

sister who's perspective

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Overview

It has often been said that one must begin from wherever one finds one's self to be, but it must be acknowledged that one's present location is neither always chosen nor always good. Among the possible insights of this month's essays is that it may not matter whether or not one's present location is good, as long as one can make it nurturing.

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

The Pain of Exile

I long ago lost count of the number of times I lamented, "why does life have to hurt so much?" Many wiser people throughout human history have asked this question in one way or another and some have even speculated a few perhaps satisfactory but nonetheless tentative answers. I suspect there may actually be as many responses to this question as there are people who are aware of this query's reality.

All that being said, there is something within me that demands an effective response before it will allow me to shift focus elsewhere.

While I do try to maintain an open mind and make the best of whatever comes along, a commitment to honesty and a perhaps atypical amount of self-awareness clearly insist that my current environment feels more like exile than home. It is usually within the very nature of feelings and perceptions, however, to shift more or less continuously. After only a few months, I already notice my thoughts running in very different ways than was typical while living in the vicinity of Denver, Colorado.

Having grown up within a context of the Christian faith, I recall the stories of the Old Testament section of the Bible relating many generations of the "chosen people" living in exile from their homeland, under the tyranny of various neighboring empires. I was told it was because they had been bad and needed to be

punished or disciplined in some way. The resulting circumstances, however, always seemed to create far more questions than answers, in combination with an enormous amount of waiting. When I reviewed the story of Joseph within the book of Genesis, for example, it became clear that as a reward for refusing to commit adultery with another man's wife, he sat in prison without any significant word from the Divine (other than two small dream interpretations) for two years. I'm not sure I would be anything but chronically grumpy if I were left within such circumstances, deprived of any sense of meaning or purpose and punished for acting in a virtuous manner.

At some level, that experience must have hurt. The point of all such experiences, however, is that they are never the sum total of who or what a person is. We are more than the substance of any single experience or even of all of our past experiences put together. We embody virtually infinite possibility.

So why does life have to hurt? Perhaps there is no final answer to this question, nor to queries about unchosen social and/or personal isolation. Yet not having such answers is an insufficient reason to give up and go no further.

What pain makes unmistakably clear is that one is still alive and, as the saying goes, as long as there is life there is hope. I could not have imagined just one year ago, where I would be today. The same is true about where I will be a year from now. Within this moment, regardless of whatever I've lost, I still have the abilities of loving and learning. Whatever else will cross my path is uncertain. I must persist because of the possibility that it could all ultimately turn out to be very good. From a biblical perspective, each of the first five days of creation were impelled by incompleteness within contemporary existence. Perhaps that can be true of each of us as well, as we move from vague exile toward integrated wholeness.

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

The Opportunity of Exile

A problem to solve may be the most helpful solution for a person who is impatient to make a positive difference within the world. A sense of purpose is therein defined as well as some initial actions to take, if resources are available from which to begin fabricating whatever is needed. Considering that every additional attempt will involve improvement, it is also quite unnecessary to be concerned about acting with perfection the very first time.

Parallel to the construction of a solution is the construction of an array of relationships, introducing one's self to views, knowledge, and experiences of others which may be quite different from one's own. The African word "ubuntu" has been translated as "I am because we are." It is this sense of inseparability between individuality and community that transforms potentially painful exile into an opportunity not only for personal growth but also for the development of ever greater interconnectedness--none of which requires homogeneity in relation to the individuals involved. It is in fact the diversity of such individuals which empowers the group with more tools and options than would otherwise be available. Regardless, the only recommendable outcome within a more or less collective experience of exile is for everyone to win, rather than becoming resigned to lethargy and ultimately self-destructive competition.

Conversely, if the exile unfolds more individually, the goals remain more or less the same because the dynamics remain more or less the same. The principle difference is that the community is predominantly invisible and spiritual instead of being physically present, but an individual faced with a challenge that is potentially overwhelming will instinctively and immediately refer to a community of past experiences, remembered perspectives, and recalled words of wisdom from official or unofficial teachers previously encountered, because anything and everything can be a teacher--if one is willing to allow past memories to be instructive.

Within experiences of exile, memories are sometimes all that we have--but they may be enough. To insist that one's immediate

physical experience is all that is available, is to reject positive contributions arising from within one's mind and heart (which, to me at least, makes no sense at all). In many cases, however, I have noticed that this is one of the last places people look for help in time of need.

Needs will come; it is somewhat woven into the very nature of life for them to do so. I do not need to fear them, however, if I am mindful of the ingenuity, adaptability, and community with which I am able to meet them--directly, promptly, and assertively. Perhaps the most magical aspect of all creation is the additional creative potential hidden within each and every part. We can always be more than simply a reaction to the moment; we can use the moment as a launching pad to steer all of life in a profound and new direction.

All of which is easy to say, but much more difficult to do. One of the reasons we call such experiences "exile" rather than "taking a sabbatical," is that they really are difficult, often painful, and virtually never encountered by one's own choice. To the extent that they are used as raw material from which to create something new, however, the measure of the experience is able to shift in positive directions.

The hidden heart of opportunity within exile is the chance to exercise our mental and emotional muscles of transformation, changing the raw material of the experience into new and unimagined growth and empowerment. It is not a case of white-washing or sugar-coating what is at heart rotten and undesirable, but rather the slow and careful process of sticky gray clay being fired into fine porcelain. In and of itself, clay is just clay. Only in the mind of a skillful potter is the future vision greater than the current reality, but such processes are learned rather than instinctual or inherent--which means that any one of us could become our particular village's next master potter.

The opportunity of exile is not a lottery ticket to be won, but rather a developmental journey to be undertaken and neither those preferring everything be easy nor those who measure accomplishment by difficulty will know the best parts. That reward belongs to those who fully respect the qualities of the clay.

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

The Invitation of Exile

If I cannot open a genuinely substantive dialogue (even an imaginary one with myself) within times that are adversarial, then I will never learn more than what I am told. More concisely, I will have chosen to remain blind while other options remain available.

Learning from others requires that I integrate something outside of my own perspective and past experience. To some extent this may be unavoidable within certain circumstances. While in high school, there were classes I despised which were required by the administration in order to graduate. The best thing I can say in retrospect is that not only did I survive their rigorous activities but also that these previously unfamiliar activities which I learned in order to earn a passing grade, are no longer part of my life. What remains true, however, is that whenever these subject areas are mentioned, I have an experientially informed perspective to offer.

As an impossibly anomalous and unique individual, four years of high school was very much a sort of exile for me, offering only the polarities of being either isolated or bullied. In attempting to make the best of a bad situation, I utilized the power of choice in any way I could and managed to steer around a number of potentially hazardous situations that had nothing good to offer to any but the most popular students. I have thus been able to move on with my life without being ensnared by excessive or painful memories. For me, that part of my story is more analogous to an

"The distinction between being at home and being in exile is whether or not one wants to be wherever one is. Choosing to be fully present, is a first step in a constructive direction."

-- Sister Who

unwritten chapter of a book or an empty closet without even scribbles of what might have been, etched upon its bare walls.

The invitation which was subtly yet persistently present throughout that emptiness, however, was the restlessness that inspired me to look beyond the boundaries of the world others had defined for me. I gave up attending high school reunions many years ago, but at the one or two that I did attend, was amused to discover that while I was continuing to grow, most others had stagnated into dull inflexible mediocrity. While I became a silver-medal bodybuilder in my forties, eventually earning a masters degree in theological studies, they degenerated into overweight businessmen and factory workers. Had it not been for me responding constructively to the invitation I discovered within that exile period, however, it is probable no difference would have emerged.

Something within loss, limitation, and imprisonment apparently has a unique capacity for launching human spirits higher than they could otherwise go, but not everyone who experiences such things successfully connects with such possibilities. My encouragement to each person reading this essay is to be among those who do. Both you and everyone else will be far better off if you succeed in doing so.

While the specific invitation extended may be unique, it will be that which one perceives to be most opposite in comparison to the exile experience itself, much like the sundial's shadow combines with its physical reality to convey a message the materials and experience themselves cannot comprehend. It is not the pieces in isolation which matter, but rather their respective individualities in relationship to each other that grant an epiphany to any persistent seeker of truth. As phrased according to a different metaphor, it is not the stars themselves that tell us where we are, but only as they stand together in specific constellations that navigation is made possible.

The invitation of exile, most succinctly stated, is the discovery of new constellations; new ways of defining ourselves, our lives, and our relationships. Nonetheless, exile being what it is, it will also take time for this to unfold.

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

The Embrace of Exile

I have no interest in even suggesting that exile is a good or painless experience. I do recognize, however, that at times it may be unavoidable and perhaps even necessary. It is especially within such times that embrace is simply a method for transforming oppressive elements into raw material from which other more desirable constructions can arise.

It is not particularly comfortable to live within a house that is under construction. If one has no other place to be, however, living within such adversarial circumstances while continuously improving them, may be the best possible choice one could make. Intolerance for such circumstances would logically leave one with only the possibility of resigning one's self and one's family to ongoing oppression.

It has been said that "sometimes there is no way out, except to go through." This is an alternative phrasing of embracing exile that is and always will be daunting, but subtly implies that one will indeed get through to whatever is on the other side of the struggle. Being unable to see what's on the far side of the current struggle, makes that reality no less real.

The pessimist, of course, would argue that the unseen world on the far side of the smog is probably worse in comparison. The optimist, conversely, would refuse to have any romanticized description questioned in any way whatsoever. Somewhere between the two extremes, however, is usually where the reality of life unfolds.

It is rarely the best or the worst which happens to us, but rather something in between that forces us to make choices and adjustments. That is, after all, how being temporarily exiled to this physical world from the realm of spiritual realities, finds its sense of purpose and direction. We are constantly and continuously invited to increase our awareness and understanding, while retaining humility in all that we do, because there is still so much more to learn and to become.

If one knows less, another knows more-- and it seems we have all been intentionally exiled here together. Anyone want a hug?

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

On a Personal Note

The first local appearances in ritual garb have occurred in connection with the creation of two thirds of the 2016 calendar photos and received no disturbing reactions. A brief appearance of the portable chapel at a local holistic fair (before adverse weather interfered) was welcomed enthusiastically by attendees.

On the first Saturdays of October, November, and December, I will be showing videos of my three morality plays and facilitating subsequent discussion at the local WREN creative studio.

Additionally, eleven new episodes of my ongoing television series were recorded within the last two days and ten more are planned within the next two weeks. It's a very busy time, since winter weatherization of the house continues as well (but is way behind schedule).

Thanks to the generosity of two friends, I was in Colorado for one week to participate in a memorial service for a man with whom I collaborated theatrically in the 1990s. It was quite an honor that during his last days of physical life, he requested that I read poetry at his memorial service. Of the three selections I shared there, the final one was the well-known verse by Max Ehrmann, entitled "Desiderata."

I was also able to visit with a few friends while in Colorado, but many who wanted to see me were unable, due to conflicting schedules.

Ah, well, at least we continue to hold each other within our hearts (at least I hope we do) and Colorado still feels more like home.

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

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