

sister who's perspective

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Overview

The contrasts of life have fascinated me since my earliest childhood. This includes the myriad of ways that the positive hides within the negative and vice versa. Nothing is as uniform as people who are a little too fond of their ideologies would prefer. The individuality of every instance must ultimately be recognized in order to interact effectively. This month's essays attempt to explore such possibilities a little more deeply.

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

Objectionable Allowances

If I allow something, does it also mean that it's okay? Not necessarily, but there will probably always be people who make that interpretation. This dynamic is bit more horrific in its implications when applied to the Divine, however, because insisting that Godde is taking care of me while allowing bad things to happen, suggests a rather sadistic, apathetic, or abusive nature--none of which I believe or have experienced the Divine to actually be.

A common sabotaging dynamic is the myriad of occasions when people assign to the Divine certain actions, interpretations, effects, and/or generalized perceptions of distinctly human origin. Statements described to me as Godde's promises during my teenage years, for example, I ultimately grew to understand as nothing more than human projections (i.e. what certain religious administrators wanted the Divine to be, say, or require).

The creation of so-called Liberation Theology occurred specifically because certain ministerial individuals observed how spiritual instruction was being utilized to encourage impoverished classes of people to allow for ongoing abuse by those with greater power and resources. Allowing for such things is hardly distinct at all from enabling oppression

within one's life, community, country, or world.

Whatever else it is, I refuse to accept that life is a matter of creating, enabling, or accepting oppression. Life is about growth and growth does not come through accepting oppression, but rather through finding ways to overcome it--whether that oppression originates within people, circumstances, or events. In the midst of all such struggles, however, I am once again thrust back into the embrace of the so-called Serenity Prayer: "Godde grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the strength to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Although there seems to be a lot of wisdom in this, it is easier said than done.

The first part of that prayer, in any case, is recognizing what is objectionable but must nevertheless (at least temporarily) be allowed--at least until ingenuity and inventiveness can catch up. Sometimes it takes a little while to devise an effective solution to a problem, depending upon available resources and the results of various attempts.

All that being said, it is profoundly irritating to me when someone expresses words of encouragement and concern without any willingness to support those words with action. It's as if they want to maintain a reputation for being charitable without ever actually giving anything away. At that point, I am often reminded of the Reverend Mother within the movie "Sister Act" (but I'm usually too polite to say it out-loud): "If you are fooling anyone, it is only yourself."

Objectionable allowances (sometimes also called "necessary evils") can be recognized as such without resulting in censorship. We can acknowledge that something is not entirely good while recognizing that it is at least temporarily necessary. It is very important, however, that we do not live a lie while doing so.

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Objectionable Tolerances

Snow is wonderful when one is skiing, but a dangerous adversary when one is driving a motorized vehicle on steep, winding, and narrow country roads--especially at night when the absence of light prevents one from anticipating challenges beyond the reach of the particular vehicle's headlights. There is no negotiation, however, with the winter season within northern climates. It snows, freezes, or melts according to its own inner workings rather than in response to human demands.

In a similar manner, it appears that nearly everyone complains about whichever employment empowers them to pay their bills, about family members' irritating personal quirks, and about their pets' occasional bad behavior, but will nevertheless defend all of these with strong conviction if necessary.

In each case, tolerance of objectionable qualities is being demonstrated. Popular or communal wisdom even recommends against expecting anyone to be perfect (which once again means tolerating something that is in one way or another objectionable). Is it really true that if one truly loves someone, the quirks that irritate and annoy are somehow always to be considered insignificant?

I suggest otherwise. No matter how much one loves a particular person and no matter how perfect things may presently appear to be, daily life will nonetheless make itself known--frequently in ways that irritate and aggravate whatever other stresses are encountered. As someone said many years ago, there are many people whom one can love, but very few with whom one can live for any length of time without becoming homicidal.

Phrased another way, as much as there are many times when I have the strength to overlook or tolerate life's imperfections, there are also times when my patience and internal resources have reached their limit and my responses are unacceptable--even to myself. I may be expressing myself honestly, but it may also be more than someone else has the strength to tolerate and it may constitute a presentation of myself that even I myself don't want to claim.

The underlying question of this essay is

whether in fact such expressions should be tolerated even if one has the strength to do so.

"It's alright," someone may respond, meaning that he or she currently has the strength to tolerate the undesirable expression, but is it really alright to simply tolerate rather than respond to whatever is behind that negative expression?

While I don't always have the strength or resources to respond in a supportive manner, I nonetheless prefer to address the cause rather than the symptom of that negative expression. Instead of simply saying "it's alright" without missing even a single beat of the rhythm of my own activity, I would like to be able to pause and say, "Is that something I could handle for you while you catch your breath (or take a short mental health break or whatever else will address the particular negative expression at the level of its cause)?"

I certainly don't want to punish the person for being honest with me about what he or she is feeling or in any way encourage that person to be less honest the next time he or she feels something similar.

As an expression and embodiment of love, I also don't want that person to have any legitimate reason to feel all alone within his or her struggle. I do have to tolerate, however, when others around me who also witness the moment of struggle, do not have sufficient strength to respond as I might choose to respond. More concisely, I must sometimes tolerate others' inability to respond, if for no other reason than that there have been times when I myself have been too weak to respond, that were tolerated by others.

This is nonetheless objectionable, since the real need is for assistance rather than mere tolerance. In some cases, the particular situation inspires recitation of the time-worn phrase, "why do I always have to be the mature one?" Why? Specifically because having greater understanding of the particular challenge allows us to extend to that struggling person the time necessary to develop his or her own maturity--while filling that difficult moment with expressions of love which will fuel the next positive transformation.

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Objectionable Validations

It has been said that courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the awareness of something more important than the fear. In a similar manner, strength is not the absence of weakness but rather the awareness of something greater than whatever stands in the way. Taking this dynamic one step further, there are times when validation must be extended for no other reason than that the alternative is far more objectionable (such as voting for an undesirable candidate because the opponent is even worse).

Only recently was I thrust into a complex combination of circumstances within which the unfortunate victim was honesty itself. In most cases throughout my previous experiences of life there were always ways to change the subject, redirect the conversation, respond with a more complex question, and so forth. This time, a completely inappropriate question (and a violation of basic civil rights, for that matter) was thrust upon me in a way that I knew that an honest answer would grant permission for an even greater evil to happen.

It was absolutely an attack upon my soul and I had insufficient resources to defend myself, so I minimized the damage as much as possible by manipulating the words in ways I could never recommend to any living person and which I sincerely hope I will never again be called upon to employ. It was very painful.

All that being said, the objectionable validation served its purpose effectively and the time of danger finally passed (hopefully never to return). From my perspective of being an interfaith minister, I emphatically object to anyone ever having to face such adversarial circumstances and I sincerely hope that such occurrences remain few and far between within

"It is easy to acknowledge that beginnings are always difficult; living through them is what can transform individuals into leaders."

-- Sister Who

the broader spectrum of human experience-- which is why I am challenged by the words attributed to King Solomon (allegedly the wisest man who ever lived) that "there is a time for peace and a time for war." Why must there be a time for war?

For now at least, it appears to be an inescapable element within ongoing human experience and in order to wrestle with this idea at all we must be willing to first validate its existence, rather than hide within a closet of psychological denial--hoping that the "house" burning down around us will somehow be unable to penetrate our self-imposed darkness.

To embrace such struggles is not an indication of weakness ("if you just believed...") but rather an act of faith: reaching for the possibility that one has the resources to not only rise to the challenge but to also ultimately overcome every aspect of it. It is almost trite to say afterward as so many thousands upon thousands of others have, that the struggle included the discovery of "strength I didn't realize I had." Like icebergs, what we are is so much more than what is immediately visible.

All of which is why I validate my negative experiences as much as my positive ones: both are ultimately formative and within even the worst circumstances there are ways in which I can direct that formation positively-- but not until I have acknowledged the most accurate and complete truth of the particular challenge that is available to me.

I suppose I could wish that I will never again face an objectionable validation, but this invites remembrance of the warning: "be careful for what you wish; you might get it." To satisfy such a wish, it is probable that I would need to relinquish contact and interaction with the world around me; that I would have no option except to embrace a pathological narcissism which has the ability to isolate me from the common struggles of ever-developing humanity--all of us moving individually and collectively from what we have been to what we will eventually be. That is not the sort of person I am willing to be and would also be an abuse of the gift of life itself. So I accept the occasional task of objectionable validation.

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Objectionable Principles

Ultimately, everything must be at least potentially objectionable and open to being questioned, if we are to avoid greater evils from developing, sometimes right under our noses (so to speak). The fact that something is objectionable and able to be questioned, however, does not necessarily mean that it is wrong, but rather only that there is ongoing (and hopefully healthy) debate related to the particular topic. How else are we to grow and move beyond our current states of being?

The fact that a principle is objectionable simply means that there are challenges the particular principle is unable to answer in ways that are completely pleasant. Indeed the very fact of being a principle includes potential confrontation with difficult, adversarial, and conflict-oriented circumstances. That's why principles were invented in the first place: to provide ways of coping with such things.

The greatest nemesis to principles is the mind that by choice or by experience has lost the ability to think, to perceive, or to interact truthfully with its surroundings. The common witticism thereby inspired is "I've made up my mind; don't confuse me with the facts"--in truth a confession of self-imposed blindness.

I do not recall the author credited, but I recall a quote presented within a television episode of "Criminal Minds" which stated something like "those who have no respect for reason will not be conquered thereby." For me, this refers to the futility of attempting to negotiate with oppressive persons unwilling to honestly perceive or reason. No evidence is sufficient to persuade them and if one does not have sufficient force to defend one's self, one can only reach for ways to minimize the damage such persons will inflict. Sometimes there just isn't enough available and tragedy becomes unavoidable. The only woefully inadequate solace I can find within such experiences is to reach for growth in the capacities for love and wisdom within the soul.

Are the lessons learned within such tragic moments sufficient compensation? I don't know, but hopefully time will tell.

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On a Personal Note

I arrived at my new home in New York and discovered conditions far worse than anticipated. In spite of great efforts to gather information, those with the answers refused to give them and I was forced into a leap of faith.

That leap left my three dogs and I cowering under a table covered by blankets, with a single electric heater for the first five nights, as outdoor temperatures plunged to -20 degrees and two more feet of snow fell. I could not call for help: there was no cell phone reception, no nearby businesses, no friendly faces, and no land-line phone or Internet access (finally available on day five). Is this the way it was really supposed to be, Godde, after four days of driving a huge moving truck, sharing the cab with three medium-large dogs?

Needless to say, all of my houseplants froze, including the dwarf umbrella tree I'd nurtured for forty years from a tiny seedling to a moderately sized bush. I'm sure more losses will come to light whenever I'm finally able to address the monumental task of unpacking, but for the moment the priority is upon survival.

In sharp contrast to all of this, however, my first exploration of my new home, using a large flashlight because we arrived just after sunset, flooded my intuition with amazement: every room has breathtaking potential and the creative possibilities are greater than anything I've ever before possessed. I pray that I will have the resources, the strength, and the creative vision to adequately serve them.

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