

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

True Gold

Is it created, found, or received? Should we therefore work, search, or wait? By whichever means it comes into our lives, will we recognize it when it does so? The most accurate answer I've found for all of these questions is simply, "sometimes."

The more important challenge is allowing it to enter our lives in unexpected forms. The form we anticipate is often not the form which arrives at our doorstep, eager to be welcomed into our homes and hearts.

For me this was an especially difficult lesson on the recent occasion of the physique/bodybuilding competition at the Sixth International Gay Games and Cultural Festival in Sydney, Australia. I had worked exceptionally hard and long to prepare and as much as I tried to arrive with no expectations, I really thought I would be coming home with a bronze, silver, or even gold medal this time.

Less than twenty-four hours before the competition, however, it was announced that no drug-testing would be done. The first implication of this of course was that anyone who had used anabolic steroids to prepare would not now be disqualified and to my personal observation, it seemed that fully one third of the competitors had made extensive use of this otherwise illegal and unfair advantage.

Although I do understand that each of these people will pay dearly for the choice he or she made to use such substances, since while anabolic steroids may in fact make unnatural muscle size possible, they also ravage internal organs and may doom the person to future kidney dialysis or any other of a long list of ailments.

I chose to remain drug-free, did my competition well but was scored very poorly in comparison to the others onstage, and have been reminded by quite a number of people that I was

more correctly the winner of the competition.

Still, I felt devastated when the announcement was made, considering the thousands upon thousands of hours of preparation and the great sacrifices I had made within the process of preparing myself for the Games competition.

I did receive a copper medal, a participation medal offered to everyone who competed in any of the thirty-one sports events which occurred during the eight days of the Games. Somehow it didn't mean as much as the first participation medal I received in 1990 at the Third International Gay Games in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, specifically because I'd worked very hard in hopes of getting more than just another participation medal.

The more I thought about it, however, the more I began to realize that the copper represented only what the administrators were willing to offer me. They had not been there for even a single second of the thousands upon thousands of hours of exercise I'd done, nor were they particularly concerned with the experience of a single athlete among the more than fourteen thousand athletes who traveled to Sydney to compete.

Copper was the best they had to give but it was not an accurate measure of my accomplishment. That measure, I would have to give to myself. So upon returning to the United States, I had my participation medal gold-plated.

I have no intention of misrepresenting what I received and what I accomplished by my participation in the Gay Games in Sydney. I am not going to tell anyone that I received a gold medal from the Games' administrators. I am also not going to tell anyone, however, that copper is an accurate measure of my participation there in Sydney. That would be every bit as much of a lie.

Perhaps sometimes it is not simply a

question of what someone else sees in us as also of what we see in ourselves; what we see in ourselves which may be quite invisible to everyone around us and which may have been until a particular moment invisible even to ourselves.

Which brings us to the question of our own ability or inability to see true gold, in all of the unexpected and diverse forms in which it may appear within our lives.

The first physique/bodybuilding competition in which I ever participated, was the Third International Gay Games in Vancouver, B.C., Canada in 1990, but I did not understand until years later, the greater significance of having been there and participated as I did. The competition was the overt reason I was there, but a less obvious seed was planted which dramatically altered the course of my life from that moment onwards. To be specific, if I had not gone to the Gay Games in Vancouver, it is extremely unlikely that Sister Who would even exist.

That was the gold which I was unknowingly awarded fro traveling to Vancouver with no more conscious intention than sixty seconds on stage doing poses to the music and words of the chorus of Elton John's song, "Rocket Man." The day after the competition was when I met Sister X-stacy Marie Collette of the San Francisco order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence; the person who would become Sister Who's spiritual godmother before dying of AIDS-related complications in September of 1993; the person who would in fact give me the name, "Sister Who-Does-She-Think-She-Is."

Similarly, my intuition has been nudging me for months to remember that the recent trip to Australia would be concerned with far more than merely a physique/bodybuilding competition, but that as with the genesis of Sister Who, the significance may not be apparent for some time yet.

Another element of that very first competition was that I specifically picked physique/bodybuilding as the event within which I would participate because it was the event for which I felt least qualified.

I had finally consciously discovered my own Gayness only a year and a half before arriving in Vancouver for the Games and I wanted to search out the limits and possibilities of this new understanding of myself. I knew that I could not do so if I ventured no further than what was familiar and therefore reasonable and appropriate. If I

wanted to find true gold, I needed to be willing to take a leap of faith and see whether there would be wings in it or not. Perhaps most curious is that I didn't recognize the moment of faith (fate?) when it occurred.

It would be completely redundant to ask yet one more time, "What is faith?". As with love, however, faith is another one of the fundamental substances of true gold upon which the very life of the universe is dependent. Without love and without faith, life itself would come to an end. Thus I include them within those things of which true gold is composed.

To quote Helen Keller, born both blind and deaf, "The most beautiful things cannot be seen or even touched, but must be felt with the heart." How much more wonderful then, if we find a way not only to feel them with our hearts but also to embody them within our lives; to live as those who have prepared tenaciously, trained strenuously, competed intensely, and returned victoriously with true gold.

*"You cannot
give me gold
which you do not possess,
nor can you prevent me
from displaying
the true gold
which God has placed
within me."*

--Sister Who

Reflections on Life Beneath the Southern Cross

Though our respective ministries are unique, a high point of my Australian adventure was visiting with Sister Mary Mother of Pearl on Friday evening, as the week of new experiences was at last winding down.

As we spoke of the value, the contribution, and the necessity of "twenty-first century nuns" such as ourselves and the healing of humanity in which we each hope to play a part, I found great encouragement in speaking with this gentle, wise, yet challenging soul.

Often simply by existing and being willing to be honestly seen, a silent trumpet blasts into the frequently sleeping consciousness of others, urging them to search out the specifics of their own understandings, perceptions, and states of spiritual growth. In viewing ourselves each day in the mirror, in living constantly with our own abilities and contributions, we easily forget that the world is filled with people waiting for someone just like each one of us. Each of us has something to say to others about love and faith. The moments and details of our lives weave the fabric which defines loves and faith (and a whole lot of other things as well). More concisely: "Life is a collaborative effort: each moment contains both a lesson to learn and a ministry to perform."

Australia is filled with anomalies. My favorite tree (which I'd never seen before travelling to Australia) was the Jacaranda. Fairly tall, covered with lavender-colored flowers, and actually a tropical American tree, I saw them nearly everywhere. After the disappointing bodybuilding competition on Sunday, I spent the week trying to process diverse emotions and the Jacaranda trees provided a soothing presence. Another curiosity was the Morton Bay tree, which sends down roots from its branches such that the tree would eventually appear to have many trunks as well as rippling wings coming out at odd angles from the trunk. The result is a living sculpture, suggesting both timelessness and ancientness. Perhaps I am a branch of a Morton Bay tree, being an off-shoot of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in San Francisco but nevertheless sending down my own roots in order to grow in my own new way and direction.

How analogous to our souls, so easily forgotten in the busy-ness of daily life, but

holding the most timeless and ultimately beautiful parts of ourselves, both shaping and being shaped by our further development.

How refreshing, to speak with Sister Mary Mother of Pearl, exchanging insights and encouragement to contribute to further growth in ways appropriate and unique to each of us.

How wonderful for each of us, like visitors from widely separated lands, to embrace the magic of open, honest communication and thereby find that we encompass more than we realized.

How sobering to listen to another's struggles and challenges and consider how these may one day be (or, if we are fortunate, have been) our own.

How powerful to hold hands, as the uncertain (but not for that reason foreboding) path of life unfolds before us.

Another person whom I encountered in Australia who was like myself a northern visitor, was very concerned that familiar stars were gone from the sky. Sydney being an urban environment, the change was not that obvious, but I was content because I knew that all of the stars were still where they'd always been. I was simply a brief guest in another part of the heavens, as I understood it. I only wish that I could have spent a night or two out away from the city so that the beauty of these southern stars could have been more completely viewed.

Many years ago, in a brief study of childhood development, I learned that one of the earliest lessons a child learns is the permanency of perceived things (i.e. a parent does not cease to exist simply because he or she momentarily leaves the room). Part of growing up, is learning to relate to more than just what is directly seen with the eyes, heard with the ears, and touched with the hands. At one point in my life, my understanding of reality did not extend beyond my biological family. Later the boundaries of reality were the small town in and around which I grew up. As life passed, the boundaries stretched to include the state, the country, the nearby continent of Europe, and now at last Australia on the other side of the world.

In some ways, it is so vast as to be beyond my comprehension and therefore a bit magical. Yet I am not afraid because now, even on the other side of the world, I have a new friend. May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

The Cries of "Why"

Sometimes when I have challenged friends and acquaintances to be more generous, more compassionate, more responsive to those in need around them, they have responded, "but I've worked very hard for what I have!" This answer somehow always puzzles me because I know that many who live in continuous want of basic food, clothing, and shelter have also worked very hard. On the other hand, there are both people with excess and people with not enough who haven't worked hard at all. Evidently there is a piece missing from our understanding of the relationship between effort and material accomplishment. Just as I have often heard it said that Life is not so much a destination as it is a journey, perhaps the focus of the effort is not so much the accomplishment as the struggle itself or more concisely who and what I become by my willingness to engage in specific forms of struggle.

I have commented on this before but as if I was looking at it from a different angle and didn't recognize this side of it. The metaphor that comes to mind is all of the times when I was first learning downhill skiing and would come to a black diamond or expert trail and instead of avoiding it because it was difficult, I would take the challenge and follow it in order to increase my abilities, self-confidence, and self-perception.

What seems to jump to the front of my mind now is that from another perspective, it was not so much just about the accomplishment as also about the moment to moment struggle of actually doing it. Just as with the last eleven months of exercise that I did in order to prepare for competition in bodybuilding at the Sixth International Gay Games, more is gained by measuring my efforts by the body I created for myself than by the ability or inability of the judges and administrators to see who I'd become within that process.

Because I often do not have the financial resources to pay others to do what I either cannot do or cannot do well, things like reconstructing my home or repairing one of my cars (I now have two vehicles with a laundry list of needed improvements; the advantage being that I still have something to drive when one or the other breaks down, which they have so far been thankfully doing at alternate rather than simultaneous times). Yesterday was very discouraging. A major repair project was unsuccessful and the repairs must now be completed in a different way and later than intended. A friend recently suggested the possible acquisition of a larger house than my current four-hundred-square-foot abode which would also require quite extensive repairs.

As much as I despise such activities, am frustrated by doing them, and curse worse than a sailor while so engaged, I nevertheless accept such struggles because ultimately I know that I will emerge at a point much further ahead along my lifepath than I ever expected to reach. More concisely, I accept the struggle because of the life that it contains. Death does not contain struggle because it does not contain life. The struggle to which I am referring, however, is no more constant than day or night (which both contain struggle in different ways) but rather like day and night, oscillates between active and passive modes, between pushing forward and pausing to catch my breath.

The conclusion remains, "Whoever wants the muscles, must lift the weights" and whoever wants to live, must be willing to struggle, to endure the moments of asking in weariness and frustration, "Why?" and to be content if no answer is given. As sure as night follows day and one year follows the one before, like the trees in the forest, the soul will find itself much larger for having steadfastly remained present through all of it, for having outlived the struggle itself.

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All correspondence may be directed to:
Sister Who, POB 18474, Denver, CO 800218-0474,
or email address: SisterWho@sisterwho.com

Sister Who's Web Page: <http://www.sisterwho.com>

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