

Sister Who's Perspective

Sister Who's Perspective, Issue #90 December 2006, copyright

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

Overview

Spirituality is a curious intersection of two very different dimensions of life.

The physical or material dimension is very immediate and easily perceivable by our five basic senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

The spiritual dimension, however, is forever a challenge, making itself evident by affecting outcomes and emotional experiences of events. It is very difficult to deny that something really is there, but it is equally difficult to document or prove its existence with any hard evidence.

The ongoing challenge, therefore, is to acknowledge that life is larger and more complex than what is physically perceivable and to live within the tension of knowing some things but never everything. Part of living within that tension, is to occasionally review what we do and do not know and to maintain a healthy integration of both.

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

Sacred Objects

When we regard certain objects as being somehow sacred, we identify a particular way of relating to those objects. It is important to consider, however, why or on what basis we consider any particular object to be sacred.

Does the sacredness rest within the object itself or rather within the relationships or interactions the object has with others who come into any sort of contact with the object? Perhaps the sacredness rests within that to which the object points, since all sacred objects (at least all the ones which come to mind) are defined as somehow signifying or embodying something more than merely the sum total of the objects' raw materials. The crucifix, idol, chalice, or candle is therefore more than merely a particular shape of wood, metal or wax but rather a channel or servant by which limited humanity is able to relate to, interact with, or communicate with that which is truly divine. More concisely, it is not what we think God is that makes the difference, but what

God truly is that makes the difference, if we are involved in any sort of relationship with God.

All that being said, the objects are symbols which speak spiritual truths toward us in the hope that we will be able to understand. Interaction with sacred objects, therefore, offers us a way of relating to that which we cannot see, a way of demonstrating our respect, our love, our humility, our courage, our faithfulness, and whatever level of understanding we possess to something or someone who is genuinely divine. Interaction with sacred objects is a way of demonstrating the particular relationship we wish to in fact have with spiritual realities we cannot physically perceive.

The danger is that we will become distracted by that which we can see (which is limited) and forget that which we cannot see (which is not limited). This means valuing the statues, worship spaces, and sacred objects more than the One to whom the objects point.

This would be similar to a dear friend sending a letter that emotionally stirs me toward feelings of love while I read it, so much so that I fail to answer the door, while he or she is standing on my front porch, continually ringing the doorbell. "I'm busy reading a letter from a dear friend," I call, oblivious to the identity of the one ringing the doorbell. In such an example, the letter has become more important to me than the one who sent it.

Similarly, when I visited the Jefferson memorial in Washington, DC, in October of 2003, I was stirred and inspired by the words inscribed there. It was not the memorial itself, however, that caught my attention, but rather the ideals, the spirit, and the vision of the man who inspired it. The memorial may be in some sense a sacred object, but its physical structure is not where our perception of it should stop. The same is true of all sacred objects.

The purpose of sacred objects, therefore, is to empower us to see what would otherwise remain invisible.

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

Charms

It is curious that, considering how diverse the world's cultures, subcultures, and local populations are and have always been, virtually all have one or more (usually more) objects which have somehow become identified as good luck charms, warding off evil and bringing prosperity, fertility, healing, or harmony instead. Even those who insist that they don't necessarily believe the object has any supernatural power, frequently continue to display or possess such objects "just in case" they might effect or influence some good outcome.

Even more curious is that the objects' presence inspires gratitude when things go well but is generally not held accountable when things go badly. If the latter were true, good luck charms would be very difficult to find, having been discarded at the first incidence of ill fortune.

The actual unfolding of life seems to be a curious mix of desirable and undesirable experiences, sometimes appearing to respond to this or that influence while at other times being oblivious to all of our best efforts. Systems of belief (philosophical, religious, scientific or otherwise) are humanity's attempts to make sense of all that we experience so that we can continue to go forward as a species upon this planet. Specifically because life is more than the sum of its material pieces and parts, a final answer can never be given--which has inspired the phrase I saw on a poster many years ago that, "Life is not a destination, but rather a journey." From the perspective of my spiritual orientation to life, I express this as "Ultimately, life is primarily about the growth of the soul," but quickly add that since I am nevertheless having a physical experience, it is imperative to the growth of my soul that I take this experience seriously and involve myself in it completely.

Regarding good luck charms, the presence and use of such objects suggests at least some minimal element of fear as a guiding force of life. If I value such an object and do not have one with me, I become afraid of the possible occurrence of all sorts of misfortune. If I value such an object and do have one with me, I proceed with false confidence, oblivious, naive, and vulnerable to the possibility of failure until it knocks me off of my feet and leaves me lying stunned and confused on the current path of my life.

A biblical phrase which has again and again

proved itself to be true, found in the first letter of John, chapter 4, verse 18, states " But perfect love drives out fear."

When we dare to love that which is truly God (as opposed to loving only the limited depictions of God contained within human theology), the Divine responds by driving fear from us. When we also dare to love ourselves in ways that are truly loving, we have no need to fear the tides of fortune but find that we can trust ourselves and trust God to meet whatever challenges we will ever face.

More concisely, in the presence of unconditional love, charms become completely unnecessary. In the absence of unconditional love, charms are one of the ways we seek to protect ourselves from what would otherwise be overwhelming.

All of which causes me to sometimes wonder, as I observe people around me, whether those who are especially fascinated or preoccupied with good luck charms are also experiencing a deficiency of love within their lives.

There is no good luck charm, no matter how carefully constructed or ritually prepared, which can effectively take the place of unconditional love within our lives. Unconditional love is something which God extends to us, though often in ways which are difficult to understand. Unconditional love is also something which we can extend to each other, translating the unconditional love of the Divine to each other in ways which may be more comprehensible, specifically because we can then receive such love from another person who is sharing our general physical and material experience of life.

This is what makes the Christian story of divine incarnation so fascinating--that the Divine itself took on human form in order to communicate unconditional love to humanity more effectively.

Within every religion and belief system I have ever studied, however, when all of the superficial doctrines, rituals, and forms are stripped away, all that remains as the heart of this seeking to make sense of life, is a quest for the omnipotent and unconditional practice of love, by which life is able to endure and to also overcome every challenge which has ever opposed it.

This--whenever a consistent practice is achieved--is what guarantees prevailing good luck to every living thing ever afterwards.

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

Superstitions

Perhaps someone believes because he or she was told to do so. Perhaps the belief is based upon an erroneous assumption of cause and effect which does not stand up to even the most basic scientific investigation. Perhaps a belief is labeled a superstition simply because the one issuing the label does not understand the deeper and more complex dynamics which nevertheless, almost magically, produce a desirable result.

For the one who repeats the action without that deeper and more complex understanding, however, the belief is nevertheless a superstition because he or she does not understand why the action works and therefore when the action would need to be adapted slightly to meet different specific circumstances.

A perhaps amusing example of this is the scene within the movie, "Starman," in which the extra-terrestrial is driving a car after observing the driving habits of a particular human. In explaining his actions after nearly causing a traffic accident, the title character explains, "Green means go, red means stop, and yellow means go very fast."

Without an understanding of why to engage specific actions within specific circumstances, simple repetition of another's actions is often victimizing. With the very best of intentions, the one ignorantly repeating the action does damage to others as well as to him or herself instead.

So why do superstitions persist? Because sometimes they do in fact work and faced with circumstances and challenges which would otherwise be overwhelming, anything that works at all is valuable.

What is important to note, however, is that the level of understanding at which superstitions are typically found is not the level at which pursuit of greater understanding should stop. The tragedy for many is that they do in fact stop pursuing

**"If evil ever looks upon you,
be sure to look it in the eye
to begin to understand its soul,
if you wish to find the love necessary
to put an end to its destructive behavior."**

--Sister Who

further understanding the moment they find something that works in even a most limited way.

Whenever I have climbed a mountain, I have always been concerned about reaching the summit, if weather, personal abilities, and other circumstances allow--not because the summit is most important, but rather because it is at least as important as the trailhead where I started the hike and each step of the journey between the trailhead and the summit. Without reaching the summit, the hike retains a sense of incompleteness and I remain ignorant of some part of the mountain upon which I stood.

Similarly, there is something very peculiar about remaining ignorant of some part of my personal identity or life, not because of adversarial circumstances which prevent exploration, but simply because I am too lazy, apathetic, distracted, or fearful to apply myself.

There are mountains within each of us which continually invite us to climb them, just as there are mountains within our communities and nations which continually invite us--perhaps even beg us--to climb them. Why? Because the unfolding of life desperately needs the greater understanding and awareness we will have only after having done so.

Maintaining a superstition about a particular mountain is a poor substitute for direct experience of the mountain--a substitute which will never be able to empower the unfolding of life the way direct experience can.

Whatever other subsequent purposes humanity may individually and collectively have, the fundamental reason underneath it all for us to be here in this time, place, and circumstance, is to live--to be fully alive and involved in whatever is unfolding around us. Superstition is a way of limiting involvement, of drawing a line in the sand and insisting that this or that misfortune is not allowed to cross over to our side.

In a particular story of the biblical old testament book of Genesis, Jacob wrestled with God all night before receiving the new name which guided and empowered the rest of his life. If we are willing to wrestle with God and to wrestle with life's challenges, we will come to know new and dramatically empowering names for ourselves as well. Superstitions will be replaced by knowledge, experience, and expertise and life will be better than it could ever otherwise be.

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

Divine Relationship

After much study of psychology, philosophy, and theology during my teenage and young-adult years, I came to the conclusion that the primary question of all psychology, philosophy, and theology is simply, "how should we then live?". When we have read our books and done our mental, physical, or spiritual exercises, how should we integrate the new understandings we have gained thereby, into the ways that we treat other people, pursue our individual and collective life goals, and harmoniously maintain certain relationships?

It is important to note that the knowledge is not an end in and of itself but rather that it needs to be applied to the living of life. If we give no response to the knowledge and understanding which we have gained, we trivialize and devalue that knowledge and understanding and we leave life limited, weakened, impoverished, and perhaps even broken in some way. Relationships remain fractured and we find ourselves isolated emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually from one another and to some extent from God as well.

As a young boy in Roman Catholic elementary school, the nuns stressed to me that God is alive. Consequently, as powerful as sacred texts may be, they do not contain the limits, final definition, or complete person of God. A relationship with the Divine, therefore, must reach beyond the limits of words, languages, culture, and the current levels of human perception and understanding. To be alive is to grow. To cease growing is to begin to die. Death contracts. Life expands.

Objects, locations, and practices may be helpful to the expansion of life and supportive of a relationship with the Divine, but it is essential to remember that it is the Divine upon which we must ultimately focus and not upon the tools, people, or circumstances which serve our relationship with God in various ways. All of those, like ourselves, are on their own respective journeys toward wholeness (toward holiness), experiencing varying degrees of brokenness and healing as they work through various challenges.

The fundamental reality of the very idea of relationship, however, is that none of us was ever intended to do this all alone.

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

On a Personal Note

So much to say within so little space.

I received a donation toward the completion of the chapel-tent mentioned in earlier issues of this newsletter and have therefore opened a savings account for this specific purpose. The current balance is \$25 and the discovery of an alternative means of creating the shell of the tent suggests the cost may be closer to \$500-600 rather than earlier reports of \$3000.

The previous local cable-access television organization having gone under, a new organization of similar function has now been formed entitled Denver Open Media and I have been invited to submit recordings of previous shows (of which I have selected seventy-six shows) for re-cablecasting, using the new introduction created a few months ago.

On a purely personal note, I have a new love interest in my life who for about twenty years (in the past, not currently) served as a Lutheran congregational minister. His name is Michael.

With regard to Iliff School of Theology and my pending masters degree in theological studies, I have written my last paper and have only a couple of small one-credit weekend courses to attend (two days in February and two days in probably April) before officially receiving the degree at the end of the academic year in May.

Design and composition of the 2007 calendar, entitled "Creating Sacred Space in 2007," has been completed and I hope to have these in the mail to recipients before Christmas day. If you know anyone who would like a copy of this calendar but whose address for whatever reason I might not have, please send me that information as quickly as possible. The calendar is a free gift, although donations to assist with printing and distribution costs are very much appreciated. Instructions regarding donations appear within the box below.

May God's blessings, love, and peace be with you now and always, *Sister Who*

Subscription Information:

"*Sister Who's Perspective*" is a free monthly newsletter. If you have appreciated this newsletter, please consider making a donation to encourage production and distribution to continue. (Please make checks payable to Denver NeVaar and send to the postal address below).

Sister Who, PO Box 593, Westminster, CO 80036

Email: dn@sisterwho.com

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