

sister who's perspective

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Overview

Life has been metaphorically described as a journey countless times throughout human history, but because each of us brings a new perspective and an ever-changing perspective to this ongoing discussion, we never seem to run out of things to say that have the ability to shed new light on what is hopefully by now a familiar subject. Such is my hope for you, as you contemplate this month's essays within this newsletter.

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

Breaking Trail

I recall hearing the witticism many years ago, "too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good." Central to this is an absence of the application of spirituality to material life. From a biblical perspective, this idea is found within the words "faith without works is dead," but the challenge of demonstrating one's faith is not a matter of concern for only Christians.

While I absolutely do believe in prayer, I don't believe in hiding behind it in order to avoid direct involvement. As expressed by an exhortation common within the working-class environments of my youth, "put your money where your mouth is." At the heart of this phrase of is the importance of congruity between one's words and one's actions. A different way of expressing a similar sentiment is, what does one believe enough to do?

To have the resources and ability to do more and to instead do less is not only hypocritical; it also places one at war with one's self, restricting either expression of beliefs or awareness that one does not truly believe (e.g. psychological denial and self-deception).

All that being said, I do concede that "breaking trail" (that is, making a path where there isn't one) is hard work. Although I've never been afraid of hard work, there are times

when I wish it wasn't always my job to do. I'm reminded of Mother Theresa's observation that Godde gives the most difficult tasks to the most trusted servants--after which she was quick to add, "I wish Godde didn't trust me so much."

In the face of all of this, a great many of my friends who seem oriented to so-called New Age spiritual practices, keep insisting that the physical reality will conform to the spiritual one if humanity would just...[do one of a number of different possibilities]. Behind every one of these suggestions, however, is the notion that nothing unpleasant, difficult, or self-sacrificing is required, in order for things to just magically become better. Yet every human life begins with the self-sacrificing actions and choices of a mother and all throughout the natural world are an infinite number of examples confirming the truth of Frederick Douglas' words: "Without struggle, there is no progress." Indeed, it seems to be a universal principle and those who deny it leave a trail of broken promises in their wake. This is neither loving nor truthful nor in any sense a better way of life.

To "break trail" is synonymous with creating a pathway for one's self and others to use and while it is recommendable to make such actions as efficient and modest as possible, some [hopefully small] amount of wilderness must be sacrificed in order for this to occur. All forms of plant, insect, and animal life are generally opposed and eradicated within the space the pathway occupies. As necessary as the path may be, it must be conceded by the surrounding environment.

Specifically because of such sacrifices, gratitude recommends that every path be regarded as being in some way sacred and that passing there be regarded with respect and even reverence. Holistically, life remains now and always a complex interweaving of choices and concessions. Love is what allows such things to ultimately be genuinely good.

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Surveying Terrain

Seeing the world as beautiful from the top of a ridge or even a mountain, is a common human experience. What I learned many years ago from reading "Gulliver's Travels," however, is that general human perception is negatively affected by the perception of excessive detail; within that story, seeing more detail was equated with ugliness and seeing less inspired perceptions of refinement. An exception to this, however, might be autism, which must begin with the task of integrating an overwhelming volume of details into a coherent relationship with all aspects of life.

For myself at least, such integration lead to understanding diverse elements and relationships more deeply and perhaps even to what one might call multi-dimensional perception: seeing not only the appearance but also the implications, effects, meaning, and (consequently) possibilities of specific form and relational positioning (with regard to time, geography, influence, societal values, other participants, and so forth). I even find it bewildering at times, that the perceptions which are so obvious to me, appear to be simultaneously invisible to others around me.

It seems that within the overall unfolding of life, many of us often find ourselves within moments or places where we might wonder where exactly we are (and perhaps even how we got there). Feeling lost typically inspires enormous feelings of anxiety, so it is wise to have some sort of basic plan of response. One possibility is to begin with pausing to do a sort of inventory; to simply listen, observe, and note whatever one's perceptions include--as well as what they do not.

The thought patterns encouraged by general human society often create expectations of certain perceptions that aren't actually always available and the task of noticing such absences is thereby rendered more difficult. Presuming a landscape that is more illusion than reality invites a myriad of additional relational problems. One might view the world from the top of a mountain, for example, and presume that all of the valleys include roads that lead to towns and helpful people, only to discover after days of hiking

that no such resources are within reach. More empowering questions within such anxious times of discovery, are the questions of what is actually available and what can be constructed from such resources? First, however, we must take the time to be quiet, to listen, and to look.

If all one sees are details' superficial appearances, ugliness and confusion are very available possibilities. When one begins to see meanings, relationships, and interactive effects between various objects (i.e. a tree along a river bank that was apparently blown over in a storm, allowing extensive erosion around the tree's now-exposed roots, all of which has consequently dramatically reshaped the river bank at that point), a much larger story of life's unfolding becomes apparent. Perhaps we would be wise to consider how shifts and changes within our own life have similarly affected the lives of others around us.

A central point of surveying terrain is thus that nothing exists in isolation; everything affects and is affected by everything else within reach, whether seen or unseen. The wind, for example, has always been invisible, but no one has ever questioned the wind's reality or the power of its effects. Human spirits can be equally influential, but also have the additional capacity to choose actions and responses, thereby becoming co-creators of the surrounding world and even of the universe.

Part of surveying the terrain, therefore, is considering who the other co-creators are (both seen and unseen) and what they might want to contribute, often because of their own stories and past experiences. A major first step of building community is thus the task of learning those other stories and experiences, to know the variables, influences, and wisdom that are available. In the midst of such exploration, of course, is the reality of one's own ongoing and gradually unfolding story.

When the landscape is dramatically changed by the falling of a tree, the loss of a loved one, or the introduction of a new and powerful possibility, few investments are more essential to future success than pausing to survey the terrain--but never forget that within everything is the possibility to become more.

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Staying Focused

It is vital to remember that perseverance is not only a mental attitude but also a very persistent behavioral practice; ongoing and repetitious action is absolutely required. While this paradox of being simultaneously both active and passive can be confusing, it is also the rich ground that is able to nurture new expressions of life. Being only active or only passive, however, denies such moments their most empowering internal collaboration.

A time-worn motivational phrase advises "don't just sit there; do something!" Turning the phrase on its head, however, ("Don't just do something; sit there!") may occasionally be even more empowering if one is mindful both to be fully present within one's sitting and to employ other actions once the action of sitting has reached a sense of completion. Action without sufficient thought often leads to more trouble than accomplishment.

The primary result of sufficient thought, ideally, is a clear focus able to guide whatever actions follow. An important ingredient of both the preceding thought and the resulting focus, however, is the possibility of change and thus also the need to be adaptable as new insights and information become available. If I am to become the best that I can be, I must embrace the fact that my present moment does not include all of the resources and possibilities that will ever be available to me and I must allow room for such additional resources and possibilities to enter my life--all of which may initially seem adversarial to effectively maintaining focus.

"Ultimately, I don't need others to understand who I am or what I do, as long as they at least allow me to keep doing my true life purpose and my unique divine calling."

-- Sister Who

This is one of the challenges my video camera has mostly mastered--adjusting its "auto focus" functionality to changes in the distance between itself and whatever appears within the perception of its lens. No matter how quickly I aim the camera in multiple and diverse directions, the lens reacts with amazing speed, to maintain the very best clarity possible. In the case of my perception, however, my mind often gets stuck pondering a previous moment while a new one is unfolding and the resulting focus is more often highly questionable.

Yet I find myself at times unable to shift focus, because a previous event embodies feelings, transitions, and implications which must be completed before new ones can be embraced. At present, a major example of this is Gareth's passing. Even more than two months later, I still find myself whispering several times each day, "I just want him back."

Have I lost focus in relation to other activities of my life or am I simply still engaged in the struggle to integrate this event into the larger and more complete focus which my life will ultimately include? How do I also integrate the fact that, for the most part, I must engage in this struggle all alone? There is no community, no sense of family, nor even a lifepartner or spouse who will help to shoulder such burdens and I must acknowledge the possibility that this absence is somehow essential to the person whom I am becoming and perhaps even to the future ministerial work that I will do.

So, for me at least, a big part of staying focused is refusing to run from anything I see, but choosing instead to listen to whatever it is and to learn what I can, no matter how difficult it might momentarily be. I have often lamented that although I can accept that life is full of lessons to learn, I feel compelled to repeatedly ask: does it really have to hurt so much along the way? Yet I know I would not want a life that did not have the ability to feel pain, because too many other things would quickly and complacently be taken for granted.

A big part of staying focused, therefore, is truly perceiving all that is seen--both good and bad--and persistently reaching for every wise and loving possibility that one can.

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Making Camp

In the most literal and obvious forms, nomadic people are a dwindling population within the spectrum of humanity. Perhaps this is a reason we have largely forgotten the importance of being unattached to wherever we are, because of the expectation that before long we will be moving again. In the case of Gareth, I know I would have done a number of things differently, had I been informed that he would be camping within my life for only and (more or less) exactly nine years. Within each moment that passed, however, it was easier to dismiss awareness of just how short our time together would be and to therefore treat each moment in a much more sacred manner.

Drawing from Gareth's example, this suggests that sacred moments should also be filled with exuberance and enthusiasm, but never taken for granted. Being unattached is absolutely not synonymous with feeling nothing while briefly visiting a beautiful moment in time or space. Being unattached also does not mean failing to lovingly immerse one's self in relationships that extend spiritually far beyond the boundaries of those shared moments.

In certain ways, I am who I am because of his nine-year presence within my life, but we were nevertheless engaged in making camp; our time together never had the ability to become a permanent home. The only place within which such a home can actually be constructed, is within the hearts, minds, and spirits of participants. The home defined only by materiality, can never be eternal.

So earthly life experiences are extended camping trips and, like any such trip, one never knows who one will encounter along the way or for how long. Fingerprints of such encounters upon each others' souls, however, are capable of infinite duration--just as every camp site may or may not leave more enduring fingerprints upon the land as well.

In some ways, leaving no trace of one's passing is respectful; in other ways, it ignores the likelihood that others seeking harmony with the land will follow. I choose to leave a little love and wisdom for the next traveler to find.

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On a Personal Note

As this newsletter comes to completion, I am still in the midst of changes related to an evolving home and ministerial environment, set in motion by Gareth's passing. As long as he was here, there was a sense of family which I discovered only recently is biased toward humanity and against canines (only two dogs allowed per household without the purchase of a special permit). So while it does feel less like home, which is a bit confusing and stressful (and complicated by leaks in the roof, cracks in the foundation, and mold in the insulation), I'm doing whatever I can to make improvements.

Bedivere and I are slowly developing a closer and more collaborative relationship, becoming somewhat different companions for each other than we were even just six months ago. He may have also become more of a local celebrity than myself, being perhaps the most-photographed dog in the Denver-metro area, in light of how many people "just have to take a picture," whenever we travel anywhere together by motorcycle.

Video-editing of new episodes of "Sister Who Presents" is ongoing, with half of the commitment of forty-eight new episodes for 2014 completed at this point. It's a little amazing to me to be working on episode #330, considering that I worried in December of 1994 that episode #53 would be the last one.

As for my doctoral work, I am writing the last pre-dissertation paper and may finish the degree completely by the end of 2015.

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