another way which acknowledges a paradox, finding a way to give just when one feels most in need, is frequently a way to open the door to that inner sunshine again. The need is not necessarily gone when the song ends, just as a tree limb broken off during a violent storm is not magically regrafted back into place when the clouds dissipate. Yet the return of sunshine invites regrowth and healing. Nothing will be the same, but eventually it might be even better. The important thing to understand is that as quickly as the sun appears, new growth begins.

Life sometimes requires physical struggle, the most obvious example being the process of physical birth itself. One can have inner peace with integrity within these moments by remembering that physical and psychological struggle are neither synonymous nor inherently interconnected. Physical struggle and psychological struggle are like apples and oranges: often placed within the same "gift" basket but far from being the

same thing.

Affirmations and positive-thinking are two other things that, as generally practiced, I would be more inclined to place with "the smile of denial." I have yet to be convinced that simple repetition of a particular phrase (by itself) will translate a wish into material reality. Were that the case, I would be able to fly without any mechanical assistance by now. I believe that everything is possible within some context or by some means or other, but mere repetition of a phrase seems to be lacking a number of other key ingredients.

One of the challenges of humanity, then, is to discover what is missing and thereby to acquire words and gestures which have genuine "guts" within them and are therefore able to "deliver the goods." This is the main point (if there is a single main point) of my yet-unpublished book manuscript, Rediscovering Ritual--and Making it Personal. Rituals are not merely a repetition of actions and words, in the same manner as they have been repeated for hundreds of years, but rather can also be a way of illustrating one's own prayers, wishes, beliefs, and statements.

So what separates an effective affirmation from an ineffective one? What is an affirmation supposed to deliver anyway--good feelings and nothing more? What distinguishes that positive thinking which is truly denial from that positive thinking which is truly self-empowering? What contrast is there between the deeper honesty of the soul and mere verbal expressions?

When I enter a public place and a complete stranger says, "Hello and how are you today?" and I recognize that he or she is using this as a greeting and not as a sincere question, the appropriate answer (in my opinion) is simply "good morning" and not "Hello and I choose not to answer because I don't believe you really want to know." I acknowledge the greeting and the heart intention, not the incongruous verbal form which the greeting and intention assumed, without embracing the same incongruity within myself. Saying words

we don't mean is yet another way of encouraging the fracturing of humanity rather than its growth into healthy integration. Beating someone over the head with this insight, however, is also not supportive of humanity's growth into healthy integration.

I recall reading of the Native American ritual called the "Give-away" in which gifts would be freely bestowed upon others, sometimes even a different tribe. Europeans didn't understand and ultimately put an end to the free and large-scale practice of this ritual. The European conclusion was that there was something inherently wrong, even insane, about giving to the point of self-sacrifice without the most obvious and urgent of reasons. The heart of the ritual, according to my limited understanding of it, was the demonstration of generosity and the affirmation of the belief that the earth would always provide enough for everyone, as long as it was treated respectfully and wisely. Additionally, specific insight about life and relationship could be gained by actively entering into this ritual. Peaceful relationships were sometimes established this way. A reclarifying of values within one's self was also a frequent benefit. Does anyone want to argue against humanity's need for reclarifying its values a bit, considering our abundance of wars and the common practice of valuing material goods and economic resources more than people themselves?

This is the inner sunshine: consciously choosing to demonstrate your own character qualities through personally chosen expressions and rituals. It may be filling someone's gas tank occasionally or inviting someone in need to come (perhaps even frequently) and partake of the evening meal with one's self and family. Obviously, the resulting mealtime together could be very challenging, but it could also be just the sort of education and growth that everyone at the table needs. Trust the process to benefit everyone present in the long run. Another possibility might be allowing someone without such resources,

the regular use of one's laundry machines, to save them the money that would otherwise be spent at a nearby laundromat. Auto maintenance, yard work, tax preparation, even just washing windows--all are ways to communicate value and confidence to someone in need of a metaphorical hug.

The sun is a glowing orb hanging alone in the midst of a frigid empty space. Its only job is to shine, to burn more brightly than any candle we could imagine, and eventually at some incomprehensibly distant time to burn out. Similarly, whoever and whatever we find ourselves to be, we must shine the light that is uniquely our own and especially in that place of cold isolation, give warmth and light to myriads of lives with whom we may never have been (nor ever will be) in direct contact. Although we have never met them face to face and might never do so, they are dependent upon our light. We ourselves are dependent upon each others' light.

"This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine." May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

*"Come
and travel
Life
with me,
for all the best
is yet to be
(because it's still
under construction)."*
---Sister Who

Recommended Reading

Wishcraft by Barbara Sher. Here I go recommending a book again, before I've even finished reading it. I think what I appreciate most about this author is her no-nonsense, down-to-earth, practical and reliable approach. Numerous books to which I've been exposed seem to be interested in creating a new system of superstition and mental projection (in contrast to honest perception). The struggle with which I'm often faced (could I be the only one?) is integrating my life-experience with the advice (and even demands) of a particular noted author or lecturer. "God will take care of you" I'm told, for example, to which my internal response is often "He (she, it, etc.) hasn't done a very good job so far." Or how about the insistence nearly everywhere I go upon positive attitude? I've smiled myself silly trying to make positive attitude deliver what I need. "Something will work out, something always does." And what am I supposed to do in the meantime--go on smiling myself silly, like some heavily drugged resident of a psychiatric ward who feels no pain because I've lost the ability to feel anything at all?

Bringing great relief to people like myself, Barbara Sher relates that in studying the lives of great and successful people she discovered that they complained a lot and were often devoid of positive attitudes. What did they have? That's what this book is about, the first major element being an environment and circle of friends that actively supported what they wished to accomplish.

My but that sounds familiar, the notion that life is a collaborative effort and that everything is interconnected in some way or another--is that something I might have said myself (for perhaps the last nine years or more)? What the book provides much better than I ever have, however, are sharply focused tools and insights for building just such an interconnected and effective life experience. Read, enjoy, live, and maybe someday we can even get together and compare what we've learned, to further enhance each others' abilities and accomplishments. May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be!