

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

Free to Be

I was describing to someone the other day, being dangerously harassed while driving home, for no other reason than my anti-war bumper stickers. Her response was something along the lines that one must expect such harassment if one decides to display such bumper stickers. I was reminded of a couple of incidents from the mid-1990s which occurred while I was living in Georgetown, Colorado.

The first of the two occurred immediately after the infamous "Tailhook" incident. My knowledge of this particular incident is somewhat fuzzy, but it was my understanding that there was some sort of military convention in the far western part of the United States and that a number of women in attendance were the victims of severe sexual harassment, which eventually resulted in legal prosecution and conviction of those men involved.

The incident I recall, is that one day while working part-time in a local antique store, a woman made a remark something like, "those women should have known better than to be there and therefore simply got what they deserved." Two other women in the store said nothing so I responded, "No one deserves that kind of treatment, least of all from men employed by and therefore representing, the United States of America. The behavior of those men was categorically and inexcusably indecent at the very least."

The other incident I recall, occurred one day in the local library. I was feeling somewhat sad because of recently being confronted with overt homophobia and a somewhat wealthy and apparently educated woman dismissed the matter with the rhetorical question, "well, what did you expect?"

Often I have heard people dismiss concern over local, national, and global situations with the phrase, "it's the way the world is," as if the way the world is has nothing to do with how each of us behaves each and every day and what we require of each other in terms of public behavior. It is quite accurately a disempowering fatalistic

attitude. To return once more to my favorite quote from the movie, "Christmas Eve," starring Loretta Young, Trevor Howard, and Arthur Hill: "You can't change the world." "But that's such a poor excuse for doing nothing."

I suspect if Susan B. Anthony and other suffragettes had heard the comments of the woman in the library and the woman in the antique store, they would have given those women a major tongue-lashing--as would Martin Luther King, Jr, Harvey Milks, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mahatmas Gandhi, and a long list of other social crusaders of all races, faiths, and nationalities. They all knew that things simply do not get better for anyone, least of all ourselves, by looking the other way or making excuses, when unacceptable behavior occurs. I'm unsure of who said it first but I heartily agree with the sentiment, "all that is necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good to do nothing."

If we make excuses for those who wish to punish others for speaking out, we encourage the creation of a world in which the right of free speech is no more than mere words on paper and not a reality which empowers the diverse citizens of this or any country to be wise, understanding, and tolerant of each other. Essentially, we forfeit the right to be whoever and whatever we find ourselves to be--a right which cannot be retained within this country if it does not apply equally to everyone and is in fact actively supported by at least the majority if not the entirety of the country's citizens.

I am reminded of a simple story of unknown authorship which someone emailed to me a few weeks ago. Essentially, a mouse living on a farm noticed the farmer setting out new mousetraps one day and hurried anxiously to tell the other animals of the new danger. The chicken was unconcerned, since the mousetrap was not anywhere near her food supply. The pig was unconcerned because the danger was completely outside of his realm also. The cow was unconcerned because the mousetrap was too small to be dangerous to an animal of her size. Feeling obviously abandoned by his

community, the mouse returned to his home to try and cope with the new problem alone.

During the night, a poisonous snake crept into the house and accidentally crossed the trap. Hearing the snap, the farmer's wife hurried to the kitchen to see if the mouse had been caught and got bitten by the poisonous snake. As she became ill, the farmer killed the chicken to make chicken soup for her. When she became severely ill and was not expected to live, many relatives came to visit, to see her once more before she died, so the farmer killed the pig to feed them. After the woman died, so many people came to the funeral and the luncheon which followed, that the farmer killed the cow to feed them. Through all of this, the mouse waited and watched, concerned, but unable to intervene in any effective way.

That's where the story ended, wanting only to make the point that all of our individual fates are interconnected. I prefer to make one addition. I like to think the unreported final picture was a lonely widowed farmer sitting on the steps of his front porch, gazing out at a beautiful sunset, as a mouse appeared next to him. The little creature smiled up at him and held out a grain of corn and a dandelion blossom, as if understanding somehow all that the farmer was feeling within that moment of deep sadness. In any case, I doubt very much that the farmer ever reset the mousetrap.

How many times do we have to be reminded that "we're all in this together"? It does not matter whether we are a great humanitarian or a social crusader or a retired person living on a small fixed income or a college student with no resources but him/herself. The question is not, "Why didn't you do this and so," but simply, "What did you do?"

One of my favorite quotes of Mother Theresa goes something like this. "It is not a matter of being a saint or even an exceptional person. It is simply a matter of coming to a situation, seeing what you can do, and doing it."

It is not just that we come to a situation and be fully present within it. It is not just that we perceive deeply, honestly, and accurately all that transpires there. For truly life-giving freedom to be--to simply exist in the fullness of what God has created and designed each and every one of us to be--we must also do whatever good we can do.

Freedom comes in various ways to various people, but almost never to those who passively wait and choose to refrain from actively either

encouraging or supporting its existence in any way. Freedom in this sense then, is not so much a gift that is bestowed as a way of life that is cultivated.

Freedom is to be found by doing what we can to create a world or even just a single relationship with an acquaintance or a stranger, in which the freedom to simply be whoever and whatever one finds himself or herself to be, is characteristic.

Freedom is a seed that is planted, more than it is a goal which is achieved. It is not a destination to be reached but a way of living to put into practice wherever one lives.

It is not the superficial imposition of a positive attitude but the learned ability of processing one's thoughts and feelings regarding life's difficulties, such that one is able to embody and disburse a cheerfulness that is greater than, rather than in denial of, whatever setbacks may be encountered. Freedom is the conscious refusal to be a long-term holding tank for all of the feelings and ideas that depress and defeat us.

Freedom does not make false boasts about its costs or the incongruities and even the specific kind of injustices it can tolerate. It is equally unafraid of disclosing its light and power to anyone who will listen and look and learn. Most especially, it asks that we always look at both sides of its sometimes puzzling manifestations.

In being confronted with a closed door of opportunity, we still have the freedom to try another way or follow a different path. In experiencing the closure of one project or phase of life, we are free to begin something new. In receiving some discontented person's ultimatum, we are free to step back and gaze once more at a larger picture of life than is, or ever was, under that person's control--and live within that greater awareness rather than within the tiny universe of that person's negative control. That person's control may in fact be so small as to be only a fraction of a second in duration before it fades into nonexistence, except of course for the existence of memories, which are by their very nature immaterial.

In closing this article, I'd like to offer one of my favorite Biblical verses, found in the Old Testament book of Micah, who was considered to be one of the lesser prophets. In chapter 6, verse 8, he wrote, "But what does the Lord ask of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It sounds like a good place to start.

Contradictions

"What a delightful looking little town," my traveling companion smiled.

I turned with a puzzled expression on my face, wondering to what town he was referring. The town before us was remarkably quiet, but it was more the tension of words unspoken than the peace that comes with all needs having been met.

Then I saw the banner hanging in the elementary school window: "If you can't say anything good, don't say anything at all."

We walked a few blocks further and saw two people standing next to a car with a flat tire.

"It's been a wonderful car since the day I bought it," one man beamed proudly to the other.

"No problems whatsoever?" the second man asked.

"None," the first man insisted.

Around the next corner, a house was on fire, dark smoke billowing angrily from every window. On the sidewalk stood a woman with smudges of soot on her hands and face and three small children clinging tightly to the folds of her singed dress.

"And how are you today?" the sharply dressed woman next to her asked.

"Fine, just fine," the first woman smiled back, "And you?"

"Couldn't be better," the other woman immediately replied.

At the church on the corner, several men carried out a casket and loaded into the back of a waiting hearse. The woman following immediately behind them dabbed at her eyes with a white handkerchief, then quickly shoved it into her purse, as if hoping no one had seen. A man standing next to her asked, "And how is your family doing, Mrs. So-and-So?"

"All very well, thank you," she nodded.

As we began to enter the downtown retail area, I saw a black family being denied entrance to a restaurant on our left. A white couple stepped past them, completely lost in their discussion of the "superb entrees" they were about to enjoy.

"Isn't this just the most warm, friendly, happy community you've ever seen?" my traveling companion asked at last.

"May I tell you a little story?" I replied. "Mr. and Mrs. Eagle lived high on a rocky ledge and spent their days soaring blissfully in the sunlight, scooping fish from a nearby lake for lunch each day, and dreaming of the day when they would finally have chicks of their own to raise. Actually, there'd been quite a succession of eggs laid during the

years of their marriage to one another, but something always happened before they could hatch. They bravely answered each tragedy with a smile, however, never allowing themselves to become depressed or preoccupied with the misfortunes of themselves and their eggs, not even to determine whether perhaps their nest was simply located in a less-than-desirable spot.

One day they saw a turtle crawling across the beach and out of the kindness in their hearts decided they would instruct this neighbor in the glorious experience of flight. The turtle, being an open-minded sort of person, was happy to listen and not wanting to appear ungrateful to even to give their ideas a try.

As the eagles carried the turtle high into the air, just as they would have done for any chick they might have raised given the chance, they explained once more the mental focus and physical actions to use upon the moment of release. When the moment came, however, the turtle plummeted earthwards and did not survive."

I could tell my traveling companion was thoroughly irritated with me but trying very hard to appear gracious and hide his true feelings.

"How nice," he responded.

"May I explain?" I prompted.

"If you find it helpful, certainly," he smiled.

"A turtle is not an eagle, quality cuisine is not the privilege of an elite group, a funeral is not a sign of good health, the loss of one's home due to a fire is not a beneficial occurrence, and a flat tire will not fix itself."

My companion stared at me with a look of great confusion, finally sputtering, "If you can't say anything good..."

I interrupted, "then the tire will go unrepaired, the woman and her children will be homeless, the widow will be lonely and uncomforted, the valuable contributions of those who are different will never be made, the eagles will never have any children who survive, and the turtle will never come to understand that it was never intended to fly, any more than the eagles were intended to swim."

With a huff of indignation, my companion turned and walked away.

I turned to retrace our steps.

The black family was still standing on a corner near the restaurant, trying to think of some way to satisfy their hunger. I gave them the address of a nearby restaurant with reasonably priced food and no objections to serving anyone with the money to pay.

The funeral procession was almost ready to depart for the graveyard as I stepped up to the black limousine lined up immediately behind the hearse. I looked at the widow with a small polite smile and said, "Please accept my sincere condolences on your loss. Here's my card with my phone number. If there's anything I can do to help or even if you would just like someone to listen while you talk, please do not hesitate to call."

I stopped at a payphone on the next corner to phone the fire department then went to the woman and her children and gave her the phone numbers of several emergency relief agencies with which I was familiar, who would help her and her children with clothing and a place to stay until she was able to get back on her feet again. I gave her my card also, explaining that although I was a busy person myself with limited resources, I would be happy to do what I could to help in the meantime.

Finally I stopped to help the man change the flat tire on his car. It only took a few minutes and his smile was reward enough, as he drove on his way again.

Yet I had to wonder, as I continued on my way home again, which were the true contradictions? Was it the inconsistency between the people's responses and their particular problems or was it the inconsistency between my choice to help those in need and the exaggerated creed hanging in the elementary school window?

One contradiction made me feel ashamed while the other gave me the warm assurance that I'd done something good. Had it really cost me so much, this good feeling? Perhaps in the long run there would be other costs I hadn't anticipated,

requests from the mother with children or the widow, and I would have to decide when they were asking for more than I could give and when it wouldn't be such a bad idea for me to do without a little bit, in order to make the world a better place.

When it comes right down to it, is there really any contradiction in putting others' best interests before my own, from time to time? On another day, it would be myself with a flat tire, a house on fire, being excluded and denied the satisfaction of my own basic needs, and struggling to adjust to the loss of someone who shared more love and memories with me than anyone else on earth.

I can only hope that when that day comes, there will be a person such as myself walking down whichever street on which I am. I can only hope that such a person will see through the facades of societal and political programming and propaganda, to the human heart needing so desperately to be actively loved, nurtured, and supported in whatever ways are possible. I can only hope that the one God asks to intervene in my own hour of need, will listen and act, as divine love and wisdom directs him or her to listen and to act. Sometimes I wonder what God does, when no such person can be found.

It was simply a sunny day in a small town where from a certain perspective, nothing really happened. Yet like so many days before and after it, this was a day when the pattern of my life, the nature of my personal character, and the integrity of my soul were given moments to shine. I know that I will never regret allowing them to do so.

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

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--S.W.