

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

In But Not Of the World

What a challenging and never definitively explained (nor universally definable) phrase this has been since its very first utterance. The idea seems to have been drawn from several verses contained within the biblical text of the gospel of John, included within one of the relatively few recorded prayers of Jesus.

The source of the phrase is not quite so important to me, however, as its implications and the challenge of its demonstration.

Just exactly how, for example, does one live within a violent world without becoming violent? How does one live within a materialistic world and yet successfully integrate and nurture one's soul? How does one live as a person of peace within a war zone without resorting to psychologically dysfunctional mental and emotional postures?

I am at odds with those who insist that we each create our own realities and the reality of our lives, with the myriad of all of their details. I insist that I do not create and usually do not even have any significant influence over the environmental circumstances of the larger world around me.

I can, however, study and strive to learn more effective ways of surviving and responding to, adversarial circumstances.

When I go hiking within the mountains of Colorado (or any other place, for that matter), I must pay attention to the weather, simply because it is very dangerous to be above tree line when a major thunderstorm rolls in. An umbrella might keep the rain off, but it would also act like a lightning rod, attracting a greater danger than simply getting wet would be.

In a similar way, I may be living within a relatively peaceful and humble rural abode just when some nation's army marches by or some nation's air force decides to bomb the entire area.

While it may be true that I did everything I could to oppose such an occurrence, too many others supported it and I was ultimately out-voted. Lying to myself or others about the fact that there

are now soldiers in my front yard or bombs falling on my garden would be ridiculous at best and suicidal at worst.

Suddenly I am within a world which does not accurately reflect who I am, that in which I believe, or least of all the higher principles by which I make my personal life decisions. If I were on a mountain and the adversary was a thunderstorm, I would begin running for tree line, but in such situations as described above, there is quite possibly nowhere to run.

From a different perspective, however, I am now (in that situation) perhaps the only light in the darkness available to those around me. It is more important than ever, that I demonstrate something better than the evil which opposes me. I pray that in all such future circumstances, I will have the strength and mental and emotional focus to do so--especially when the adversary is not so easily identifiable as a soldier or a bomb.

Here, however, we always seem to stumble over the rhetorical (and perhaps legitimate) question of effectiveness. Offering a soldier a smile and a glass of water may get me shot and killed on the spot and may in fact have no significant impact upon anyone's emotional or psychological awareness. Running around outside to rescue others while bombs are falling, may be a noble but fruitless gesture.

But to do otherwise would cast aside all that I am and everything in which I believe. Is personal integrity and the integrity of one's soul worth such risks? That, I stubbornly maintain, is a question that no one has any business answering for someone else. I only know how I would answer the question: yes, absolutely, and without hesitation. Why? Specifically because I am not OF such a violent world as that which I am IN. I must instead be a light, a hope, a prayer, and a source of love and wisdom within the surrounding darkness. Ultimately, I must be who and what I am, within every moment of my life, in the best way I can.

Flying Above

I recall first seeing a particular bumper sticker a number of years ago, which said something like, "It's hard to soar with the eagles when you're surrounded by turkeys." Similarly, I remember a number of times at which I boarded a passenger jet in this or that airport, surrounded by pouring rain and gray clouds, only to find some twenty minutes later or so as we rose above the clouds, that the sun was still shining and in a higher place, the air was perfectly clear.

Yet one of the curiosities of that higher place, is that there is not enough air or warmth for a human being to remain alive for very long at all. There is a peacefulness and a beauty which is never seen by those who remain below, but it is perhaps more a place for spirits than for bodies.

This is one of the ongoing conundrums of my life experience, to find a way to live within the reality of that higher place of peace and beauty without forgetting or disregarding the storms below. If I were to attempt to remain in that lofty space and never return to earth, the plane would eventually run out of fuel. Rather than squeeze out that last remaining moment, wiser pilots return their planes to the surface for refueling. Rather than believe for one moment, however, that the realities of life on the planet's surface are in fact the only realities, it is not long before pilots again return to that lofty and serene space. How curious that the refueling takes place within an environment of chaos, struggle, and confusion, and not within an environment of abundance, restfulness, and prevailing beauty. Perhaps, while granting the need for occasional personal "mental health retreats," we should be more open to receiving from the world below, more effective refueling of our hearts, minds, and lives.

The challenge to integrate within my thinking and daily activities, is that the peaceful place above the clouds and the frequently stormy world below the clouds, are equally real and simply two ends of one continuous spectrum (or, more accurately, two very contrasting points of a spectrum which extends even further beyond the qualities of these two points in many other directions).

In calling to mind the peaceful place above the clouds, I am reminded that the storms which may surround me are not all there is to current reality. All beauty cannot be removed from the palette of the universe by any greater amount of ugliness. All peace cannot be removed from the palette of the universe by any greater amount of war. All love cannot be removed from the palette of

the universe by any greater amount of hatred. All of these qualities, as well as many others, are eternally available to or through anyone who is willing to serve them.

In calling to mind the frequently chaotic and confusing world below the clouds, I am reminded that life must have a body as well as a spirit, that there is a very specific unfolding form and expression with which I must contend every day for the simple reason that I too possess a physical body, and that there is a contribution I can make, specifically because in some specific way, I (and you and you and you and everyone) am one of God's many gifts to the world by which its challenges can be surmounted. Nevertheless, we live within an economically obsessed age which demands certain things of us, often without regard to our ability to supply those things.

In relating to this frequently chaotic and confusing world within which we live, there is a need for great flexibility, just as the action of flying requires every air-borne bird and insect to compensate for a hundred different variations and fluctuations within each and every moment of actual flight. In the words of John Lennon, "Life is what happens while you're making other plans." To use one of my own quotes, "It is just as important to listen to the music, as to dance with all of your heart." To use the predominant metaphor of this essay, it is just as important to move your wings appropriately as it is to recognize which way and with what degree of strength the wind is blowing.

But what of the counterfeits? Balloons may float, but they really do not fly. Politicians may promise but they frequently lie. Many claim to have received a message or directive from God, yet do not concern themselves with whether the message is consistent with any greater understanding of transcendent love and wisdom. "God told me to kill the banker who repossessed my neighbor's house, as an act of divine judgment." "God told me to blow up the abortion clinic so that the activities which occur there each day would stop." "God told me to hate this or that group of people because they are somehow defective aberrations of what the whole of creation is supposed to be or include." It makes me wonder whether within certain private moments, Adolf Hitler believed he was serving some sort of divine mandate to cleanse and renew the human species. Part of the extremely uncomfortable challenge of even questioning such things, is the inherent arrogance or inability to know with any certainty, what God would or would not do within a specific context.

But I do not find that I can believe in that sort of God, a divine being who because of somehow having lost control during a creative moment, created something so bad that it needed to be destroyed by force. Too often it has not been a question of whether God made a mistake, as of whether I simply do not understand. Until the first time I flew within a passenger jet, I had nothing more than a hollow intellectual understanding of the world above the clouds. Perhaps the majority of the world's population have yet to experience such a thing as that. Until I met and became more fully acquainted with a person of a different race, I did not understand that even with all of our differences, there were and are a great many things we have in common. Until I traveled to a foreign country, I did not fully understand that there are in fact other places in which my way of speaking and understanding is practiced by only a tiny minority of the world's people and that the use of this or that language or any of the other hundreds of cultural choices practiced each day by people all around the world, are inherently neither good nor bad.

That God is real or that there is something that is God, is difficult to deny and curiosity about the unknown is perhaps one of the most universal of human characteristics. We want to understand God and we want to know what God wants, but like any other person, what God wants depends upon a long list of variables which are unique to each situation and moment of life. I do find it somewhat odd, that the God who favors judgement is found most commonly among people who are afraid and that

*"The only thing
'Don't Make Waves'
has ever produced,
is initially
stagnant water
and ultimately
a cesspool.
Agitation, circulation,
and movement
are essential to life."
--Sister Who*

the God who favors healing is most commonly found among people who are not; who instead believe that the most essential element of life throughout the universe is not the chemical and material element of carbon but the emotional and spiritual element of love.

Though I am frequently very angry with God for not making things turn out differently or proceed more smoothly than they do, yet God seems to have so much love and so much to teach me, that pivotal moments of emotional, physical, psychological, spiritual, or even material crisis sometimes turn out much better than they could have and I am again reminded that nothing is categorically impossible. Sometimes, things can go wonderfully right instead of wrong, even against the most apparently insurmountable odds. Perhaps the greatest ongoing struggle of my life is to maintain my faith in that possibility.

Whatever conclusion I may find to the above questions and moral dilemmas, I have consistently found that far fewer human mistakes are made when the motivation, consciously or unconsciously, has been unconditional love. Miraculously healthy relationships have been formed on many occasions, by the willingness of one or the other person(s) involved to act from love instead of anger, when the goal is my "enemy's" welfare rather than my own personal agenda of "how things should be," and when I was willing to give without any concern for whether I would receive "a good return on my investment."

To quote Willy Twofeather, a self-described Native American priest whom I met several years ago, "When you have a problem, when you have a confrontation, when you have glitch, this is your time to be small or big. Who do you choose to be?"

The point, as expressed so eloquently by Henry David Thoreau in Walden, is to have the peace, serenity, and mental clarity of living within a rural environment while in fact living within an urban one; to use the metaphor of this essay, to have the peace, serenity, mental clarity, and the bigness of flying above the clouds, while standing with one's feet firmly planted upon the ground within the smallness of a specific moment; and most especially, to be fully conscious that there are people within the world without adequate food, medical care, and safety, and we must do what we can to help them because they are in some sense a part of us as well, but that this does not make a glowing sunset less beautiful or less deserving of grateful and sustained appreciation. We really can fly within both realms.

When White Answers Black

I climb into my car to begin yet another long drive. The sun has gone and the sky is dark. I respond to the darkness by turning on the headlights, the simple action that allows me to begin moving toward home. While at work, a frustrated and angry person had phoned and I was the first person to whom they could speak. I answered the darkness within his voice with warm and compassionate understanding. To do otherwise would have only sustained the darkness. Arriving home, I am tired and have no desire to cook supper for myself, but the rumbling of my stomach persists. I do otherwise and thereby find the hunger gone.

Often, someone will inform me, that "there is no other way" than that suggested by the speaker, to resolve a particular situation. Often I ignore such negative and unreliable advice. Instead I begin brainstorming an alternative, an unconventional approach, a fresh and untried perspective. I do this specifically because I believe that nothing is categorically impossible. In some cases, it is a question of finding a way to create circumstances which support a desirable outcome and a more positive result.

A drought-stricken plant is not helped by more drought, but rather must receive water in healthy amounts and at regular intervals, to break the destructive cycle. A person suffering from damaged emotions is not helped by punishment but rather by compassion tailor-made to fit his or her unique situation. A person expressing disillusionment stemming from feelings of worthlessness is not helped by being reduced to a

number within a vast social welfare system but rather by being loved and valued by people with the intelligence to both praise and require good things of him or her, as the valuable and capable person he or she in fact is.

Is providing the opposite of a negative symptom always the answer? Of course not; there is no universal, one-size-fits-all panacea for any human problem, but fighting fire with fire sometimes accomplishes nothing more than destruction of the entire forest. In learning to ski steeper and steeper slopes, I specifically needed to train myself to respond in total contrast to my natural instincts. Whenever I felt myself falling, in contrast to the normal human tendency to move away from a fall, I had to lean into it, thereby turning a fall into a dive, one might say. In the case of a fall, the action is unintentional and likely to become a victimizing experience. In the case of a dive, the downward direction is intentional, mental focus overtakes fear, and I am more likely to land in a way that is empowering. In skiing, if I lean downhill at the beginning of a fall, the sharp steel edges of my skis immediately grab hold and transform the action from victimizing to triumphant.

Similarly, when something negative is thrown at me, I can fearfully resist and be victimized or I can train myself to lean into it like a confident wrestler advancing onto the mat and thereby increase the chance of winning the match. So, like driving home at night, I answer the darkness with light, the war with peace, and the hatred with love and find that I thereby travel safely to my desired destination.

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--S.W.