

Recommended Movie:

Dead Poets Society. Robin Williams co-stars in this challenging and deeply moving portrayal of the journey of a group of young men from a state of being relatively passive victims of society, to finding within themselves the strength to live with true integrity at whatever cost. The contrast between the inner life they have taken for themselves contrasts sharply with the oppressive attitudes of the administration of the school they attend.

So many strong ideals and archetypal life challenges are contained within this movie that I hardly know where to begin. As angry as I am at the members of the faculty who oppress their students in ways that are clearly if perhaps also subtly evil, I must acknowledge that these wicked men have their place within the world also, and that without the provocation of their ignorant and unjust actions the true heroism of their students might never have come forth.

Yet the movie is also a most serious indictment of the ways that members and organizations of human society force creative people into limited corners and desperate choices. In each of the persons portrayed within this movie--both those considered to be admirable as well as those considered to be detestable--is a challenge to each of us to extend to one another not the easy limitations of our own expectations of others, but rather the greatest freedom, encouragement, and empowerment that we can.

Sometimes the sun
lights the future path,
at others I navigate by stars;
sometimes the waves
will gently sway,
and at others I ride out the storm.

Each in its turn
describes my journey,
whether or not I protest;
Yet through it all,
remain love and life
and God and I
and in this I am at rest.
---Sister Who

We are each capable of far more than we have so far discovered, but perhaps this is something known far better by dead poets than by we who yet live.

A chorus to a song I wrote a number of years ago goes, "Though nobody hears me and they don't understand, that tomorrow is yesterday still here in our hands...". What we will be remembering tomorrow and for the rest of our lives lies unmolded and unshaped within our hands today.

In the words of dead poets, I often find the moment of inspiration I need to continue to live with integrity. May each of you find within yourselves today also, the divine inspiration to live with complete integrity, the fullest and most positive experience of being alive that you can. Amen.

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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 With (Sometimes Repetitious) Defeat

I recall a particular episode of the television show, "Kung Fu--The Legend Continues" in which a Native American student asks the martial arts master what happens when an enemy is just simply too strong. Almost glibly, it seemed to me, the answer given was "you lose."

I find myself going through the five stages of grief in response to that answer. When Dr. Kubler-Ross presented the findings of her research into the process of death and dying, the five stages she identified actually apply to a great many more things (I think I'm remembering them more or less in the order she presented them, though they do sometimes occur in other random orders as well). My initial response is denial: that can't possibly be true. At some point this weakens and I attempt to bargain with the facts of the situation, wanting some way to escape full contact. When this clearly doesn't work, I become angry, trying to lash out at what I do not wish to be true. With no effective way to strike back and change the basic

truth of the experience, however, at some point I slip into depression. (It is my understanding that depression is generally and basically unexpressed anger, whether because one chooses not to express the anger or because the anger cannot be effectively expressed).

If a more true but different sort of healing is to take place, I must eventually come to simple acceptance and move on in whatever ways I can, with whatever chronological unfolding of events is more or less inevitable. If an enemy is too strong and no additional resources can be found, all that remains within reach is to seek either a last effective trumpet blast of one's personal ideals or a graceful and dignified way of losing.

Fear of failure seems to be just about the most common and most feared psychological and emotional nemesis within the experience of the human race. Yet we spend so much time trying to deny or bargain with the occurrence of failure, that we are seldom able to openly and humbly confront it. Never looking failure in the face, with an inner attitude of acceptance, we are often unable to move beyond the experience of failure to other things. Without talking to Failure, as if it were a person, or talking with each other to learn ways of accepting and dealing with this generally unwelcome guest, the struggle against this less-pleasant side of daily life is re-invented every day.

In every large city across the nation and many small towns as well, hospitals have been built and this testifies to our acceptance of the frequency with which physical injury or illness occurs. We don't like disease and woundedness, but we accept that they are common experiences within life and thus we build hospitals. The resources we've gathered to deal with the common occurrence of failure, however, seem to

be far less obvious and far less effective.

Many times when life's experiences knock me down, I have turned to various friends for support and had to redefine who my true friends were, usually finding a smaller number than I thought I had. The last few years of my life (and the last nine months in particular) have been far too full of such isolating and unpleasant experiences. I understand that this is indicative of how fractured and disconnected we are as a species, a society, and a civilization, but somehow this doesn't help.

I understand that the challenges of my own individual life are my own riddle to solve and my own puzzle to assemble, that according to current societal definitions it's no one's job but my own to "rescue" myself before it's too late. This also is not very helpful, especially when all my best efforts leave me concluding that a time of losing has come, because the simple fact is that my enemy has greater resources than I do.

In seeking the healing of acceptance, I push myself to acknowledge the fact of the loss, to express the grief in whatever ways I need to, and (when I have finished grieving) to move on in whatever ways I can.

If I owned a house filled with beautiful and irreplaceable family heirlooms and through no fault of my own the house burned to the ground one night while I was away attending a holiday party at a friend's house, grief is inevitable and nothing will turn the ashes back into the beautiful things they once were (the one exception being the alien robots in the movie "Batteries Not Included," but I don't happen to know how to contact them).

When I have finished grieving, or possibly even before, I step through and beyond my grief into the action of sifting the ashes for whatever treasures the fire may have missed or, conversely, for whatever treasures were born and given to me specifically by means of the fire. Then I move away from the ashes, allow

them to be buried but always remembered, and I begin to build the next phase of my life with whatever materials I can find or acquire.

In seeking to apply this metaphorical understanding to my current life experience, quite against my will I am slowly beginning to recognize greater strength and maturity within myself. I have also chosen to recognize (or at least try to recognize) such uninvited events as a form of divine guidance.

I know that I am a sufficiently strong-willed person that I would steer my life in directions it wasn't meant to go, if it were not for "closed doors" that force me elsewhere. I believe there is a life that is uniquely mine to live and that the specific qualities and events of this life are part of a much larger unfolding of life within the universe, an unfolding so complex and diverse it could only be effectively overseen and orchestrated by God. Often I have different ideas about what my life should be and sometimes God lets me explore them, but I usually find that the Divine knows the best place for my unique combination of qualities and abilities better than I do.

I don't do what God tells me to just because God says so; I do it because it fits more perfectly with all that I believe, all that I am, and all that I experience. When the divine spark within me (by reason of being created in God's image) resonates with the Divine that transcends me, I somehow know that I'm on the right track--even if that track reminds me daily that roses have thorns; mountain hiking paths are paved with rough and uneven stones; and the experience of life cycles through good times and bad times, success and failure, and wholeness and brokenness with as much inevitability as the cycles of summer and winter, day and night, and inhaling and exhaling.

To return to the metaphor of the burned home and family heirlooms, one

of the most prominent gifts to me from the current time of "burning" in my life, is the challenge to learn to peacefully coexist with confusion, with the unknown within myself and more especially within my future, and with the reality of all the things I don't like--dysfunctional people, limited resources, a world of fractured relationships, and so on.

A very good friend once responded to my statement of the common complaint, "I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if I don't" with the question, "so which way do you want to be damned?" Suddenly I was no longer the complete victim of my circumstances, but rather a person with a decision to make. I may be headed for a rocky shore, but I could choose the rocks that would claim my boat.

What sort of person would I be, if I lived in a world with no rocks, no difficult people--no problems? Resentful as I usually am of the experiences these things give me, I know that they shape me and that as the characters of a movie (the title of which I cannot recall, but Patrick Swayze had a starring role) observed, "Everything contains its opposite." Somewhere hidden within each problem is its solution, within each moment of weakness is a great strength, and within each failure is the greatest of victories. If I do not believe in at least the possibility of this, I thereby promise myself that I will never find the victory I seek.

A final current challenge of my life--experience that bears mentioning at this point, are the frequent reminders I receive during mountain hikes of the different speeds at which different forms of life measure time. Modern humanity wants to count minutes, seconds, days, and perhaps weeks in attaining its accomplishments. Mountains, wildflowers, stones, rivers, and a great many other things count years, decades, and more.

Too often I forget that it may take a lifetime to build a life. But this is what I want to build: a life as big as my soul and not as small as any particular experience, in love with a God who is too big to fit within any religion.

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

Recommended Reading:

In Search of Stones--A Pilgrimage of Faith, Reason, and Discovery by M. Scott Peck, MD.

I haven't finished reading this book, but already it has been both insightful and inspirational. With honesty and depth, the author shares thoughts and questions encountered during a trip to Great Britain with his wife. The stones for which one seeks may indeed not be physical, but rather the heavy bits of earth experience around which our lives are organized and interpreted.

In childhood, my siblings and I often had to weed the garden. In pulling up a clump of crabgrass, I noticed dozens of thin strands of roots. In pulling up a dandelion, I found basically one root (called a tap root) that went very deep and needed to be completely removed in order to keep the dandelion from growing back again.

A metaphor of crabgrass is that for many things there's no tap root. Scott Peck uses the word "over-determined." Both mean that there are a huge number of causes or roots from which a particular thing being described may grow.

Sometimes a moment of life is so over-determined that the most honest answer we can give is that--all things considered--we don't really *know* what we're doing.

But we continue "the search for stones" anyway, and even in our ignorance, we manage to make life beautiful. I think there's something of God in that accomplishment--though it may take much longer than we anticipated.

As Scott Peck observes within these pages, the transition from the age of faith to the age of reason took three hundred years.

Sometimes transition is the state with which we must live, rather than seeing only what comes before or after. Sometimes the search itself is where the empowering questions and answers lie, rather than in the initially recognized goal.