

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

Cycles and Seasons

Just a couple of weeks ago, as eight feet of new-fallen snow piled up around my house, the electrical power failed, and the phone lines went down, the fact remained that Spring was just around the corner. After four days of neighbor helping neighbor because we were basically cut off from the rest of the world, the snow finally stopped falling and life very slowly began to return to normal. In the days since then, higher temperatures are sustaining a sea of mud throughout the neighborhood but there's still about four feet of snow left in my yard to melt before the last evidence of the ordeal fades to a mere memory.

As much as I know how important it is to always remain honest with one's self about one's current circumstances, since every journey must start from where one is standing, I know that it is equally important to maintain a sort of peripheral vision. If current circumstances are less than wonderful, there is hope to be found in the awareness that something better will eventually follow. Life simply does not stay bad indefinitely, though it certainly does go that way every so often, just as sure as every year's cycle includes all of Winter's hardships as well as the rebirth of Spring. In the words of the old adage, "change is the only constant in the universe."

I believe myself to be a man of peace but thousands of years ago a man wiser than I will ever be, wrote, "To everything there is a season...a time for war and a time for peace...". Anyone who insists that there is no time for war, is obviously either ignorant or in denial. On the other hand, those who insist that it is impossible to have world peace or for everyone to learn to care about each other, also drastically underestimates God-given human potential. In the confusing mix between these two extremes is where the majority of our lives seems to unfold, as we continually strive to discern which time (of the many possibilities) is it now.

Perhaps most gratifying during difficult times in which it seems that virtually the entire human race has lost its individual and collective mind, is to

remind myself that no matter how much the agents of evil claim to be in charge, God has the final word and the reality that the agents of evil create is never the complete picture of reality.

The challenge is to retain awareness of the unfolding of evil while continuing, somehow, to go on nurturing all that is good, perhaps because every wise person knows that everything within Time is finite. Evil may have its day, but it will also have its end. The most necessary hope then, is simply that one has the stamina to last that long. In any case, even in the worst of times, we must continue to find ways to plant the seeds of the better harvest, by which we want the world to be someday blessed.

Where I grew up in Wisconsin, along with Spring came hours upon hours of working in the garden--planting, watering, and weeding. Creating the perfect circumstances for desirable plants to grow also meant creating the perfect circumstances for undesirable plants to grow. In a nation which prizes personal freedom, it must be accepted that people are as free to make wrong choices as they are to make right ones.

Thus, it seemed to me, for every good seed I planted, there was a sprout of crabgrass to pull out. Weeding was a more or less endless task, until the days turned colder and Winter drove all plant life into hiding.

Imagine for a moment, a man who decided he would rid his garden of crabgrass once and for all. Plowing the weeds under only made them multiply. Pulling them one by one seemed too tedious and even if the man succeeded in ridding the garden of every last one, new crabgrass seeds would just blow in from the neighbor's property across the street. In a final desperate effort, the man sprayed defoliant across the garden and every last sprout of crabgrass died. When even the sprouts that blew in from across the street died, the man thought he'd won. When his neighbors stopped by the following Spring, however, it was

discovered that he'd starved to death because his garden had produced no Winter food supply to sustain him.

As long as there are people in need who cry out for help and are ignored, there will be tyrants and despots of all kinds, championing the cause of those desperate people. Perhaps it is the most appropriate way for God to show us how and where we have failed to believe in each other and demonstrate toward each other the unconditional love which was first demonstrated toward us in more ways than we can count. How quickly and how easily we seem to forget this.

Whether it is truly a time for peace or truly a time for war is something upon which we will probably never agree, but I do know that all true victories will only come through the continuing and effective demonstration of love. If we do not therefore empower ourselves to demonstrate love persistently and effectively, we prepare ourselves only to be losers.

Love listens and dares to give, even or especially when giving makes no sense. Love is willing to listen rather than make demands. Love is willing to respond with what is truly needed rather than supplying only what the giver thinks the one in need should have. Love is willing to make sacrifices for no other reason than that it's the only way to make things turn out right. Love dares to embrace the undeserving, forgive the unrepentant, and provide for the ungrateful. Love is willing to go slowly when someone is afraid and (as much as possible) to allow someone to learn from his or her mistakes, when that person is unwilling to learn any other way. Love is the embodiment of honesty and integrity, never sugar-coating, white-washing, exaggerating, or grand-standing the truth about anyone or anything, but simply letting things be whatever they actually are. Love does not censor anything, knowing that God has hidden the seeds of personal and spiritual growth within every atom of creation, but insists upon a truthful and empowering distribution of those seeds.

So what is the lesson of crabgrass? Until there is not one piece of crabgrass left on earth, weeding will be an ongoing ritual of every productive garden. Furthermore, we must learn to distinguish weeds from desirable plants while they are still very small and much easier to remove, rather than wait until they have overtaken the whole of the garden. We must also devise a way of removing the weeds which does not damage the

productive plants which may be growing so near to the weeds as to even have intertwined roots with the roots of the weeds. There is also no one specific weed, the removal of which would somehow magically eliminate all other weeds in the garden.

What we need, indeed what we have always needed, is an effective weeding plan which is effectively put into action. Considering the variety of plants contained within the garden, however, there is no one single weeding plan which can be universally applied. Again and again, we must adapt all that we have learned, to meet the specific needs of the situation within which we find ourselves or by which we are confronted.

In rereading recently a passage within the book, The Different Drum--Community Making and Peace by Scott Peck, I found an interpretation I don't recall seeing there before, even though I've read the book several times. Regardless of the reason I failed to see it before, the passage seems especially relevant now. The author describes how every step of individual and collective growth within humanity follows generally the same basic five steps outlined by Dr. Kubler-Ross in her breakthrough book, On Death and Dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In this specific passage, Dr. Peck goes on to apply that pattern to the general American experience of the unofficial war in Vietnam. Although history clearly shows that virtually everything about that war was a mistake and that we really did lose, as a nation we never made it past the fourth stage to a more positive acceptance in which we could redefine our relationship to third-world and developing countries in a more mutually empowering way.

Just as any lesson we avoid keeps coming back into our lives until we finally deal with it constructively, Vietnam has been followed by a succession of unsuccessful military actions in third-world and developing countries, each one of them asking the United States one more time, to redefine how we relate to countries living without the comforts and societal structures most of its citizens take for granted. By God's design, the lesson will not go away until we learn it. Whether we choose to learn this lesson during a time of peace or during a time of war, is ultimately our own decision to make, but learn it we must or we will be like the man who used defoliant to rid his garden of crabgrass.

Corporeal Integration

Many religions throughout human history have in effect separated body and spirit into separate if also interactive entities. For hundreds of years, many people were taught that earthly comforts were irrelevant and that at the point of death, physical reality would in fact be replaced by a better spiritual one. Many have been taught to find their joy and happiness within spiritual experiences, no matter how incongruous such experiences are from typical daily life. Those who had difficulty embracing such disconnected theology, more often devoted the majority of their attention, time, and energy to various forms of physical gratification.

Just as I have occasionally spoken in the past of the need for us to learn to perceive multi-dimensionally, it has always been my contention that physical life and spirituality are in fact, two sides of the same coin; two main categories of life experience which must be integrated in a harmonious and healthy way, long before our full potential will ever be realized and demonstrated.

When I am mindful and heartfelt enough to perceive multi-dimensionally, I perceive both what something looks like as well as what it means and how it feels. My understanding in such moments is therefore intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual--all at the same time.

As Sister Who, I am very aware (thanks to Roman Catholic nuns of my elementary school years) of the need to set the best possible example for others to follow. Because I am also very aware of how most people seem to have great difficulty relating openly, honestly, and intelligently to the physicalness of their own bodies, I choose to avoid specifically sexual expressions while in costume. It somehow seems inappropriate to the role of service I embrace while wearing ritual garb and makeup. I do not, however, avoid open, intelligent, and direct discussion of such issues, whenever they arise within conversation.

Within the more inclusive world of my mind and heart, which are not focused so exclusively upon serving others' personal and spiritual growth but also upon my own personal needs and beliefs, I know that to be a mature and intelligent person, I need to come to terms with being a specifically physical man, a specifically gay man, and a specifically spiritual man.

I began some time ago to submit copies of all of my television shows, personal correspondence, and any and all other printed material relating to being the man who expresses himself ministerially as Sister Who, to the Western History department of

the Denver Public Library. The director of that department recently sent a brochure listing the various parts of the archive which has been thereby accumulated. I was somewhat amused by an entry on one page identifying the inclusion of "sexually explicit photographs."

Although I have been careful to submit things only in ways which protect or at least disguise the identity of any concerned person, I decided after considerable thought, to include examples of more intimate correspondence with other gay men I've met over the years, specifically to leave a complete picture of myself and of all significant elements of my life. To do otherwise would leave an unbalanced representation and offer no help to those who may struggle with integrating spirituality and sexuality in the future.

As a young boy attending a Roman Catholic elementary school, the perception was always that there were four genders: man, woman, priest, and nun. Somehow, spiritual service was completely incompatible with sexuality, or so it seemed, yet sexuality was thoroughly interwoven throughout the world around me.

So I have spent many hours contemplating the dynamics of a healthy integration of the two and have no illusions that any of my personal answers will necessarily work for anyone else, but they may nevertheless be somehow helpful.

To begin with, I thoroughly disagree that sexual expression is essential to mental and emotional health (an idea held by various mental health professionals I've met over the years). That being said, I do believe that repression is specifically unhealthy. What concerns me most is that there be a relationship characterized by integrity between what a person feels inside and how he or she expresses himself or herself on the outside, with both the inner and outer realities being generally constructive rather than destructive toward one's self and others.

The idea of "two consenting adults" sounds very good but continues to struggle with definitions and is only a small step away from various debates regarding the infamous "North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA)." I once wrote to a contact address of theirs, expressing that while I was not prepared to insist that a young teenager and an older man could not genuinely fall in love and want to share their lives with each other, I wanted to know how NAMBLA distinguished between abusive relationships more accurately categorized as pedophilia and the healthy love-based relationships they recommended. For

whatever it's worth, I did not receive an answer.

While it's true that my former life-partner and I are twenty-three years apart in age, I was twenty-seven and not twelve when we began our relationship and spent three months debating whether or not I should do so. I think I've always been a very mature individual, somehow always ahead of others my age, but I doubt very seriously that I would have been able to intelligently make a similar decision at an earlier age in life.

Still, it leaves us all with the question of what to do with the fact that children are sexual beings too and why God would have allowed that, when it would be so much more convenient (for us anyway) if no sexual desires, feelings, or thoughts ever occurred before a certified and ordained minister pronounced the happy couple "married."

Returning to the perhaps questionable inclusions in the library archive, it seems to me that one of the possible reasons such pictures are exchanged over the Internet (I am referring only to legal exchanges here, not illegal ones), is humanity's ongoing quest for intimacy and connection with others; perhaps also our desire to escape loneliness, if only for a moment or two.

Negatively expressed, such exchanges become like a narcotic, dulling our awareness of a certain pain and making an unpleasant aspect of life tolerable for a just a little bit longer.

Positively expressed, such exchanges embody the interconnection of emotions and the embrace of spirits across the miles or in ways that no such connection would otherwise ever happen.

The desire for intimacy and interconnection are probably not the only motivators, but they are

often just enough to create an opportunity for remarkably deep friendship, an eventual lifepartner (meaning partners in all aspects of life), or a fond memory of a moment when someone expressed the belief that the other was (and is) a beautiful and desirable person. Even with all of the thousands of people I've met over the last twelve years of ministry as Sister Who, I have met extremely few who view themselves in such a positive way (as being beautiful and desirable to another human being).

Is this not a fundamental element of spirituality--learning to perceive ourselves as beautiful and desirable in the eyes of God, others, and ourselves? If, as the bumper-sticker says, "God Doesn't Make Junk," then it follows that God made everyone with the capacity to be physically attractive to someone. Having said that, I also believe that no validation by another person is required for this to be true.

If we do not perceive ourselves as desirable, I suggest that we will only (though perhaps subconsciously) approach others and God from behind a thin and perhaps mostly undefinable veil of shame. We will not be able to present ourselves in the fullness of all that we are.

Instead of forced smiles, blind stares, misdirected gazes, and hands hidden in pockets, we could instead greet each other and even total strangers, with divine love and the light of self-confidence shining out through our eyes, beaming through our smiles, traveling to the other through a firm handshake, and genuinely expressing a concern that the light of God in any person not be veiled by anything--least of all, a feeling of being physically undesirable or of being unloved.

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--S.W.