

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

Qualities and Consequences of Tolerance

When we tolerate hypocrisy, we halt our progress toward integrity. When we tolerate unilateral demands for conformity, we halt our progress toward the harmonious and mutually beneficial integration and affirmation of diversity. When we tolerate pseudo-community (which is oriented around conflict-avoidance), we halt our progress toward true community (which is oriented around conflict resolution, no matter how bumpy the path to that resolution may be).

In each case, we again slip into variants of playing "king of the hill," a game within which no one ever wins, nor is there ever any end to competitive, adversarial, and even hostile struggle. Whatever else such a situation may be, it is not a celebration of life nor a path to realizing life's greatest positive potential.

Why is awareness of such things so important, especially during this season of holidays which supposedly focus upon expressions of love within all of our primary relationships? Specifically because those relationships will not long survive the absence of integrity, diversity, and community.

The most fundamental instruction of the world's change during this season, from increasing nights to increasing days, is the rebirth of light and growth. In harmony with this, it is essential that we bring this same sort of rebirth to all of our primary relationships, recommitting ourselves once more to the pursuit of integrity, diversity, and community--all of which are expressions of the season's fundamental goals of love and peace within the world around us.

As thankful as I may be to have attained a certain degree of maturity, this season also calls to me to once again embrace the child deep within me, whom I once was and in some sense will always be. If I am at war with my past because the experiences of my childhood were in various ways damaging and undesirable, I will not be able to truly embrace and celebrate the present opportunities and experiences of my life.

Like running to a decorated tree on that

special morning, only to find that there are no presents beneath the tree with my name written upon them, or like reading a good book only to find that the last page has been torn out so that there is no way to know how the story ends, or like participating in an athletic competition in which the judges decisions are never announced and the medals never awarded, we find ourselves struggling with a great emptiness in our hearts and a lump in our throats too big to swallow.

To prepare ourselves for the presents beneath the tree, the final page of the story, and being awarded a medal recognizing athletic accomplishment, we must first embrace all that we have been and come to a point of accepting the reality of each moment. It was what it was and because of what it was, I now am what I am, and what I am is a manifestation of my own degrees of integrity, diversity, and community.

The magic of this holiday season, however, is that having finally come to this point of unconditionally accepting and in effect loving one's self, the contents of the packages beneath the tree are transformed.

The box covered with wrapping paper printed with photographs of every negative childhood experience, when unwrapped and opened, contains a depth of understanding and compassion for one's self and others which is (unfortunately) a rare treasure indeed, within the spectrum of human civilizations.

The box covered with wrapping paper printed with photographs of every adversarial or abusive experience encountered after the days of childhood had faded, when unwrapped and opened, contains a breadth of perspective and a degree of internal strength which dispel all fear of interaction with those with whom one has little in common.

The box covered with wrapping paper printed with photographs of every closed door of opportunity and every event of personal rejection, when unwrapped and opened,

contains new and potent possibilities of self-expression which not only are not dependent upon anyone else's approval or support, but also have the ability to touch the lives of others in ways which will create future support that does not currently exist.

Thus when all of the packages have been opened and explored, we find ourselves in possession of more wisdom and empowerment than that with which we faced the challenges of the year that is now passing away. This is most truly a manifestation of divine love, regardless of the wrapping paper which needed to be removed before the contents could be joyfully received.

At this point I would pause for a moment's reflection, a warm feeling within my heart and a gentle smile upon my face, perhaps some holiday music playing softly in the background, perhaps big white flakes of snow drifting to the ground outside my window.

I recall on my favorite passages from Madeleine L'Engel's book, Walking on Water--Reflections on Faith and Art, in which one of her grandchildren asked her, "is it really alright?" and only after reflecting upon the struggles and accomplishments of her family's previous generations could she finally answer, "yes, it really is alright."

Within such a moment as the holiday morning I've just described, after reflecting upon the ways in which the world in which I live is continually at war in some location or another, and in spite of all the untrustworthy politicians and greedy financial powers who help to maintain such sad situations, I believe that I could still look upon the snow falling outside my window and the presents beneath my tree received from friends and loved ones in distant places, and still be able to answer, "yes, it really is alright." Love has survived another year in spite of all the very legitimate reasons for it not to have done so. Love has survived and life will therefore go on.

So I stand once more, stepping beyond the torn wrapping paper scattered around the now-opened presents beneath the tree, and I go to the window and place my fingers against the cold glass and watch for a moment in silence as the snow continues to fall. Then I sing once more, softly within this sacred moment, "May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be. May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be."

Happy holidays, everyone, from me to you.

The Nocturnal Gathering

The sun had set and not yet risen again, so the world outside my home was dark. A few friends and acquaintances had gathered to wait with me while the night slowly passed. One had his nose pressed so tightly to the glass of a particular window, that the darkness outside filled all of his vision and he spoke of nothing except the darkness, as the time slowly passed. Another stood guard at a different window, forbidding anyone from opening the curtain, as if rendering the outer darkness unseen somehow made it less real.

I encouraged everyone to gather in the center of the room, beneath a brilliantly illuminated chandelier, so that we could dance and sing together as friends, but only a few responded. Becoming impatient with the preoccupation of some with the darkness outside, I strode toward the door.

"No," someone screamed, "don't open it! The darkness will come in and consume us all!"

"Oh, really?" I responded, as I turned the knob and pulled the door open. "Alright, Mr. Darkness, please, do come in," and I made a grand sweep of my arm and a low bow, as if admitting a royal personage. "What? Is something wrong? You don't want to? Well, suit yourself. The door is open so feel free to enter whenever you want to."

Leaving the door ajar, I returned to the center of the room, beneath the great chandelier. "Do you understand?" I queried to the silent stares of everyone in the room, which were now fixed upon me. "I can open every window and door of this room, pull back every curtain, and still darkness will not enter -- as long as I do not let my own light go out."

"Let us therefore join our hands in love, dance together in joy, and celebrate the life within us, for no amount of darkness outside is able to prevent us from doing so--as long as we keep the light within each of us burning bright.

As real as the darkness outside may be, it is not all there is to this moment, if we choose to add something more; if we choose to add to this moment the light that shines from within each of us.

This too--the light within each of us--is absolutely real. So let it shine."

Muddy Footprints of Love

For the moment, my two dachshunds are the only immediate family I have. Galahad is about two and a half years old, short-hair, and solid black. Tristan is nearly a year old, long-hair, and dappled black and gray. They thoroughly enjoy a walk around the block (which measures approximately one mile and includes no paved roads or sidewalks), but if the weather has made the route wet with rain or snow, they return to the house with muddy feet and, given their short stature, muddy tummies.

It does not occur to me to push them away immediately thereafter when they want to joyfully leap into my lap. Nor do I waste any time complaining about having to mop the floor again, to remove little brown footprints which mark their paths through the house for a while, mostly I suppose, because of Lance.

I had another dachshund years ago whom I named Lancelot, who died quite suddenly on September 4, 1996. I would give nearly anything to have his muddy feet back in my life again. I am well aware, therefore, that I will probably outlive both Galahad and Tristan and one day be wishing for their muddy footprints to appear upon my floor again.

Which perhaps explains why in spite of being somewhat a neatnik, I would rather wash the sheets, mop the floor, and change my clothes more often than maintain a greater separation from my two canine companions.

I have numerous friends and extended family members, whose presence in my life increases the volume and frequency of maintenance chores of various kinds, but none whom I would describe as more trouble than they're worth. It is a privilege to be there for them in whatever ways I can, in their times of need. With respect to these as well, I am constantly aware and occasionally reminded by non-fatal heart-attacks and such, that a very real possibility exists, of me wishing for the extra work their presence within my life may have been, when there is suddenly no ability to ever again physically touch each other.

Clothes can be washed and floors can be mopped, but opportunities to express love come only of their own volition and rarely in response to personal demands, and therefore must be welcomed and valued as they occur, no matter how inconvenient their timing may be.

When all is said and done and the last dirt has been shoveled onto the grave, no one will care

how clean the floor was, whether all of the bills were paid on time, or how often it was necessary to change my jeans because of some joyful puppy with muddy feet. It will be for me alone, however, to regret every opportunity to set other things aside and play with my dogs, which I did not welcome and celebrate; to regret every opportunity to express love which I rejected.

All of which is intensely personal and immediate, but similar patterns of relationship with the larger world around us fill each day also.

It was not convenient for me to leave work early, fly to Washington, DC, stumble through an unfamiliar public transportation system in the middle of the night, allow myself only four hours or so of sleep, and (after the usual three hours of makeup application) spend an entire day wandering around a political event helping wherever I could and encouraging people to think in terms of non-violent and mutually respectful solutions to world problems--but I will never regret having done so. It was at the very least, an attempt to express love for the country in which I live.

The unfortunate truth is that there will never be enough hours in the day to respond positively to every opportunity to play with my dogs, nor will there ever be enough hours in the day to respond to every opportunity I will have to make a positive contribution to my community, my region, or my country.

It is within this tension of never knowing for absolute certain whether I did too little or too much, however, that days and seasons of life unfold. I can only hope that when all is said and done and the time has come for my final journey out of this world, that I will have somehow left it better than I found it.

As preferable as it might be to go about my daily life without ever needing to mop the floor, express my views to my government, or encourage my coworkers at the office to function as a team by maintaining a minimum level of mutual respect between their personal differences, a perfect world would seem artificial to me, never touching that deep part of myself that is big enough to rise to all such challenges.

Perhaps that is why it is so important to me to go on making appearances in full costume and makeup. It is not convenient to spend three hours applying makeup and another hour removing it, but it is a way in which I can express the deepest and otherwise hidden parts of myself. Perhaps the makeup on my face is simply the muddy footprints of my soul, challenging others (as well as myself), to involve themselves in the sometimes chore-like

activities of inner growth and awareness.

I cannot live with the notion that nothing exists beyond what my eyes can see, my ears can hear, and my hands can touch, having had experiences of the Divine many times throughout my life. Similarly, I cannot live with an unexpressed awareness of love within my heart.

Yes, but does it fit into the existing social and political order? Somehow the question seems absurd. Does the platypus in Australia cease to exist or should it be exterminated, simply because it is unlike any other creature on the planet?

More is to be gained by being fascinated by differences and integrating them within the bigger picture of our world, than by viewing them as being somehow inherently adversarial. We can become more than we have ever been, growing arms that will someday be able to embrace the entire universe with love and healing.

Within the compassion we show toward each other, the justice and wisdom we require from our administrators and governments, and the integrity we instill within our religious and spiritual institutions, we can design the muddy footprints which will communicate who has been here and what kind of world we believed in creating.

Within the grease-paint I apply to my face, I can express to the world that I do indeed (to the best of my ability) live by the creed that one should never judge a book by its cover or a person by his or her face. I renew my commitment, each time I paint the green vine upon my right cheek, to striving to speak only words which bring growth and ultimately peace to the world in which I live. I remind myself, each time I paint three tears upon

my left cheek, that sufferings must not be forgotten because they are the inspiration for the healing work to continue.

As the holiday season unfolds, I will again decorate a tree within the main room of my home. The decorations won't be those dictated by others, however, but rather reflections of my own spirit and life experiences, things which capture and repeat again and again each time anyone ever looks at them, the spark of divine light which makes them so important to me and to my celebration of this season.

Perhaps they too are muddy footprints, tracing a wandering path around the tree's circumference and height, possessing more diverse colors and sparkles than typically associated with the substance of earth mixed with water, unique also because within their specific combinations of earth and water they also possess fire which projects light into the air around them.

Perhaps we are muddy footprints of the Divine, combinations of earth and water, made alive by the fire of spirit, so that we can project light into the air all around us, within this and every other season of life.

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



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All correspondence may be directed to: Sister Who, 407 Beaver Road, Idaho Springs, CO 80452; or email address: SisterWho@sisterwho.com. Sister Who's internet website is located at <http://www.sisterwho.com>.

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--S.W.