

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

Stones in the Stream

On numerous occasions when hiking wilderness trails, generally toward high mountain summits, I've been faced with the challenge of traversing a stream. In very few instances has a formally constructed bridge been provided. In even fewer instances was I able to find a tree which spanned the entire width of the rapidly flowing water, when it died and fell. Most of the time, it was for me to discern a path of stones by which to cross.

Some of the stones were round and curved on top. If my shoes did not have good tread or if I stepped anywhere but exactly on the highest part of the curve, I would slip and fall.

Some of the stones were flat on top, but just below the surface of the water and at least partially covered with bright green moss. Though the moss may have been very pretty to the eye, the most slippery part of the rock's surface was also thereby identified.

Some of the stones were fairly close together while others were rather far apart. Having long legs, this was not as much of a problem for me as for a person with a shorter stride. The greater the angle at which my foot contacted the next stone, however, the greater the chance that I would slip and fall.

All of the stones were hard and easily capable of breaking my bones if I slipped or fell, but as slippery and dangerous as any particular step may have been, I would never cross the stream without accepting its temporary place in the unfolding of my life. So it is with difficult moments of life. They have the capacity to wound me as well as the capacity to support my weight and allow my journey to continue, but my life will not continue without allowing for the existence of each one-- though they may in fact serve no other purpose than simply to be a bridge to the next stepping stone.

In all places, from one side of the stream to the other, the water was exceptionally cold. While this may feel quite good on exceptionally hot days, the high elevation of mountains generally maintains an air temperature much lower than the warm summers below. Getting wet is therefore not

advised.

In a few places, the water ran very swiftly and deeply between two large rocks, suggesting a sort of natural flood-gate. In those places more than others, I did not want to slip and fall. The result would be far worse than simply having wet shoes when I reached the other shore.

None of the stones was a suitable place to stop and rest for any great amount of time. Following each carefully placed step, I immediately began looking about for the next such step, which would carry me ever closer to the far side of the stream.

A strong hiking staff is very helpful when crossing such streams because it is a tool which allows me to have much greater balance, just when circumstances encourage a sense of balance to be diminished. It is, however, one more thing to carry during those times when its inclusion is less necessary and one might wish to be carrying as little as possible.

I've known people like that, people who are in a sense carried along by the rest of humanity perhaps most of the time, but whose unique talents and perspective are invaluable during the crossing of a particular stream.

Looking down at the stream itself while crossing, is sometimes unnerving, specifically because the water is moving (usually very quickly). To maintain balance, focusing upon something that is not moving is far more helpful.

I was once told that one of the primary elements of whirling dervishes being able to whirl for so long without getting dizzy, is that they focus upon a spiritual point inside of themselves which does not move and their bodies simply whirl around this point like the tire around the hub of the wheel.

Similarly, when attending the American Academy of Dramatic Arts years ago, a dance teacher instructed that to maintain balance when turning while crossing the floor, students need to focus upon a specific point ahead and maintain as constant visual contact with that point as possible. More specifically, I needed to turn until I was watching the focus point out of the corner of my

eye, then turn my head all the way around until I could see the same point out of the opposite corner of my eye and again follow the point with my eyes as my body and head continued to turn. Thus the body would seem to be turning at a relatively uniform speed while the head would be aimed at the focus point for two to three times as long as its much more rapid turn, required to allow the body to keep turning.

Similarly, on numerous occasions, I would have been unable to complete a particular task if I had not maintained a most strict mental focus. A recent example of this was the task of running phone lines through the basement crawl spaces to the various rooms of my house.

Completing the task required an unwavering focus upon getting the phone wire run wherever it needed to go, ignoring by a sheer act of will the darkness, cobwebs, dust, claustrophobic spaces, and aching muscles that opposed me. After four or five hours of struggle, I concluded, "If I have anything to say about it, I will never do that again."

Still, I know that I will never regret having the phone jacks installed just where they are needed and where everyone who lives within this house in the future can benefit from them.

Sometimes in life, creating lines of communication is equally as challenging and we pray that if we are successful in running such lines through the most inhospitable of such circumstances, we will only need to do so once.

It is imperative, however, that we go on loving and caring for each other, remembering that ultimately who we are is so much more important than what we own or can do at this or any other point in our lives.

This is the focus upon the far side of the stream, the larger sense of self that keeps us moving forward no matter what else may happen.

If I lose all my possessions while crossing the stream, I may still successfully reach the other side and find resources there by which to replace everything I have lost.

If I slip and fall, perhaps even being wounded, but am not washed away like the leaves and twigs that pass like tiny boats, the task of crossing the stream will be much more unpleasant and perhaps even painful, but I can still reach the safety of other side and take time to recover and heal when I get there.

Attempting to recover and heal while still in the midst of the stream, would be a mostly frustrating and generally unsuccessful choice.

One must remember also, that the challenge

of crossing a stream is often not merely a physical challenge. In the case of some of the wider streams I have crossed, I was unable to see whether there were suitable stepping stones to enable my steps the entire distance. On a few occasions, I crossed as far as I could and then had no other choice (other than going back, that is) except to jump as hard as I could to leap over the remaining distance.

A very real adversary within such situations is my own fear of failure, which must be respected rather than lightly dismissed, because of the verifiable impact upon my ability to rise to the challenge of the crossing.

If I have invested any other emotion than calm acceptance of an uncertain outcome, I will leave part of myself behind in the midst of the stream and begin to create a sort of self-imposed blindness which will follow me throughout the rest of my journey.

Based upon years of experience and reflection upon the life experiences of myself and others, it is my contention that the only effective way to deal with one's fears is to honestly face them and to respond with an appropriate degree of respect for one's limitations as well as an appropriate degree of confidence in one's abilities.

There have also been many times when I was looking downward, searching for the next good stepping stone within reach of my feet, that I did not realize how far across the stream I was. Suddenly instead of the next stone, I saw the far side of the stream within reach instead and only then realized that this particular transition was now ending. When this was especially helpful, was in those times when the total distance seemed too great to comprehend.

One step at a time, nevertheless, the stream was successfully crossed.

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

"The one
who is unwilling to give
to those in need,
is the poorest
of all."

--Sister Who

Reflections on Pride

Originally, in response to society's attempts to censor, marginalize, and otherwise negate the existence of anomalies, gay and lesbian people (though initially the word "gay" referred to both genders rather than specifically men) had marches similar to the civil rights marches of the 1960s which evolved into "Gay Pride" parades, the idea being that instead of being ashamed ourselves as the larger social order encouraged, we would choose a healthy degree of pride in simply being who and what we are.

More recently, I suspect encouraged by the very questionable desire of some to be more acceptable, words such as "gay" and "lesbian" have been dropped from many groups' and celebrations' names, since such words were interpreted as inciting a more negative response. I oppose and disagree with this approach very strongly, since it leaves me apologizing for my very existence, suggesting for example that if someone doesn't like the way I look, I should leave even though there is no other reason for me to do so.

There will always be people and things in life which are to some degree personally objectionable, but if I am to avoid being imprisoned by my own objections, I must learn to coexist with such people, things, and even circumstances in a way which does not cost me my own personal integrity.

For this year's celebrations here in Denver, Colorado, I chose to help with a fundraiser on Saturday morning for an organization which facilitates gay and lesbian participation in sports activities such as Gay Games, Euro Games, and Out Games (Olympic Games style events). On Sunday morning, I assisted with lining up entries for the annual Pride parade.

As with other parades, the first examples of the parade in Denver, Colorado may have been civil rights marches, but the current form is a very commercial and celebratory event. Many large corporations now have non-discrimination policies for the benefit of their gay and lesbian employees and therefore as part of their public relations activities will enter a float in this parade. Most if not all liberal political candidates will be sure to have an entry within the parade also. Attendance by the general public now easily exceeds a hundred thousand people and the main thoroughfare through downtown is completely closed to all vehicles for an appropriate amount of time, to allow the parade to pass. The parade itself includes over a hundred entries. I was told there were three adversarial

demonstrators on the steps of the Roman Catholic cathedral which is located along the parade route, but only heard one of them yelling anything as the parade passed. Perhaps with the exception of those three, a good time was had by all.

My participation began at 2:30 am. After shaving and showering, I began applying makeup at 3:00 am, beginning as usual with a light outline of the purple cross.

At 3:10 am, I began applying white greasepaint to the large background areas, finishing this step of the process at 3:45 am, and moving on to filling in the respective branches of the purple cross.

At 4:45 am, all of the purple areas were done. Next were the red lips and pink triangles on each cheek, followed by the fine blue and green details of the vine, eyebrow, and tears, which were completed at 5:10 am.

At 5:50 am, the headwrap and veil were in place and all makeup and costuming were complete. Gathering a few necessary extra tools and supplies, I left the house at 6:00 am, found a parking spot near the parade's starting point, and proceeded to the volunteer station.

Various sleepy-eyed people were drinking cups of steaming coffee, which seemed somehow amusing to me, since I'd been up for over three hours already. The park was almost empty, but within the next two hours, over a hundred entries and a thousand people would arrive.

For some reason it always feels a bit magical to me, to be present and witness such transformations--perhaps similar to watching an empty stage or television studio space be transformed by the addition of each set piece and actor, into a space in which a significant celebration of life will unfold.

This I think is the deeper and healthier understanding of pride: the recognition of not only being present but of being an active participant in the transformation of something empty or incomplete into something beautiful and memorable.

In some cases, the transformation is an event. In other perhaps more miraculous instances, the transformation is of a person and a way of living life to the fullest, which includes both horizontal (human) and vertical (divine) relationships.

May your life be filled with such transformations today and in all of the days to come.

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

Communal Independence

Often of late I find myself being reminded of the interconnection of all things, the rippling effect of nearly any action, word, or perhaps even thought, through the pool of life experience which surrounds each and every one of us.

The basic idea of the I-Ching, if I understand correctly, is that there is no true separation between anything and all that surrounds that thing. Distinctions may create individual identification, but they do not inherently create disconnection or separation. These are more accurately created by our responses and opinions than by the distinctions themselves.

Within the US we are now at that point of the year when we celebrate the historical accomplishment of our political independence, but I'm sure I am far from being the only minister to suggest that we have mostly forgotten the personal and collective implications of that administrative change. At least once each year, however, we do ourselves a great service to remind ourselves and each other of some of these too-easily-forgotten implications.

In order for our communities to remain healthy in every sense, freedom for individual self-expression and self-definition are absolutely essential. Exercising this freedom without regard to the fact that the world is a shared space, however, leads only to disaster and is in fact a form of denying the interconnection of all things, at the expense of the health and integrity of our souls.

As much as I need to be who and what I am, I need to recognize that those definitions include my relationships to those around me. To the extent that I make my best contribution to the world around me, the communal circles of which I am a part are strengthened and empowered to deal with their own growth, development, and evolution also.

As much as I need to make my best contribution to the world around me, it is absolutely imperative that I also take care of myself so that I do not prematurely burn out from the usual wear and tear of daily stresses.

Both inner and outer relationships absolutely depend upon honest and accurate communication, just as the human body depends upon accurate and comprehensible pain signals to direct each body's healing processes.

If I fail to speak or act with regard to challenges to my own or my community's health or if my words and actions are ignored by my community, I am little better than a pain signal

which never reaches the brain and never provides its respective guidance to the body's healing processes.

All of which is part of why I consider deception, dishonesty, and hypocrisy in all of their various forms, to be among the greatest evils in which a person or a local, regional, or national community can ever participate.

Since these have long been more or less inherent to the political processes of this country, I consider the battle for independence and freedom to be far from over.

Ultimately is our own lies, pretense, and self-deception of whatever kind, which comprise the most serious forms of enslavement or incarceration.

Our liberation is therefore to be found within a non-violent, mutually respectful, gentle, actively nurturing, and sensitive honesty with ourselves and with everyone around us.

To the extent that we bring this same awareness and loving commitment to our organizations, businesses, governments, and communities, we will move toward creating systems which bring out the best within ourselves and each other, instead of systems which leave us dying on the battlefield when active violence has temporarily retreated.

We really are smart enough to create a world which is nurturing rather than adversarial in its treatment of all it includes.

We really can win the inner war for truly healthy independence, but like the outer one, it will take all of us working together to do it.

Pagan perspectives of spirituality often use the phrase, "as within, so without."

My paraphrase of this same idea is that we can neither be at war within ourselves nor harbor anything but love toward others and still be able to maintain any peace within our lives and world.

Therefore as we discover elements within ourselves or within our communities which need healing in some way, we will find that working to heal either, will also heal the other. The important thing is simply to keep healing.

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

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