

Material Things

--Attachments or Relationships?

Long ago, I read a quote attributed to Corrie TenBoom, a Dutch survivor of a Nazi death camp. Basically she said "I try to hold things loosely because it always hurts so much when God has to pry them out of my fingers."

I once did yardwork for a retired couple and felt dismayed at the thought of ending my life with no purpose but the maintenance of all I'd collected, knowing that it would be dispersed the moment I was gone.

I changed my legal name while in college but spent the first two decades of my life named after Saint Francis of Assisi--a man who chose to identify himself with extreme poverty.

I do not, however, find anything wrong with owning material things. What is important, is the relationship I have with each thing.

To ask a thing to symbolize nothing more than wealth fractures its function from the fullness of its identity. To ask a thing to symbolize nothing more than the historical occurrence of an experience also fractures its function from the fullness of its identity. There is always more to a moment of life than merely what meets the eye.

Everything is alive in some way. Sometimes I give life to things by my fondness for them, much like "The Velveteen Rabbit." A basic respect for and valuation of this life within all things creates in me a desire for all things to experience the greatest fulfillment and highest good of which they are capable.

Sometimes this means giving a treasured thing to someone who needs

it more than I. Sometimes this means holding onto a symbol of a particular memory, from which I continue to draw great strength. Sometimes this means letting go of something that has served its purpose, putting closure where closure needs to be.

Always, this means neither trivializing nor obsessing about the place of the particular thing within the larger picture of life, and that with gratitude, strength, and gentleness, I participate in the unending circle-dance of life.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

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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

Serving the Work

In our age of goal-oriented affirmations and conscious self-development, I find myself reminded again and again of my earliest creative lessons. The first such lesson was the observation that fairly early in the process of creating any artistic expression, the work would seem to take on a life of its own and want to go in directions I had not chosen to go--or in some cases, in directions I had specifically chosen not to go. Consistently I found that if I let the work go where it wanted, I wound up with something unexpected but nevertheless beautiful in its own way. If I refused and forced the work to conform to my predetermined plan, to some degree I wound up with something twisted and crippled.

For some time now, I have understood that this lesson applies to the crafting of my own life as well, though I have not for that reason been completely cooperative. I struggle, I complain, and at times the process hurts so much that I cry. Yet I find that these darker moments also get woven into the complex fabric that will be the finished tapestry of my life, finding their respective places within the larger picture as well.

So I like to think that I'm getting better at refraining from making "snap judgements" in a moment of crisis and that I'm improving my ability to ride out the storm and allow the storm to include things like dark skies, choppy waves, water occasionally splashing into my boat. Too often I have been disturbed by the wild rocking of my boat and jumped away from its frightening gyrations, only to find myself treading water and trying not to drown. Such times are by nature confusing and disorienting, but they are also necessary to the growth of my soul.

Recommended Reading

The Highly Sensitive Person by Elaine N. Aron, Ph.D. Dr. Aron presents a new element to the on-going challenge (and consequent empowerment) of integrating humanity's diversity.

About twenty percent of all life has greater sensitivity to its environment. The book explains the advantages and disadvantages, repeatedly reminding the reader that the goal is not to eliminate anomalies, but rather to harmonize assets. There will always be situations in which the highly sensitive person is essential to the perception and understanding of others, as well as other situations in which the highly sensitive person could feel overwhelmed and needs to be supported.

We all take turns being the one in need.

This is yet one more expression of the divine artistry, which created the world to be extremely interconnected and interdependent. Our enemy is never diversity, but rather misunderstanding and the fractured

In an effort to successfully answer the economic obsession of the current age, I have enrolled in an intensive course in computer programming lasting nine months. At the time of this writing, I have only completed one week of the program and have spent most of my time feeling rather overwhelmed.

The moment of struggle embraced seems infinite; the moment of struggle remembered seems brief. The moment embraced will pass; any moment remembered will last eternally.

I try to remember this while in the midst of my struggles and thereby to be more than just my present experience. I want to be the whole of my life and self which is far more than any moment of time can encompass, touching the present moment in time with much the same self-limitation as touching a large wall with the tip of my right hand's index finger. The present moment is a point of contact with life and time, but never enough to contain all that I am.

Another quirk of this current life-experience is the incongruity at first glance, between being a spiritually oriented person and putting so much energy into dealing with momentary economics. Knowing myself to be a timeless creature, I am nevertheless making decisions and engaging in activities that in their direct description are meaningless within the bigger picture of all that is.

Indirectly, however, the challenges

of personal and spiritual growth that have clothed themselves in the the faces, curriculum, and electronic tools of this educational process, will undoubtedly have upon my soul an impact far greater than I can presently comprehend.

It is vital to my growth, that I do not reject difficult teachers. I may choose to orchestrate my relationships with them in unique and diverse ways, but I will impoverish myself if I reject either their existence or the lessons they have to teach.

Where many acquaintances will disagree with me, is in applying this to life situations which are judged to be undesirable. In spite of wide-spread insistence upon goal-setting and self-analysis that believes in the possibility of a problem-free life, I continue to believe that there are far too many things beyond anyone's personal control to embrace the promise of a problem-free life. Whether someone wishes to name this "destiny" or "pre-birth choices" or "fate" or something else, is fairly irrelevant to me. Things happen and while causes and transcendent reasons may exist, such understanding is often not within my reach. What is sometimes within my reach, is to avoid dismissing and disconnecting from these experiences. They are not evil adversaries; they are difficult teachers. I would not be who I am without the contributions I've received from such teachers in the past. Therefore, as much as possible, I choose to be equally grateful for the contributions of such teachers in the present.

Always when entering a new classroom, I seem to subconsciously expect that this session will pick up where the last one left off, thereby validating everything I've learned so far. More often, a generous amount of remedial work is woven into the curriculum and I find myself struggling with basic issues of common language

and vocabulary, trying to fully comprehend fundamental key concepts I thought I'd already mastered. How disturbing to find myself to be less than the master I imagined!

Yet how refreshing to find myself once again in the place of the uncomplicated innocent student, the one who comes simply to learn what is unknown, without any pretentious ego issues over which to stumble.

A few days ago, however, another student and I were discussing the manner in which educational material was rushing past us, much more quickly than either of us could assimilate all of it. The metaphor that brought the most understanding as we talked, were my memories of church potlucks.

Whatever the particular occasion, most church potlucks I attended during my childhood and teenage years had the same general description. Each family would bring a food item or two, ranging from appetizers to main courses to desserts, and the resulting buffet table would be twenty feet long or more. The common joke was that I was required to try a little of everything, to avoid offending anyone. Contributions that were largely untouched at the end of the collective meal were suggestive of the contributor being a bad cook in some way. Similarly, serving dishes that emptied quickly were a compliment. In general, everything on the buffet table was nourishing and healthy. A basic fact of the situation, however, was that there was no physical way to consume all of the nutrition available. Many choices would have to be made, though some minimized these by becoming expert engineers in the task of piling exorbitant amounts of food onto a standard dinner plate.

In a similar way, most high school, college, and post-graduate courses begin with a rhetorical request to consume every piece of educational nourishment available. Most end in much the same way as my remembered church potlucks: feeling totally stuffed from head to toe as left-over bits of nourishment go back home with their respective contributors and I return to my home and individual life as well.

Did I fail in some way, considering that all of the nourishment available was not

consumed? Of course not. Wisdom also requires that I consume no more than I can handle. What if I missed the best part? That can never be known, since determining which part is in fact the best part is a completely subjective judgment. Ultimately, I acquired a certain part of what was offered and what is far more important is how well I did with the part that I acquired.

And that comes back to "serving the work." In contributing to a potluck, whether literally or figuratively, I need to know which sauce, condiment, or accessory best accompanies which particular item. I do not put ketchup onto a piece of pumpkin pie any more than I put whipped cream onto a hamburger. I let what the item is tell me what the item needs. Some items need to be kept hot. Some need to be kept cold.

In considering my own life as a sort of potluck, with contributions coming from all directions in more different types of pans and dishes than I knew existed, I do not begin by selecting contributions to throw away. Rather, as at any church potluck, I begin to group things into workable patterns and attempt to place my own contribution upon the table in whatever way will allow others to enjoy and to be nourished by whatever I have chosen to share. I choose not be offended whenever people pass my contribution by, interpreting that they have different nutritional needs than my contribution provides.

Since God knew what I had to contribute and placed me here within time and space, I have no doubt that my contribution is needed by someone--I just never know by whom. So I serve the work of humanity's potluck and trust God to get myself and everyone else connected with the nourishment we each need.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.