

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

Overview

I occasionally hear and read of people talking about the self as if each of us had only one. There is certainly a tendency throughout our world as well to view each other as flat one-dimensional beings (i.e. the postman is the one who delivers the mail, but has no reality to us beyond this activity).

To be all that we are and all that we can be, it is imperative that we remember that each and every one of us is a multi-dimensional being and that there can even be great contrast between one and another dimension of who we are. To the extent that we become aware of these undiscovered dimensions of ourselves and nurture them, a vast universe of new possibilities comes into view and in time also within our reach.

May the thoughts and words of this month's newsletter assist you in discovering universes of possibility within yourself and within others.

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

The Cornered Self

I would prefer to be always at my best, but as someone has wisely observed, people most often judge us by who we are at our worst. In both cases, however, what is occurring is a very partial awareness of the self. Seeing myself only as what I am at my best, fails to acknowledge and respond to the persistent reality of what some call our shadows. Seeing myself only as what I am at my worst, fails to acknowledge that the whole entirety of my spirit, soul, and body are much larger than any corner in which I will ever find myself to be.

It is common knowledge that a frightened animal in pain, when cornered, will frequently turn violent in its expressions--even toward those whom it would otherwise recognize as loving allies. Similarly, there is something about feeling cornered that most often brings out the worst within each of us. Restoring a sense of having options, of positive self-agency, and of something in which to hope or believe, however, magically causes our soul to transform from a being small enough to fit within any

particular corner, to a being too large to be restrained by circumstances.

"If you make that choice or take that action, you will lose everything, you will fail, and you will be destroyed!" I imagine we've all heard that threat in some form or another at some point (or at many points) within our lives. When we are able to find within ourselves that sense of self which is larger than the particular corner in which we seem to be, however, the response which seems most appropriate is simply to laugh and say "yeah, right. Who died and made you God?" The threat is an attempt to manipulate using fear and is generally only spoken by those who are wrestling against their own fears of helplessness and impending loss.

What is needed by both the other and one's self within such moments is to accept that some sort of change is inevitable and to remember that we have each been through countless changes already and are completely capable of handling yet another one. We may resent having to do such change yet one more time, we may protest against the demands it places upon us, but thanks to past experience and internal resources of creative ingenuity, we can do whatever needs to be done. When we are aware of this, no cage can ever hold us and no circumstance can ever decide our fate.

We may not presently know the internal resources and creative ingenuity we each possess, but this is no indication that they are not there. If we do not know them, perhaps now is the time to begin to explore, by imagining or by actual experimentation, new things we've never before tried. The goal is not to create a perfect first project, but to redefine ourselves as being more capable than anyone (perhaps even ourselves) dared to imagine that we are. We can learn; we can grow; we can at the level of our souls, our minds, and our spirits be larger than any corner is able to encompass and when we are, we will never be cornered again.

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

The Relational Self

From earliest childhood, I have been painfully aware of my inability to satisfy others' expectations and demands for conformity. Consequently, I was forced by such environmental demands to develop a sense of self and of individuality very early in life. Internal integrity thus became one of the early primary structures by which I measured my soul, each step of the way, no matter how much that internal integrity contrasted with the world which surrounded me.

While in graduate school pursuing a Masters degree in Theological Studies, I was disturbed to note a pervasive preoccupation with categorization. As presented by the various courses I encountered there, definitions of identity of both individuals and groups were pretty much the same. More concisely, the proposed rule was that identity begins with community rather than with individuality; that I cannot know who I am until I know of which group I am a member. My belief, conversely, was exactly the opposite: that identity begins with individuality and community is formed by individuals banding together because they have something in common with each other. Because I have never really been a part of any group, I was forced to find a sense of self which did not depend upon the existence or guidance of a group.

What became more apparent to me throughout the struggles of graduate school, a detail which I had somewhat overlooked, is that in order to be complete, individuality must exist within relationship. The relationship I now understand to be basic to all humanity is that community renews itself by nurturing its individuals and individuals survive and thrive by contributing to community. I have yet to find a single problem within all of human history that cannot be explained as some sort of breakdown within this mutually beneficial (also called "symbiotic") exchange.

The relational self, therefore, is one which continues to pursue self-awareness, growth, and integrity in ways that contribute to community. As one example of such a person, I do not do the things that I do because it is expected or because of someone else's demands. I do what I do because of who I am; I respond as constructively as possible to the persistent question, "Within this moment, what sort of person will I show myself to be?" It does not matter what response I receive or even whether I succeed or fail. What matters is what sort of person I show myself to be.

As a relational self, I am invited to express myself with love, with truth, with wisdom, and with mutual respect, giving to others the freedom of choice, self-definition, self-expression, and the freedom to disagree, that I wish to have for myself. No one lives within a disconnected vacuum--unaffected by life circumstances, internal emotions, or information of varying accuracy. Every perpetrator was once a victim and every victim may become a perpetrator, if the healing power of love is not adequately brought to bear upon the wounds of any particular person within the past, present, or future.

The relational self does not look to others to provide identity which it is wiser to place within one's self. I do not require you to behave as I wish so that your actions can become part of my identity (i.e. "I am part of a group that does this or that thing"--which ceases to be such a group if too many of its members do something else). I am myself and I choose to love in order to be whole--this makes me relational.

I am myself and I choose to be honest and open with others in order to empower them to be honest and open with me. They may nevertheless not choose to do so, but I have given them the opportunity and the ability to do so--which is far better than giving them only the opportunity to be reclusive, withdrawn, and estranged from me. I choose to love others not because they are perfectly consistent in loving me--they aren't--but so that they have the option of becoming more loving toward others (including me) than they have thus far been. As an individual, I can thus be a source of love for people around me; I can be the one who breaks the ongoing cycles of brokenness reproducing themselves over and over and over. I can be the beginning of healing within whatever community I ever find myself to be.

Because we live within an age of economic obsession, it is easy and even encouraged to get stuck in measuring every action and involvement according to the potential for profit. This only makes sense, however, if we have forgotten just how interconnected and relational all of life is. When I give money or resources to others, it is not because of any potential profit to myself, but rather because I believe in humanity enough to invest in it whenever there is opportunity to do so. The rewards which can result from such investment will outlive me and exceed anything I could imagine.

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

The Limited Self

I have often prayed that God would never bless me with more resources or opportunities than I could effectively manage, but it sometimes seems like God is testing my limits and sometimes pushing me beyond them, just to confirm where those limits actually are. As the inspirational poster I saw many years ago declared, "Only those who will risk going too far, will ever find out how far they can go." Perhaps God does occasionally ask us to go too far, just to see how far we will really go. The reward for the failed attempt that remains, however, is that we will often be more open to the possibility of trying again--just in case, this time, we might succeed.

Limits are also sometimes difficult to discern, because we ourselves are engaged in pushing them back, reconfiguring them, and creating larger spaces in which to live. Limits at one particular time within our lives are often not the same as those at other times. The important challenge within all of this, is knowing when to respect limits and when to defy them.

Sometimes the limits come from within me, when, like the trained circus elephant, I fail to believe that I really can do a particular thing--so I don't even try. It is a bit awe-inspiring for me to consider that the reason I wound up at the 1990 Gay Games in Vancouver, BC, Canada, competing in bodybuilding, was because it was the sport for which I felt least qualified and that if I had not done so, Sister Who would not exist today. In contrast and perhaps as a gesture of having come full circle, the next time I competed in bodybuilding in Canada, in Montreal in 2006, I was awarded a silver medal. The point is, in any case, that--qualified or not--I had to be willing to try; to be more than the limited self in which I had been taught to believe.

Sometimes the limits come from around me, when others' perception of me becomes a stumbling block around which they are unable to

*"The one who is unwilling
to embrace the thorns
will never smell
the sweetest rose."*

-- Sister Who

manuever. During my years in college, it was always a source of irritation for me when professors in the music department would make judgments regarding who they felt could or could not sing, play an instrument, or participate in musical activity in whatever way anyone might want to participate. Considering the healing power that music has verifiably had within the lives of thousands upon thousands of people, separating someone from whatever music would otherwise be available to them, is positively deplorable. The point, more concisely, is never to let someone else's idea of what I can or cannot accomplish be the measure of what I'm willing to try.

I've lost track of the number of times someone who'd been labelled inadequate, took a chance on their accusers being wrong and found the beauty of their contribution cheered and applauded. Looking once again at the pages of history and those who've come before us, we would do well to remember that Elvis was told he couldn't sing, Fred Astaire was told he couldn't dance, and a long list of other creative persons were similarly advised that they were unqualified for the very thing for which they are remembered.

On a similar note, when I am treated differently because of orientation, gender, language, religious practices, age, ability, or clothing, it is others' blindness and presumption which separates and impoverishes them in relation to the abundance that might otherwise fill their lives. God may appoint as prophet the very person to whom one would have the hardest time listening--or a Samaritan to help a Jew who has been wounded somewhere along the journey by those filled with violent intentions and greed, perhaps because of their own woundedness.

Sometimes the limits involve inter-relational strategies, such as not disclosing something that may be true but which is also clearly not something the particular individual is ready and able to hear. Within such moments as this, however, there is also the possibility of planting a seed which may remain invisible until long after the initial moment has passed, but ultimately sprout and grow to create positive change.

When love is sown, a greater harvest becomes possible. When we are willing to love unconditionally, healing can happen. When we constructively integrate thoughts and feelings, divine love can make a positive difference.

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

The Expansive Self

As important as it is to take a hard look in the mirror each day, it is also important to acknowledge that the mirror in my bathroom will never be able to show everything that is me. In fact, it can only show the smallest part of me: the skin and surface appearances. The real substances of me--physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social--extend far beyond the limitations of my skin and superficial appearance.

I am alive and even just this alone has meaning of vast proportions, beckoning me toward sunrises, horizons, and possibilities yet unknown. This is why it is so essential that I allow my understandings of myself to expand also, so that when I rise to the occasion of a new opportunity to demonstrate what I can do, when I adopt new approaches and perspectives, and when I embrace new understandings that take beyond the horizons of my childhood world, it is still me: the one whom God loves and in whom God believed enough to infuse the breath of life. I am not a mistake; I am an expression of the breath of God, which like the wind expands and spreads further and further as it travels, over the land, through the sky, and perhaps even deep into watery depths.

Considering the vastness, majesty, and mystery of that which is truly God, it only makes sense that any soul which dares to love the Divine must be a soul prepared to expand more or less indefinitely, so that there will be enough room within that soul for the ever-expanding mystery of God; so that there will be enough room within that soul for the miracle of life; and so that there will be enough room within that soul for the vastness of ever-increasing wisdom.

To escape the temptation to resign one's self to being blind--which would be so much easier--we must continue to strive toward that expansive love which is forever remaking us into more than we ever thought we could be. In growing into ever-larger form and essence, the soul expands to encompass more than it previously did and learns to see what was previously invisible--either because we did not notice or because we could not understand.

Through love and wisdom, we can expand our vision and nurture the gift of curiosity. We can find the self that is not limited while presenting the most grounded demonstration of who we are now.

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

On a Personal Note

Another busy month has flown by, during which I was honored to meet many wise people, to offer encouragement to many earnest seekers, and to thus far also continue to satisfy various economic needs. With regard to graduate school, bureaucratic conflicts have very much gotten in the way of accomplishing academic writing.

With regard to personal mystical/spiritual experiences, difficult points of relationship to ponder have weighed heavily upon me of late. There is more to life than what the physical eyes can see, but perceiving even a little bit of that greater reality does not necessarily include any sort of quick and easy guide to utilizing and applying that wisdom and love to the living of life.

As I continue to pursue wisdom and love, however, I find myself once again besieged by an absence of adequate finances. The word "adequate" seems to be where the bulk of the struggle occurs. Yes, I am still here. Yes, I have thus far continued to pay all bills on time. Yes, blessings continue to find their way to me at least as often as new challenges seek to discourage and blind me. I welcome whatever "day jobs" may come along, but do my best to retain a vision for the greater work of building a genuinely interfaith retreat center and giving to all in need as I'm able.

Home repairs in combination with a million other demands upon my time and energy leave me frequently quite exhausted. All that being said, the lilacs in the sacred circle in my backyard, which I was given by former neighbors Tom and Cathy, are beginning to bloom, as are the irises and other flowers in the front yard meditation garden (now if I could just find a way to keep the weeds in check). It has taken a number of years to get to this point, but certain examples of progress are all around me.

Within this confusing and frequently overwhelming mix, however, much remains for which to be thankful--including each of you.

May God's blessings, love, and peace be with you now and always, *Sister Who*

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