

sister who's Perspective

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Overview

I learned long ago within a particular class of a professional theatrical acting school that a principle problem with pretending too long and too hard, is that one begins to forget the larger surrounding reality of one's world.

This month's essays, consequently, invite contemplation of the difference between pretense and truth; that which is apparent but not real and that which may not be apparent but is absolutely real. I hope that you will find these distinctions specifically empowering.

Pretended Community

Many of the words which we commonly use, are clearly being both interpreted and used in diverse ways. My understanding of "community" has been mostly shaped by Scott Peck's book, "The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace." Central to this is his assertion that true community is oriented toward conflict resolution and pseudo-community is oriented toward conflict avoidance. Any population or group avoiding its problems instead of working to resolve them is thus not truly a community at all and saying that it is--even a million times--will not make it so. The only thing that will transform a pseudo-community into a true community is constructively and proactively addressing and hopefully resolving its problems (rather than continuing to avoid them).

Nonetheless, there are reasons pretended community seems attractive. The first that comes to mind is that on the surface it appears to be less work. It's no secret that resolving problems frequently requires perseverance, patience, and perspiration. Another reason is the guidance of established precedent; for example: "This is how it's always been done." Finally, resistance is minimal or non-existent. Being different has long been compared to swimming upstream: the survival of the species depends upon it, but

circumstances are rarely supportive.

Nonetheless, it's also been said that "it always takes less time to do it right the first time than to do it wrong and then have to fix it." What initially appears to be more work thus turns out to be less. Similarly, another time-honored witticism says that "if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right."

This is especially true of community, within which it is not merely one's own life experience that benefits but also that of all who are directly or indirectly influenced--including future generations.

An added complexity of humanity is the question--which rarely has a clear answer--of whether we really want what we say we want. In spite of the number and diversity who say they want strong, healthy, and enduring communities, far too many persist in practicing interpersonal dynamics which are adversarial to any such community's creation. Additionally, many people are unable to even describe what a healthy community is. If we don't know for what we are looking, we are unlikely to know when we find it.

Perhaps it is helpful for children to pretend otherwise inaccessible experiences and relationships, but even children can recognize whether or not they are playing. To play with this or that idea of community without ever truly doing the work essential to genuinely becoming a community, will not create or facilitate the blessings that only true community can provide. Within certain circumstances this may be tolerable; having no access to water is tolerable, for example, if no house is on fire. When a crisis occurs, however, as they do from time to time, our complacency, apathy, and failure to prepare can quickly become the adversity against which we have no defense.

The only good purpose pretending community could ultimately serve is thus the experimentation which leads to discovery of what genuinely works to make true community the life-empowering collaboration that it is.

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

Pretended Family

I have quite lost track of the number of times the word "family" has been tossed about with obvious intentions of creating a sense of belonging--which is certainly a commendable intention. Like most words, however, the word "family" has no meaning unless we're willing and able to back it up with actions of some sort. An additional challenge is the recognition within social interactions that a great many similar and contrasting definitions of this word exist.

At times, for purposes of creating solidarity, it may be helpful to describe humanity as being one great extended family and there is at least a certain minimal truth to this. There are clearly innumerable interconnections and interdependencies, such as one might expect within any conception of what the word "family" means.

If we instead shift the question to "are we behaving like a family," there seems to be abundant agreement that we are not. What needs to be consciously stated, remembered, and considered, therefore, is how we individually expect a true family to behave and whether or to what extent we are living up to the standards specified by our own beliefs.

Many seem to agree that, ideally, at least, commitments to family are above all others. In pretending to be a family without truly being one, however, opportunity is created for truth to poke holes in our illusions just when it may be most important for our illusions to actually be realities. What is most important within such moments, is to take a good look at what has finally become visible thanks to those otherwise unwanted holes.

It is important to note, however, that this can go both ways. It is just as possible to discover that our family is not as small as we thought, as to discover that it is not as large. Whether a family is real or pretend, new or long-standing, however, all families have both opportunities to endure and needs that must be satisfied in order to do so.

To some extent, the members of our family will always know us better than anyone else. Then again, there are often areas which family members are standing too close to see. Interpersonal dynamics can become even more confused if avoidance of a particular point of truth becomes an obsession of one or more familial members.

An additional pitfall for such relationships is that shared history is sometimes a little too real. A

visitor with no shared history with the members of one's family may be able to converse in ways that are free of "emotional baggage." The influences provided by a shared history, however, can make idealistic actions much more difficult to do.

The blessing of virtually any crisis is that it offers a door between pretended experiences of being family and those which are conversely very real. Someone completely unfamiliar to us may within a particular opportune moment suddenly have the ability to be a brother, a sister, or an elder. In a similar fashion, we ourselves may be blessed from time to time with the opportunity and ability to compassionately fill such roles for another.

Is it real? I suggest that it is as real as we're willing to make it, but that being real in such ways requires being completely honest and completely available--at least for as long as we're able.

There have in fact been moments in the past when I was blessed to be brother, sister, mother, and father to others in certain times of need. To pretend that such role definitions have persisted would be a lie; to pretend that such role definitions did not occur when they had opportunity would be equally untrue.

At the heart of this particular discussion is awareness of one's relationships--what they are and what they are not--followed closely by applications of intention to demonstrate in which way or ways we would like them to develop. Whether or not such relationships develop as we would like, however, is not for any one of us to decide--specifically because it is a collaborative decision.

On a somber note and at an individual level, I feel I must respect the decisions of those who have chosen to exclude me; at a societal level, the debate on inclusivity will probably continue for hundreds of years, at least. Between these two extremes, however, are the various configurations of family that diverse individuals collaboratively create--which is after all the heart of the discussion.

True families specifically collaborate; pretend families do not--like couples on a ballroom dance floor whose only unifying concern is the desire to avoid running into each other. Within the action of truly becoming family, however, it is no longer merely partners dancing only with each other, but rather the collective decision to form one great harmonious circle dance, within which everyone moves in relative harmony with everyone else--within which we also create more beauty than any couple ever could.

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

Pretended Friendship

As much as life is in fact empowered by good manners, courtesy, sensitivity, and consideration, essential trust is destroyed anytime such manners, courtesy, sensitivity, or trust compromises fundamental truth. Deception, falsehood, and manipulation simply do not have the ability to create enduring empowerment. At some point, a price will be paid for any untruth communicated.

Before anything so deliberate is considered, however, one must also be aware of the difference between intentions and ability. One may wish to be a friend but lack the ability; it will serve no good purpose to nevertheless claim that one is. Once again in order to be clear: it is not that one doesn't want to be a friend, but rather that one doesn't have the ability or resources to demonstrate one's understanding of what a friend fundamentally is.

Understanding first of all that anything I present here will only be my own current understanding and that many other contrasting perspectives on this complex subject exist, I nevertheless offer the following statements as food for thought. What is most important with regard to this subject is that each of us grow within our awareness of the definitions, understandings, and expectations that we each consciously or unconsciously hold within our hearts and minds.

I was recently blessed with a most wonderful quote which has apparently been waiting for me to discover it for more than half a century. From Dwight Eisenhower, former military commander and president of the United States, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

Drawing from words attributed to Jesus within

*"Since I was not merely pretending
when I was born
and I will not be merely pretending
when I someday die,
I don't think I should be
merely pretending to live
during the time in between."*

-- Sister Who

the Christian bible, the measure of true goodness is the simple content of one's actions--feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing those who are in need, and comforting the grieving. To the extent that we fail to do such things, we fail first of all to be decent human beings and secondly to be in any sense true friends. This basic dynamic is further reinforced by what has been called "The Golden Rule," versions of which exist within every philosophical, theological, and spiritual belief system humanity has ever created; essentially, what you want to receive is what you need to give.

Nowhere is this more essential than within claims of true friendship. I cannot legitimately claim to be someone's friend if the only emotion I feel toward that person within his or her moment of need is apathy; I cannot legitimately claim to be someone's friend if the only action I'm willing to take when knowledge of that person's need reaches me is none.

This is where the whole discussion turns a bit gray, however, because the only ones who are truly competent to judge whether or not I or anyone else is doing one's best, are myself and Godde. That being the case, it is most difficult to accurately say whether or not someone is being a true friend whenever he or she becomes aware of a need and does nothing. I do not know that person's emotional, psychological, and physical abilities in sufficient detail to legitimately accuse anyone of failing to live up to his or her spiritual/relational commitments.

Sometimes, to be honest, I do not even know that much about myself--which results in long internal wrestling matches with the fundamental question of whether or not I have in fact done what I could. I suggest that the mere fact that I do engage in such internal deliberation (and sometimes for great amounts of time), is an encouraging indication that my friendship may be absolutely genuine.

A true friend is truly a treasure, but a false friend is an opportunity for betrayal of one's trust and ability to emotionally, psychologically, and physically survive. The fact remains that any of us might at some point or another inadvertently stumble into being a false friend, necessitating an active and demonstrated apology in order to bring healing to that particular relationship.

It is often said that one must first take care of one's self before taking care of others. What has become clear to me over the years, however, is that taking care of myself includes taking care of others.

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

Pretended Spirituality

I find it odd when others profess spirituality--which to me infers interaction or relationship with non-material reality--and simultaneously embody that spirituality within a closed ideological system. A truthful, concise, and paraphrased representative statement of such people might be: "I believe in the god that lives within a box."

To claim not only to believe but also to have successfully captured and restrained the Divine within a particular human theology--as if That Which is Truly Godde was not allowed to act in any way inconsistent with one's interpretation of a particular sacred text--is ultimately self-sabotaging.

In order to maintain such a box, it is extremely important to repeat an explicitly described standard ritual or statement in exactly the same way and as often as possible--which is synonymous with lifeless stagnation pretending to be active.

One could even describe such a situation as an embrace of stagnation and a rejection of accountability. Pretending anything, after all, does not move one closer to healthy accountability--the substance upon which personal integrity is based, at the heart of which is fundamental truth.

Many years ago, I helped a neighbor tear down a very old farmhouse. It was only after the plaster walls were removed that broken and rotting beams were discovered. The true condition of the house was hidden beneath a layer of painted plaster. Spiritually, if we don't look within, we won't know what we truly are. In time, however, what we truly are, will determine whether we stand or fall.

At the heart of integrity is truth, not only revealed but also confirmed. Spirituality is therefore a matter of creating congruity between inner and outer, between spiritual and material, and between potential and demonstrated realities--which also includes developmental potential.

If I fail to recognize when something not only can but also needs to grow, then my understanding and relationship to that thing will be incomplete, untruthful, and unable to do the good it could do.

Somewhere deep inside, everything wants to serve a higher purpose; to really matter within the larger scheme of things; and to experience all that life has to offer. To do this, however, one must move beyond pretending into being real, being honest, and being fully present.

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

On a Personal Note

The transition from PC to Apple computers came to a screeching halt this week in spite of even having discovered "The Adobe Creative Cloud," which gave me access to a large number of powerful programs, all of which unfortunately required more expertise than I was able to provide. Metaphorically I would compare Apple computers to cross-country skis and Microsoft computers to downhill skis. Specifically because the technology of the boot-binding combination within downhill skiing provides a great amount of assistance, one can be a rather poor skier and still safely enjoy the experience. Cross-country skiing, conversely, requires exceptional skill and additional resources, unless restricting one's self to unchallenging terrain. I did my best, it didn't work, and the experiment is done.

So with the help of a new friend I am attempting to address the disastrous effects of sales clerks' lies and week after week of extreme effort and to find (if possible) ways to extract advantages from recent experiences and choices, so that something good does in fact come out of all of this confusion.

Of great significance is that I was also recently diagnosed as having high-functioning autism, a condition which is neither a birth defect nor a disease, but rather a difference in how the brain is wired (such as perceiving details more easily than generalities and interpreting language quite literally)--which explains perhaps the majority of relational difficulties of my entire life. My hope is that this validation will finally bring the resources and self-education necessary for much greater personal empowerment within every area of my life. Obviously time will tell.

Yes, indeed, in one form or another, life goes on.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be. -- D.N./S.W.

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