

SISTER WHO'S PERSPECTIVE

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Overview

One of life's biggest challenges is that (as individuals) we are always standing too close to accurately see the larger picture which we are actually helping to paint. Occasionally, however, we will have experiences thrust upon us which uncompromisingly demand reflection.

At such moments, it is essential that, as recommended within the movie, "Sister Act," by the Reverend Mother, we "take the hint" and consider our contribution to that larger picture.

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

Collection

In adding one thing to another, even without any specific intention, I wind up with a combination that is more than the individual qualities of any single component. Collectively and consequently, the individual additions not only make many more things possible, but also introduce a multi-dimensional experience of life that would otherwise be beyond the reach of any of the individual additions. It is not just that by working together we can build bigger things, but also that by working together we begin to perceive and to measure our lives in new and different ways.

Without the introduction of a musician, for example, commonly used musical metaphors (i.e. being out of tune or hitting a sour note) would not be part of popular language. Without the addition of a florist, language would not include the metaphors that relate to that profession (i.e. blossoming into one's better self or paying attention to one's roots). Without the integration of a banker or bookkeeper, still more metaphors (i.e. the notion of whether or not ideas or information add up to a satisfactory conclusion) would be similarly unavailable to linguistic expression.

Specifically because humanity does encompass a diversity of professions and also

because thinking metaphorically is a common human capacity, there is a potentially infinite number of ways to express ourselves. As much as this contributes to empowerment, it also raises possibilities of misunderstanding and confusion—especially because virtually every collection also includes less-familiar anomalies. The time when someone used a golf term to express a relational idea, for example, I was completely baffled and could not provide any sort of effective response.

In relation to language, perhaps the greatest example of a collection would be a dictionary. Related challenges are created, however, by the ongoing need to update dictionaries and to also have dictionaries corresponding to each of humanity's literally hundreds of languages. As much as we might appreciate collections' ability to empower, therefore, we must also be cautious of their ability to burden and overwhelm us.

I keep certain things with me throughout life, because I find some mysterious inner strength just by having them around, due to the persons and events these objects symbolize—which suggests that there is a part of me that is somehow tied to those moments and persons, that causes me to interpret new experiences, events, and acquaintances in particular ways. I must be vigilant, however, of when, where, and how particular items or even entire collections may exceed usefulness and instead become burdensome. This is why I sometimes pray that I will never be given more blessings than I am able to effectively manage.

An important additional consideration is whether as the steward of these blessings, I am managing and utilizing them in the best ways possible. It is not only a question of what's best for me, but also of what is best for the person or object. So I sometimes release things that I love, so that they may know even greater love and fulfillment than I can provide.

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

Combination

An important consideration of things being combined, is that they change. Nothing is what it previously was, once it has been combined with something else. In most cases, even if one is able to once again separate the constitutive elements, they cannot return to their previous state, because of the resulting effects of the experience of having been even momentarily combined. For humanity and certain other species, this is especially problematic because of our capacity to remember. Even in relation to inanimate objects—cars, carpeting, or buildings—a certain amount of wear is considered to be normal.

Demonstrating the same principle in a contrasting direction, combining ingredients within a kitchen is usually irreversible and—if done wisely—creates better rather than more worn out results. This introduces the notion of investment, that by giving something to a relational event or experience, (ideally) one winds up with a blessing that did not previously exist at all. In considering such possibilities, I suggest that there is no investment more worthy than that which is oriented to the holistic and positive development of people.

A challenge to virtually all holistic intentions, however, is that humanity is still learning what in fact is truly holistic. Not that long ago, environmental concerns would not have been included, because there was limited understanding of how inseparable our survival is from that of the environments within which we live. In now having this information and understanding widely available and in combining it with our perceptions of needs to be resolved, both the content and the process of our decision-making has changed.

An additional quality of combination is thus that if it has occurred once, there is an inherent invitation for it to occur again (and again and again...). As such, combination is inseparable from time, unavoidably indicating the existence of moments both before and after the event of combination occurred. Within common human perceptions and practices, this also introduces the possibility of judging ourselves very harshly for how we behaved while ignorant of that which now guides us.

Judging and blaming are always a waste of time, distracting us from the more important task of growing into new forms, definitions, and systems, which were perhaps invisible until combination occurred. A primary task of growth within ourselves and others is therefore that of creating opportunities for empowering combinations to occur. As taught to me while a student at a Southern-Baptist-oriented Christian youth ministry school, "a man proven wrong against his will, is of the same opinion still."

Ideally, therefore, (specifically in relation to humanity) combination is not a matter of indoctrination (forcing something upon another) but rather of creating opportunity for individuals (in all of their uniqueness) to discover more truth and thereby take the next step within the long and (hopefully) ongoing journey of holistic personal and spiritual growth. Combination is thus ideally a matter of transforming individual components into a new and greater wholeness.

In keeping with the witticism that "every time one points a finger at someone else, there are three more fingers pointing back at one's self," the importance of making transforming combination a part of one's own spiritual practice cannot be overstated. Within my own spiritual journey, this practice meant that as I passed from one spiritual context to the next, instead of substituting one thing for another, I just kept adding and integrating whatever insights I encountered. Somehow I knew intuitively that everyone was seeing something worth seeing, but that like the six blind men and the elephant (which I recall reading in early childhood), they failed to realize that they were all just unique glasses of water looking at the same mysteriously infinite ocean.

There are certainly many combinations within my own life that I failed to perceive and understand as quickly as they were presented to me. In some cases, it was I who was not ready for the next step. With regard to my novel, *Troll Steps*, there were some portions which could not be written until after certain life experiences had occurred; I just didn't have the understanding necessary to do it. Thankfully, I didn't stay in that more limited frame of mind.

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

Collaboration

A primary initial consideration is the presumption of both mindfulness and a capacity to choose. Even the collaboration done by enslaved persons requires the choice of submission over perhaps life-threatening punishment. Collaboration thus depends at the very least upon freedom of thought, which must include the freedom and ability to disagree. Where open disagreement is forbidden, however, collaboration is a lie, an oppressive sham, and a counterfeit; devoid of true value and destructive to one's integrity.

Where mindfulness has engaged in effective communication, however, choice can consequently be intelligently informed and at times even breath-taking in its effectiveness. A primary and nearly universal example of this is the existence of so many diverse human languages. The very creation (and evolution) of a language requires two or more people agreeing that a particular combination of sounds, gestures, and in some cases symbols will represent a particular understanding. Until there is such agreement, an effective language cannot exist. Phrased another way, language is fully dependent upon effective collaboration and an ability to interact symbolically; by mutual agreement allowing a sound, a gesture, or a sign to represent a specific meaning.

Within certain fantasy worlds of the genre of science fiction books, movies, and television shows, certain species have been described as telepathic (meaning that communication happens by an exchange of thoughts rather than words or gestures). Even in such cases, however, one must initiate and the other must collaboratively receive in order for any understanding to be conveyed. In keeping with the witticism that "a picture is worth a thousand words," however, those more

***"The real job of life
can only be seen when
one is finally undistracted
by more immediate tasks."***

-- Sister Who

accustomed to linguistic communication usually find the transference of images overwhelming, attempting to process an unanticipated flood of possible meanings and being thus required to interpret much more rapidly in order to avoid an adversarial pause in the conversation.

The conclusion to which that leads me is that collaboration also requires certain degrees of compassion and sensitivity in relation to the limitations and abilities of the recipient of any specific communication. Failure to respect the other's capacities might inspire the protest, "You're talking over my head," to indicate unfamiliarity with either vocabulary or ideas. I seem to be often guilty of this myself, so I try to let people know that they are always welcome to interrupt or ask for explanation, if this occurs.

A particular preparation for collaboration is therefore the phase of simply listening to each others' stories; being open about one's strengths, weaknesses, and personal styles; and creating common agreements about any controversial issues which may arise. While on one hand I absolutely hate the notion of "agree to disagree" because of the frequency with which it creates "elephants in the living room" (topics which cannot be openly discussed), I must also concede that due to differences in particular personal or communal values, some individuals may in fact remain unable to discuss certain topics—at least until both are willing to allow three essential inter-relational dynamics. These are (1) that the world is a shared space, (2) that the world is populated by people of diverse perceptions and opinions who must collaborate occasionally to address common concerns, and (3) that in order for each group to have the freedom to embrace its own beliefs and practices, others must be free to hold contrasting beliefs and practices, in ways that allow for peaceful and mutually respectful coexistence.

Specifically because the three dynamics are true and always have been, collaboration is a matter of community—but collaboration without individuality has neither integrity, nor vision, nor potentiality. To the extent that individuals collaborate, however, community is able to survive virtually any challenge.

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

Completion

Does this even exist as anything other than a tentative label? If even death is nothing more than a doorway to a radically different experience of life, at what point can one genuinely claim to be complete? All that being said, there are times when at least momentarily I do feel complete—as well as times when I definitely do not.

Reflecting upon my own experiences of personal and spiritual growth, the fleeting moments when I did feel complete have usually been when after long searching, I discovered an apparently perfect resolution to a particular challenge. In many cases, however, such moments were temporary plateaus analogous to the steps of a stairway. Once I had sufficiently acclimated to a particular plateau, I would be informed by circumstances, a certain inner restlessness, or occasionally even a direct external challenge, that it was once again time to get growing again.

What has impressed me as being most important within such moments, is to avoid in any way whatsoever, fleeing from the particular challenge. As frightening and painful as some of those challenges have been, I know I would not be who I am today without them. To the extent that I hold myself accountable to a higher standard than merely what feels good at the time, I find my spirit growing and expanding in ways I had not previously imagined. Does that make me complete? For the particular moment perhaps, but that hardly means that there is nothing further in store for me.

Consequently, as thankful as I am for my large canine family throughout the last decade, I have decided that for their own safety and welfare, my three dachshunds will be going to live with "Uncle Neil" (my former lifepartner) in Montana about two weeks from now. That will leave only myself and Bedivere to carry on here as well as we can. I dread the sudden emptiness, but Gareth's passing has completed one phase of our familial history and invited a very different one to begin. The task of making it feel complete again is apparently my next challenge and I intend to do my best.

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

On a Personal Note

Losing Gareth: He arrived nearly nine years ago as the most wonderful ball of fur I'd ever seen, an amazing combination of spirit, mind, and body, trying to make sense of his own peculiar transitions, perceptions, and feelings. When my diagnosis of autism was finally given, I thought perhaps he would become my autism service dog. I'd been told that what he really needed was a job to do, but his lack of prompt response to commands and nervousness in relation to anything unfamiliar recommended otherwise. Nonetheless, I never hesitated to rub his ears and assure him of my love, whenever he interrupted me. About six weeks ago, I noticed that he had begun to spend much more time on the floor near the altar in my living room. In retrospect, I wonder if he was preparing for a most important spiritual journey, but had no way to tell me.

The morning of Gareth's last day began in the usual sort of way. I did not realize that Gareth would suddenly experience some sort of unanticipated and unprovoked brain injury only a couple of hours later. In the blink of an eye he was suddenly unable to stand. I rushed him to the veterinarian, but it was already too late. Then, without fighting the process at all, he was gone. As has often been said, "If love could build a stairway and memories a lane, I'd walk right up to heaven and bring you home again." Yes—absolutely and without hesitation.

Now I just have to remember (or more likely re-invent) a way of living without him.

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

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