

SISTER WHO'S PERSPECTIVE

Sister Who's Perspective, Issue #43, January 2003, copyright

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

Defiance

No, my participation in the Gay Games last November didn't go the way I'd hoped. Another person from Colorado who'd also participated in the Games, contacted me by email several weeks afterwards, offering words of consolation and encouraging me to continue to participate and support future occurrences of the Gay Games, the next of which will be in Montreal in 2006. I responded, "Of course I will. No matter how many things go wrong, it is still an incredible experience, just to be an active part of something as big and multifaceted and ultimately positive as the Gay Games."

How very like Life this is. No matter how many things go wrong, it is not enough to keep something from going right. No matter how many people lose, it is not enough to keep someone from winning. No matter how many people die, it is not enough to keep someone from being born. No matter how many things come to an end, it is not enough to prevent something new from beginning. No matter how many people hate, it is not enough to prevent someone from expressing love.

Specifically within this bigger picture of positive potential, Life is still a worthwhile and wonderful place to be. It will remain so as long as there is even one of us who is willing to defy any prevailing negative pattern and do something better.

A new year has begun and possesses at least as much potential for both good and evil as the last one which has just finished. Certainly there will be a great many things this year to mourn, a great many evils which will be done. Just as certainly, however, there will be at least as many opportunities to answer hatred with love, bigotry with tolerance, exclusion with inclusivity, and demands for tyranny and oppression with demands for freedom and liberty.

So how shall we begin? It may be an insignificant detail to most, but every time I lace up

my gold hiking boots after applying makeup and putting on the ritual garb which identifies me as Sister Who, I always thread the outside lace through the inside eyelet first, before crossing over the top of it with the inside lace through the outside eyelet. The symbolism of this is a reminder to look within before expressing myself outward, to refresh my connection with my own divine inner spark before acting in whatever way of service seems best.

Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is within you" and I suspect that every other genuinely spiritual leader throughout history has echoed that sentiment in some way or another. The spark of Life within each of us is a tiny bit of God's presence by which we can be guided or which we can strive to repress and ignore because of the challenges it inevitably brings with it. God, within my understanding, is the embodiment of transcendent and divine wisdom and love which encompasses all aspects of personhood and much more as well--gender, orientation, race, innocence, maturity, understanding, growth, justice, mercy, curiosity, adventurousness, openness, strength, vulnerability, and so on.

With all of the limitations of my specific identity, I am ever-so-slowly becoming more than I am, by relating daily and even moment-to-moment, to this divine spark within me which is also the bridge by which I connect with the vastness and virtually unlimited potential of the universe.

Which, unfortunately, is not to say that there are not plenty of moments in which I express something other than this divine connection, the times when I completely (but hopefully only momentarily) forget the divine spark within me. As with Life, however, I can never make so many mistakes that I am incapable of doing something better within the next unfolding moment. This too is a divine gift by which I am empowered to make the world, in some small way, a better place.

Recommended Viewing

"Emmet Otter's Jug-band Christmas." This is perhaps one of Jim Henson's lesser known creations, significantly different from his other muppet productions, yet each holiday season when I view it one more time, it continues to challenge me.

Emmet Otter and his mother are trying to get by financially on odd jobs and doing laundry for wealthier citizens of the area, but are not having great success. Preparation for a local talent contest quickly becomes the focus of the story, but for me the movie is much more about the characters who guide and carry the story along.

The first such challenge is the appearance of "the riverbottom gang," essentially a bunch of juvenile delinquents with no significant parental authority, respect for others, or decency of character in their lives. In the bigger picture of the movie, they are not punished or made to shape up. Rather they are simply presented as part of the curious fabric of the local community. Perhaps in the bigger picture of life, such people really don't matter as much as they seem to matter. Most of those from my own high school experiences who resemble such characters, have lived pitiful unfulfilled lives in the years since. Perhaps the fact that such people are found within nearly every high school population is simply a reflection of the way in which such characters are found within every other societal subset--the politicians who campaign and are elected on the basis of only a single issue, the church administrators who are more concerned with adherence to doctrinal standards than with true spiritual growth, the societal manipulator who is more concerned with acceptability than with integrity, and the promoter who is more concerned with sales than quality of service or merchandise, to name just a few. It all suggests that external wealth more often attempts to conceal internal poverty, that only a very few have managed to accomplish wealth both internally and externally. Perhaps that is a more difficult challenge than most of us realize, requiring an internal vigilance and great self-awareness, to accomplish the possession of money and power without losing our souls along the way.

Within the story of this movie, wealthier persons filling the roles of municipal authorities and business owners are also presented, but seem mostly apathetic regarding the fates of the poorer members of their community. Even down to the wonderful positive twist at the end of the

movie, they are only motivated by that which benefits themselves. Yet somehow this is not enough to persuade everyone else in their community to follow their example, nor does it prevent them from even giving voice to deeper insights about relationship and interaction, though I wonder whether they understand the broader implications of their own words.

Emmet and his mother on the other hand, have managed to become honest people with basic feelings of generosity and goodwill toward others, hard-working yet somehow never blessed (so far) with the opportunities and resources they deserve. There is frequent reference to the perhaps uncertain example of the father and husband who is no longer present but who was apparently a dreamer willing to take a chance whenever a positive opportunity presented itself. Even when the talent contest doesn't turn out as hoped, however, and Emmet and his friends sadly comment, "if only...", Mother Otter's only comment, without blaming anyone else or bothering to get angry about the judges' lack of ethics, is "Well it just didn't turn out that way."

Walking home after the competition, the washtub ruined by being made into a string-bass instrument and the hand tools used for odd jobs pawned to cover the purchase of material for a new dress to wear while performing, they draw from the integrity of their souls their simple enjoyment of singing together--and therein lies the small miracle which saves them. They had no way of knowing that they were in the right place at the right time, but if they had failed for even a moment to express the beauty within themselves, the positive outcome never would have happened. I find myself wondering whether or how often, my own lack of initiative has allowed me to walk right past such moments. To sing just because you feel like it, no matter where you are or who is listening, seems to be such a small thing to do. Perhaps there are many other small things, the impact of which we regularly underestimate.

Ultimately, it wasn't positive affirmations, self-inflicted attitude changes, or rugged individualism which transformed their circumstances. It wasn't strategic planning, exceptional courage, or fierce determination. It wasn't even a miraculous gift such as winning the lottery, being invited to someone's palace, It was simply their love for each other and their willingness to let their souls sing together in harmony.

Two Sides of a Spinning Coin, Ending in New Year's Resolutions

Years ago, I learned how to stand a coin on its edge, holding it there with one index finger, and snap it into a very fast spin with the other index finger, releasing it to spin like a top for perhaps fifteen seconds or so. The coin was a blur, spinning so fast, almost giving the illusion of being a sphere but without quite the same amount of substance. Changing from one side to the other at such a speed, it was impossible to make out the details of either side. In time, however, it would begin to slow, finally toppling sideways to leave only one side still visible, facing upwards. No one ever knew, however, which side it would be.

We've just crossed the threshold into a new year and its details are still invisible to us. The details of the old year we think we know, but even those are not as distinct within this moment of rapid transition as they seemed before the brief moment of spinning transition began. When the spinning stops, however, which side will be facing upwards? Will we truly have a new year before us or content ourselves with reliving the one that has just passed?

What is Time but a stage upon which we recite whatever lines come to mind and portray the drama of our lives for thoughtful reflection by the audience, a system by which we place things into chronological order, a measure of the diverse spectrum of our experiences, or a crucible in which our souls are refined and matured into precious gemstones?

Time is passing, or as my pagan friends might say, "the wheel of the year is turning," perhaps like some cart wheel, carrying our wagon in directions which may turn out to be redundant and familiar or the birthplace of new paradigms. I may find new aspects of myself which have been either neglected or somehow as yet undiscovered. I may be dismayed at others' tendency to repeat the same mistakes within national and international relations. I might also rejoice, as strength of conscience is passed to the next generation of people who will govern the earth. Whatever happens, I do not wish to be merely a witness.

Spinning coins: the earth, the year, you, me, the nation within which we live, the communities of which we are part--all having multiple sides, orientations within space and time, reactions to the surrounding atmosphere, and inherent qualities as well. All having faces we would like to show as well as ones we would like to keep hidden. All having things we would like to buy but feeling sometimes uncertain about the costs.

If we look intently, we may even see that our light and dark sides are changing places so quickly, that it is sometimes quite difficult to tell one from the other. Self-doubt is a God-given quality, if it is used to balance overconfidence and turn our steps aside from arrogance and presumption. Switching places yet again, confidence and occasional boldness can keep us from being mired too long in self-doubt. When I confront a black diamond/advanced trail high on a mountain at a ski resort, the longer I pause and remain inactive, the more my fear of going forward grows. Similarly, to charge onto such a slope without a moment's pause to collect both my mental focus and my respect for the terrain I am about to traverse, more often than not makes me one with nature with a sometimes painful embrace.

I recently lost my day-job. For more than a year, to pay utility and other basic bills, I've been working as an administrative assistant for a company which does administration for large nonprofit associations. Following the tragedy of September 11, professional memberships dropped, associations therefore had less money to pay for administration, and ultimately there was no longer enough money to pay me for my services. Initially, I warned my friends against trying to lecture me about there being some sort of lesson in all of this. I'm still not to that point, but it has never escaped my attention that what seems like a negative event is often an opportunity for something new. If I spend too much time grieving the event, I will miss the greater opportunity as it passes by. If I spend too little time grieving the event, it will become excess baggage which drags along behind me and slows my progress. Somehow I need to find positive closure and move on to the next phase of my life, I must live the life I've been given to live without stagnating in any particular place just because the path ahead lacks adequate illumination.

Shall I be optimistic just because something has always worked out for me in the past? What about those for whom this was not the case? Many passengers who said prayers for deliverance while the Titanic was sinking were nevertheless drowned in the icy waters. Shall I be pessimistic just because January has, within my experience, always been one of the two worst months of the year to be job-hunting (the other being July)? What about those for whom this was not the case? Many with no obvious faith or optimism have nevertheless been rescued just in the nick of time. What makes me any better, any more or less deserving than any of them?

I think I shall simply be attentive and ready to dance with whatever partner the unfolding of my own life provides. I think I shall strive to listen with my heart and to persist in expressing its beauty in every way I can. I think I shall push myself to see the multiple dimensions of every moment and to always remember the bigger picture, that whatever the present moment is, it is not all there is to my life. Other elements may be requesting something of me, offering me a deeper insight or understanding, or inviting my participation in ways in which I have never before participated in life. How I will respond or participate, guided by certain basic principles, may not in fact be the way that anyone else on the planet would respond or participate. I am not for that reason making a mistake to think as I think, say as I say, and do as I do.

I think I will be ready to sing, as much as possible whenever the inspiration strikes me. I think I will be ready to dance the feelings of my heart, even if my awkward steps betray an inadequate amount of time spent in rehearsal. I think I will be ready to live, even if my very existence is sometimes unacceptable, unauthorized, and unwanted.

I hope before this year is out to have learned more of what it is to be the multi-dimensional special person that I am, more of what it means to be a Gay man in this day and age, more of what it means to be an unconventional minister and twenty-first century nun, and more of what it means to be a man of peace within a world at war with itself. I hope to have learned more of how my mind and heart work, how the limitations and abilities of these can positively interact with a world obsessed with monetary matters, and how to better express the insights and ideas which emerge within my heart from sources unknown.

I dream before this year is finished of more completed book manuscripts, more television shows being cablecast and broadcast in many more places, and more intelligent people finding their voices at last, to instruct their governments and communities in peaceful coexistence. I dream that

we will all learn to spend more time being at our best rather than at our worst, that more people will care less about the cost of things and more about whether everyone has enough of whatever he or she needs, and that we will finally at least begin to understand just how very precious each and every moment of life can be if it is filled with love and divine presence.

I ask that I will be able to understand when a particular pattern of life no longer serves me and how I may release the pattern to the past with gratitude for its contributions. I ask that I may be there for someone in need, wherever he or she is, with the resources in hand to meet his or her need and the willingness to give freely of those resources. I ask that I may understand more fully the true meaning of words like, "family," "success," and "happiness" and not spend any more time mourning the loss of their counterfeits.

I pray that all lingering emotional scars, failed relationships, and broken dreams be transmuted into a fruitful garden from which a bright new tomorrow may spring for myself and for all with whom I closely share my life. I pray that all inaccurate and disempowering mental programming would finally crumble away like a mud mask to reveal a healthier me than I have so far known. I pray that my life may be (or perhaps continue to be) a blessing to those around me, specifically according to the love, encouragement, compassion, kindness, understanding, and service that they need.

Most of all, now as always, may one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be. More completely, may one--myself in the midst of all of creation and all of its activity--and all--everyone I meet in every place I go or of whom I even think for the briefest of moments--and everything--every plant and animal and star and moon and idea and event and moment--, blessed--filled with divine presence, power, wisdom, and love--and loved--valued and nurtured to the maximum degree--ever be--remaining so in integrity and health and strength beyond even the greatest scope of time and beyond the limits of all life experience--! Amen.

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