

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

Acceptance Within Continuance

Within the first moments of each day, I sometimes wake from my dreams to find reality obstinately clinging to all that has gone before. I may have a new vision, a new perspective, and new ways of defining and understanding myself, but I am still the raw material from which all tomorrows must be created. Past experiences can be understood in new ways, but they cannot be rewritten.

The house in which I live is my home and in that sense something for which I am very thankful. It is, however, also a house with a badly wounded foundation, resulting in floors which are slightly tipped one way and another in various places. Consequently, certain doors do not work properly and a spill of any particular liquid flows slowly in peculiar directions.

In spite of the wounded foundation and the frequently frustrating doors, however, this house is still my home. It is where I and my (now) three dogs form a family and continue to love each other.

Yes, three dogs. After more than a year of wishing and praying, Gareth, an old English sheepdog about four months in age, was added to my household just a few weeks ago. Everyone is getting along very well and he is an exceptionally bright and loving puppy, though growing rapidly.

To return to the matter of the house, however, my preference is a new beginning which would not include the fundamental flaws that now shape my life-experience here. No such opportunity has yet been provided, so we are continuing to make the best of the tools and resources available to us. All in all and to at least a minimal degree for now, it's working.

Similarly, my preference is a past filled with certain accomplishments, nurturing environments, and abundant resources. These are not what I remember but remember I must, if I am to come to terms with what has shaped and constituted my current perception and understanding.

My pursuit of a Master of Arts in Specialized Ministry degree from Iliff School of Theology, remarkably, is already twenty-five percent complete. It too is an ongoing struggle, but formative in ways

that for now I fail to understand. Again and again I want to run away because the lessons and experiences are often painful, but in moments of quiet reflection and tolerance of the divine mystery at work within my life, I find the subtle suggestion somewhere in the back of my mind, that all of this is for some greater purpose.

Is that a trite, silly, or weak thing to say? Far too often the idea that suffering serves mysterious greater purposes has been used to encourage tolerance of unjust circumstances which more correctly deserve to be opposed. Nevertheless, not all suffering calls us to resistance. Sometimes suffering really does serve greater mysterious purposes of personal and spiritual growth for humanity, individually and collectively.

Through my current schooling, I have recognized that I place a considerable amount of faith in the idea of a divine plan or perspective, a divine intention within which all of the anomalous moments of life make good sense. It is nevertheless still a significant challenge to trust what I do not understand, to trust once again no matter how many times my trust has been betrayed before, but to trust in a slightly different way so that I do not simply repeat the mistakes of the past.

I must trust and remember all that has gone before, even (or perhaps especially) those moments and experiences I would rather not remember. They too are a part of who I am. If there is a part of myself I do not accept, then that is the part which remains wounded and unable to dance, dragging behind as the rest of me strives to leap and spin and celebrate whatever measure of joy in life remains.

Without acceptance of all that has been, true joy will not remain within life which continues, within life which remains truly alive in spite of all that has conspired to put it to death, to still its dancing feet, and to silence its singing voice. Without acceptance of the rain, the flowers will not grow.

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

Change Within Continuance

I planted a small tree in the backyard last year, transplanted from a friend's yard. At the time, it promptly lost all of its leaves and became an apparently lifeless twig. I watered it anyway. I prayed over it. I talked to it. I encouraged it in any way I could. About two weeks ago, quite unannounced, a small green branch suddenly appeared on the side of the otherwise apparently lifeless thin trunk. Now, a dozen tiny leaves have unfolded.

The peony bush in the far corner put out its first white blossoms a few weeks ago and now a pink one has opened also. The wisteria and bittersweet vines have come back and are quickly reaching for the top of the fence. All the arbor vitae bushes in the front hedge managed to survive the winter too. The lavender is spreading and even the eidelweiss are in bloom.

A number of voices over the years have suggested that sometimes one moves forward simply by standing still. For someone as self-motivated and creative as myself, standing still can be a most difficult challenge.

Yet if I can find the self-discipline and the presence of mind to pause for just a moment, there is a gentle melody floating in the breeze. When I pause to listen, drifting slowly forward and back on the porch swing, I notice the soft tones of my large windchime and the chirping of sparrows in the branches of the maple tree.

Then I remember that all around me, peace is nearly always available and the reason I do not hear it, is simply that I have not created peace within myself. Instead I too often remark, "So many things to which I must attend!" Believe me, I know the meaning of the word "busy."

My day starts at 5 am with jogging and exercise to prepare for participation in physique/bodybuilding at the first World Out Games in Montreal, scheduled to occur in August of 2006. Breakfast, shower, all morning at the office, then all afternoon in class. Evenings are for homework, responding to letters, and taking care of the house. Whew. It's a bit overwhelming, but if I can just continue, just repeat this pattern each day for a few more days, I will find myself that much closer to receiving a masters degree and being that much more ready for my next bodybuilding competition as well. By standing still within the current constellation of patterns of activity, I will very soon be more than I now am.

It would be so easy and so understandable to

sink into despair and discouragement, to lament how very weary and even exhausted I frequently am. Sometimes I do exactly that, but only for a moment. Then it's time to get back to work and press onward in spite of whatever weariness or discouragement opposes me.

Whenever I've climbed a mountain, my feet are very sore and my body aching with exhaustion before I am even halfway back to my car. At times, the thought has crossed my mind that I am just too tired and will never make it. A few moments of rest and the knowledge that no one is coming to carry me the rest of the way home, however, is enough to keep me going. The realization within such moments is that even when exhausted and in pain, I am still able to go on. I am stronger and doing better than is obvious even to myself.

Similarly, I'm finding that even when I'm confused and uncertain, even when I haven't understood anything the professor said during the last two or three class periods, I somehow manage to write well enough to receive one more passing grade. I suspect that when I finally receive my masters degree, I will no more be able to tell you how I did it than I can tell you how I managed to make it all the way home after fifteen hours of hiking up and down a steep mountainside.

Storms of fierce intensity may destroy everything around me. The important thing is that I am still here when the storms have gone. To the best of my ability, I am determined to be here. After all, how else will I be able to see the rainbow? To see a rainbow, there must first be a storm, then there must be a sun that shines again as the clouds begin to disperse, and finally there must also be someone such as myself to see it.

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

*"Sometimes life really sucks.
Unless you like it that way,
keep moving in a positive direction.
Your discontent may in fact
be God's prompting for you to grow."*

--Sister Who

Discernment Within Continuance

I have a small weaving loom stored in a closet upon which I occasionally weave guitar straps, belts, and other narrow bands of fabric. Each project always begins with the rather long and tedious task of tying the warp or lengthwise threads through the loom. The actual weaving then begins when I run the first woof or crosswise thread through the loom and patterns begin to emerge from the contrasting yet interwoven relationships thus formed.

Over the years, I have moved within many diverse societal circles and continue to do so. Each circle frequently has its own unique language, range of personalities, and interpersonal dynamics. Inevitably, there are miscommunications. Considering the complexities of any human language and the range of personalities and possibilities involved, misunderstanding seems more reasonable to expect than its preferable alternative. Again and again, I have found that mixed messages and misunderstandings have been the warp and woof which have brought new patterns clearly into focus.

Until such patterns emerge, however, I never know for absolute certain, just what will be. Some people go through life making specific plans and then acting upon them. I usually find that I must "make it up" as I go, since most of my plans have gone bravely forward only to be smashed against a closed door of opportunity.

At other times, intuition suggests that I pay attention to some small distraction passing within my reach. When I have heeded such suggestions, I have often been surprised by gifts and treasures I never dreamed would come my way. Perhaps God really does have some sort of plan for my life.

Then again, on almost as many occasions, a serendipitous blessing has resulted in an inordinate amount of struggle (such as enrolling in graduate school). Of course I wonder within such moments if I somehow misunderstood and am now stumbling down the wrong path, but times of doubt and confidence each take their turns no matter which road of life I may choose. Usually there is also no genuinely desirable way to go back, so I press onward, determined to finish if I can, whatever I started.

At other times, the face in the mirror seems to be that of a person too wounded, broken, confused, or perhaps even self-deluded to be of any good use to anyone. I have even met numerous people over the years who will insist that this is so,

who insist that only those who have achieved personal wholeness and complete healing of all psychological, emotional, spiritual, and social shortcomings is an appropriate servant of others' personal and spiritual growth. There are in fact plenty of times when I completely agree that I am not qualified to be doing any sort of ministry at all, but if I remember correctly, many prophets and spiritual leaders described within the Old Testament section of the Bible also declined God's invitation for similar reasons.

To no one's surprise, God has never accepted such responses. Rather, as described in the apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth (and paraphrased for inclusiveness by me), "Friends, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before God."

Though it is perhaps a contradiction which does not support the idea of divine wisdom, I notice that God continues to use weak, unintelligent, and wounded people with more apparent frequency than those who are strong, intelligent, and healthy in every way. The encouragement I find within this, is that I too may be a co-creator with God of healing and wholeness within the world and its people. I don't have to wait until tomorrow. I can do something good today.

I do not understand or express things in the same ways that others do, which often creates breakdowns in communication. If God did not make a mistake, however, there may also be a sort of ministry to others to be found within my foolish stumbling, poorly worded statements, and general awkwardness within certain situations.

More than just being a weak, foolish, and in some ways unintelligent man, I must also be willing to be weak, foolish, and in some ways unintelligent from time to time, so that God may use such peculiar qualities to bring certain insights or growth to others. I must be willing to get up and sing badly, if in fact it is more important for a particular song to be sung, than for it to be sung well. My pride must not be in any illusion of perfection but rather in a consistent practice of humility, love, and service.

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

Continuance Within Continuance

Is it just now or is it always, that we must be better than our politicians, better than our leaders, better than our systems of social welfare, and better than our systems of education? Sometimes newspaper headlines depress me, as they describe events which insist that once again the phrase "human intelligence" has been proven to be an oxymoron. Sometimes reports of actions taken by this or that board of directors or this or that committee move me to shake my head in dismay and repeat the comical alternative wording of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that God didn't send a committee." Sometimes the abundance of people struggling against homelessness and unemployment persuade me that the country in which I live is in a deeper and more true sense the poorest nation on earth. Sometimes the experiences described to me by parents, teachers, and students themselves insist that those filling positions of administration within educational institutions may in general be the least intelligent of all. Yet we all have the ability to be the exception rather than the rule.

As unlikely as it may be, there is no law preventing an honest and just person from pursuing a political career. As improbable and demanding as it may be, individuals with no personal agenda other than being just and fair toward all, may serve the common good through various administrative or committee positions. As odd and unwise as the general public may view it, even someone with limited resources may still choose to share what little he or she has, to help someone with even less, survive one more day and perhaps even end the day with a little hope for a better tomorrow. As rare as it may be, a teacher, parent, or principal may still stand up, go beyond the call of duty, and do whatever she or he can, to help a child learn.

A recent discussion of societal circumstances in Germany during World War II in which I was not given the opportunity to speak, once again went no further than assigning blame and expressing disappointment at people's apparent denial of historical events. The person making the comment suggested that although the German people knew "what was going on," they didn't realize the numbers of people involved were as great as they were.

I wanted so much to interject an alternative perspective, to acknowledge that some of the German people may have also been in a similar position to that of some Americans right now.

What do I do when my country seems to

have gone crazy? Are all Americans to blame for the hundreds of thousands of deaths in Iraq at the hands of the American military, including those Americans who have publicly demonstrated against the war since even before it began, but who have also been completely ignored by their government?

What do I do if, on the other hand, I agree with the actions of the government and feel that the losses due to the war in Iraq are somehow justified, but feel frustrated by the general lack of cooperation from other peoples and countries, which seems at least partially to blame for the general military conflict having not been resolved already? What do I do with a nation, with a world, which cannot agree on mutual respect and peace?

I do what I must always do: I continue to live according to qualities of good character, I continue to demonstrate love and to do kindness wherever and whenever there is opportunity, and I continue to strive for wisdom within myself and within every situation and circumstance to which I have any ability to contribute. I continue to shine whatever light I can into the darkness which hangs like bitter smoke all around me.

I continue to get up every morning, striving within each moment to find some joy and hope, to find a more effective way of responding to the frequently overwhelming challenges that clutter my path. I exercise, study, and prepare to be at least as good and hopefully a little better each day than I have been in the past. I take a moment with God to remember who I am, who God is, and the ways in which we will be together through each moment of being misunderstood, marginalized, or mistreated within the day just ahead of me. Sometimes this gives me strength; sometimes it doesn't, but I find I must somehow carry on with life either way.

As with the trail winding through the wilderness, leading where I've never been, I continue walking simply because of who and what I am. I continue singing simply because I have a song to sing. I continue living simply because I have love to share. I continue praying simply because I know God is there.

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

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Sister Who, PO Box 593, Westminster, CO 80036

Email: dn@sisterwho.com

Internet website: <http://www.sisterwho.com>