

SISTER WHO'S PERSPECTIVE

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Overview

Many words seem to be tossed around lightly, encouraging us to forget the importance and possibilities to which such words refer--which may be especially important to the current challenges of transitional relationship.

That humanity is individually and collectively becoming something different than it has ever been is obvious. I insist that we need to be careful not to lose connection with each other within that process.

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

The Family of the Mind

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the conceptions and expectations each of us holds in relation to the word "family" affect nearly everything we ever think, say, and do. I do recognize this to be true, but also concede that my words and actions are not always congruent with the best that I have to offer. It seems wise, therefore, to consider ways that I may be living, without even realizing that I am.

My conscious understanding of family includes first of all the dynamic that the members value and support one another in whatever ways they can. Biologically related persons who do not behave in this way, in my humble opinion, are not truly being family to one another. Ideally, this value and support also manifests as a certain frequency of interaction. It is difficult at best, to maintain a genuine reality of being family, if the persons involved have neither communicated nor directly interacted for an extended time period.

A common complication, however, is that well-intentioned and genuinely loving persons want to be family members to each other in some way or another, but do not have the logistical ability to do so--resulting in promises and expressions of commitment to which they are objectively unable to be true.

The other broad adversarial area of awareness is the extremely common incidence of dysfunctional families which are not in any way even minimally oriented to unconditional love or multi-generational wisdom. One self-help lecturer advocated selecting real or imaginary persons (perhaps drawn from historical, literary, or cinematic works) to substitute for biological relatives who are either unable or unwilling (for whatever reason) to fill their roles in a creative, positive, and/or constructive way. The family of the mind may thus be mentally imaged or imagined, but its effects upon one's thoughts and emotions may be no less real.

As much as a Buddhist perspective recommends against expectations and emotional or psychological attachments, these seem to be fairly unavoidable from the moment one begins to use the word "family," specifically because of one's specific understandings of what the word means.

The central goal of this entire concern is holistic and relational health, but it seems to be universally acknowledged that entrenched societal practices may be pointed in the opposite direction. Virtually every example of positive development, however, begins with an idea or the discovery of a new possibility. It only makes sense, therefore, that this is where one should begin the transformation of self-sabotaging relational dynamics into other ways of interacting that are more empowering to everyone involved.

An added challenge, however, is that so many are unaware of the mental conceptions of family they hold and consequently may not even understand the significance, whenever invitations to become extended family appear.

By divine grace, however, such invitations and opportunities are as frequently available as the dawning of each new day--for virtually everyone willing to take notice of them.

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

The Family of the Face

As often as I or anyone else may strive to be very precise and specific in order to bring understanding to a particular point, many of the physical or relational components common to human life experience cannot intelligently be separated from the systems within which they appear and function. Individuality can be wonderful, but is only so when one remembers that every sustained example of individuality is inseparable from an enormous constellation of relationships.

Facial expressions which therefore might be interpreted by as little as a single word--happy, sad, angry, frightened--include a complex combination of memories, perceptions which have been interpreted a particular way, and possible interactions and responses which could follow. A single facial expression does not stand in isolation from its context.

Similarly, the influences upon any single moment's facial appearance involve not only multiple thoughts but multiple sensations as well--specifically because they are often more sensitive than is generally realized. The most faint fragrances, sounds, visual details, and even the particular taste within one's mouth within each moment are registered and integrated by the brain into a summary of experience that will have a direct impact upon the words one ultimately chooses to speak.

It is not just the constant wearing of a dishonest smile, therefore, that encourages more desirable social interactions, but rather a collaborative effort to create the constellation of sensations and experiences which makes the world a better place within which all can live.

In considering the family of the face, therefore, there is also an invitation to value each member of that family, supporting health and integrating contributions respectfully, no matter how any particular perception is added to the mix. This may be one of the most persistent and obvious metaphors by which life encourages us to regard each other in a similar manner--welcoming perceptions of all sorts and working toward effective integration of them, so that the face and ultimately the body of any particular community is empowered to do much more than it otherwise could.

Metaphorically, we could also consider the face of a particular time, people, or societal entity (i.e. a government, a corporation, or a religious institution). The face that an age, a nation, a business, or a church shows to the surrounding world, constitutes a positive or negative contribution to the wholeness of ongoing human life experience. Such faces are not determined by a single individual, however, but rather by individuals acting with solidarity; by individuals acting as a family.

As has often been said, "a picture is worth a thousand words." A facial expression is unavoidably a succession of pictures, evolving in ways that reflect experience, and thus constituting a longer novel than anyone will ever be able to finish reading. The family of the face is consequently a multi-generational one with a very long lineage, most of which is quickly forgotten, but which it could be very helpful to remember--if we are able, that is, to maturely respond to the ongoing wholeness rather than obsessing about a single particular expression. Joy can be found within the ability to move from any difficult moment into a more positive one, but a sobering reality is also that it is both unhealthy and unwise to censor or ignore the more difficult moments. If we ignore that which needs healing, simply because it is unpleasant, no healing will ever occur.

One could in fact suggest that every family is ideally concerned with a virtually endless stream of collaborative acts of healing; facing challenges, working together, and making things better.

An interesting quirk of the family of the face, is that in comparison to other examples of family, it is most predisposed and equipped to inspire or extend hope to all who perceive it--and the hope it thereby creates provides the willingness and perhaps even the strength and energy to try one more time, following each error, mistake, or failure.

It is ultimately not that the family survives at the expense of its members, but rather that it survives by the strength of its members and that it must consequently nurture the health and vitality of each member. We are ourselves, but we are also family members.

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

The Family of the Body

As much as pain is an undesirable perception and experience and as much as I wish to be sensitive to personal friends whose life experience has become characterized by chronic pain due to various misfortunes, there is also the reality that pain is simply the body's way of communicating that something is wrong and needs to be addressed. Unfortunately such communications do not always respect that effective resources to address the specific problem are not always available. The nerve impulses may have all of the best intentions (to educate the body about needs to address), but as has been said for hundreds of years, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." For those enduring chronic pain, this would certainly be true.

This does nothing, however, to make the body's interconnected, interdependent, and inter-relational family any less real. Even (or especially) in times of pain, it is essential to be as available to each other as we're able, to encourage the survival of every member of the family in whatever ways we can. Allowing or perhaps even forcing a particular part of the body to face its pain alone, is little different from a sort of (at least temporary) amputation.

What holds every family genuinely together, especially during times of great difficulty, is love. Without love, an appearance of togetherness may be maintained, but such appearances will never have the strength or substance necessary to survive more serious threats or adversarial circumstances (which is perhaps why so many families fall apart when faced with particularly severe tragic losses).

Rather than obsess about an absence of love, possibly also engaging in self-blame, however, a more effective response is to re-establish availability and to re-engage in acts

***"Love is the conviction
that including that person
is absolutely worth
whatever is required."***

-- Sister Who

of support and (hopefully) effective healing. If I am unwilling to do so whenever such times arise, it is highly questionable whether the familial relationship I otherwise claim is anything more than a ruse. In the words of the reverend mother within the movie, "Sister Act," "if you are fooling anyone, it is only yourself."

It is specifically by remembering--or in many cases rediscovering--interconnectedness and the possibilities of collaboration, that innumerable good things can truly begin to happen. In this sense, we all have the opportunity and invitation to be leaders--to be the ones who go first, blazing a trail that others are free to follow and marking the trail as clearly as possible in case there is a certain lapse of time before they do so.

It is specifically because each member of the family is unique and valuable that the family must always rally to the defense and support of even its weakest members. It is perhaps an often overlooked but extremely pervasive reality that the majority of the body's organs are unable to survive without the protective sheath of the skin and unable to move without a sturdy skeleton running from one end of the body to the other. As aggravating as skin and joint conditions may occasionally be, there would no such thing as strength of heart, lungs, circulation, or immune system without them. Whatever limitations caring for the skin may impose upon our lives and whatever adjustments must be made in posture when lifting heavy objects, we must do these in order to benefit from the availability of skin and bones during other times that we might consider to be more important.

On a different note, it is peculiar to note how often injury is a result of overconfidence; that an unsupportable assumption of adequate strength may lead to a poor choice to expose ourselves to stresses and circumstances beyond the ability of a particular body part to address. Is it that one is actually unable or only that one is unwilling to try? While only the individual can reliably answer this question, the willingness to try is all that is necessary for the resources and strength of an interested family to be integrated and applied to the challenge.

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

The Family of the Heart

"If love could build a stairway and memories a lane, I'd walk right up to heaven and bring you home again." Such were the words inscribed upon a pet memorial which I saw quite a number of years ago, but have remembered ever since. What can easily be overlooked within this verse, however, is the one speaking, who has a specific relationship to the one being described.

The focus is not just the one who has "crossed over," but rather the relationship between that one and the one volunteering to make the effort described. This is an example of how relationships of love (e.g. of the heart, according to western cultural perspectives), transcend species, age, language, culture, and a long list of other descriptors. What makes the family a reality is the love that guides and empowers every interaction--so much so that the sense of honestly being family rarely if ever survives the fading of love between the persons involved.

How is it that so many can regard such a vital dynamic as almost optional? If I were to enter any house of worship and announce to the congregation there that I have a serious problem, I suspect they would hurry to assist with any sort of substance addiction, but would give me only a blank stare if I said that I had for whatever reason lost the capacity to love a particular person. Within Christianity, the directive is that we are to love our enemies, but very few seem to understand what this means.

I suggest that what is at the heart of the matter is remembering that all of humanity is ideally intended to be one huge family, loving and supporting each other in whatever ways we can, and striving always to resolve our arguments, integrate our activities, and ensure that everyone's needs are legitimately met. To the extent that we ignore the needs of other family members, ever-escalating conflict is the only logical outcome.

Conversely, to the extent that we carefully and wisely nurture every individual and community, world peace may ultimately become an enduring reality.

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

On a Personal Note

I continue to strive to be creatively productive, but we seem to be living within a most confusing time, within which paradigms, relationships, and systems are radically shifting and even re-inventing themselves. That being the case, I am striving to be even more open than usual to unconventional approaches to whatever challenges cross my path.

Among these has been responding to how depressed Bedivere has been since all of my other dogs left. A new sibling thus arrived two days ago and was named Vivienne, after the lady of the lake within Arthurian legends. It has been an intensely challenging couple of days so far, however, because she is a bull terrier about one year younger than Bedivere, who has had apparently no previous training of any kind. Although strong-willed, she is quickly learning the norms of our household.

As for the video project of three modern "morality plays," over half of the dialogues have been recorded. I hope to record the rest by the end of August, suggesting possible completion by the end of October. Comments and responses received thus far are very encouraging. I am hopeful that this will be a remarkably powerful work, producing many new and wonderful opportunities.

The Autumn metaphysical fair at the Denver Mart will be September 5-7, at which I will be available within the portable chapel and will also facilitate an open discussion in a classroom on Saturday evening at 5 p.m.

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

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