

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

Overview

Considering how very many times I've heard the word during the last two years or so, it seems odd even to me that my best conclusion is that justice is a divine dynamic and in its truest form mostly beyond the reach of the human mind.

From the months of contemplation and as part of an ongoing dialogue and quest to perceive and understand as God does, however, I offer the following four reflections either as a place to begin (for those who have not yet engaged in such discussion) or the contribution of a hopefully fresh perspective on this multi-faceted and extremely complex subject. I pray that you will find within these reflections, some tools to empower the demonstration of God's truth and justice within your everyday life.

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

Justice Defined

Within human public presentations, justice is often presented as the punishment of evil and the rewarding of good. Even this statement, however, is difficult to define because punishment, reward, good, and evil are all terms that are subjectively defined (that is, they mean different things to different people and also depend upon what information is available).

For myself, it makes more sense to speak of people who are emotionally and psychologically broken or wounded in combination with the general tendency of brokenness to reproduce itself. An example of this is the general statistic that those who have experienced abuse are more likely to become the next generation of perpetrators.

Shifting this to the general subject of justice, the rephrasing would be that those who have experienced injustice are more likely to become the perpetrators of injustice, unless their wounds are somehow healed.

Yet how can we aspire to the practice of justice if we can't even articulate what it is? On a different but related subject, given the more or less

invisible nature of the psychological and emotional wounds, how can we know whether or to what degree they have been healed and the predisposition to repeating the offense removed?

All that being said, the definition of justice as the punishment of evil and the rewarding of good seems fairly close to me, if I can also come to an understanding of evil and good. Essential to this investigation, however, is the avoidance of arbitrary selection (selecting one example of evil while overlooking another), which creates the problem of "double standards" (the notion that without legitimately relevant differences, one standard is applied to one person or group and not to another).

All things considered (or at least everything currently within reach), I have concluded that the establishment of justice is more concerned with healing emotional and psychological wounds than with punishing or rewarding anyone. Another way to describe this would be the re-establishment of right relationships, of harmony, and of wholeness.

Is this even possible? I think we must believe that it is in order to continue trying. Far too many things which were dismissed as impossible during earlier times of human history have already been accomplished within our lifetime, to so easily give in to the finality and hopelessness of the word "impossible."

In spite of all of the evil that has been done and all of the stupidity that continues to regularly manifest within unfolding human history and life, nothing has persuaded me to leave behind the belief that "with God, all things are possible." Someone recently insisted to me that nothing will happen unless we can first answer the question of how the particular thing can happen. My immediate response was simply that if knowing how in advance was that essential, the majority of my life would never have happened. It's just the miracles of God within the miracle of me.

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

Justice Expressed

Sometimes, even if I don't really know what it is, I become something better than I have been by attempting to express as much of an ideal as my current understanding allows. More concisely, I expand my ability to love by attempting to express love, even if I don't have a particularly complete or even accurate understanding of what love is.

Similarly, even if I don't really understand what justice is, I expand my ability to act in accordance with divine justice by choosing to express as much understanding as I have, of what justice is and how it would be expressed within my specific circumstances.

A very important aspect of such expression, however, is my own recognition that I am a student, a learner, or a pilgrim on a journey toward ever greater understanding and practice of divine truth, love, wisdom, and justice. Arrogance is never appropriate and humility is always essential within such journeys, along with a healthy assertiveness which distinguishes between humility and self-imposed victimization.

All of which makes it clear that justice can never stand alone but rather must be carefully focused using the assistance of love, wisdom, empathy, and a certain aspiration for transcendence (reaching for something better, bigger, or higher than the current immediate experience offers).

The action of expressing justice, therefore, begins with some sort of understanding within me of distinctions between harmonious and empowering relationships and those which are wounding, devaluing, limiting, and perhaps even painful.

To whom the relationship is painful is nearly always the least important part of the discussion because the truth of the "Golden Rule" persists in spite of all contrary argument: "Do unto others as you'd have done to you."

In other words, all of life is interconnected and any destructive action directed toward another which is tolerated, may one day be directed toward one's self. Preserving the life and rights of another, therefore, (from this perspective) is virtually indistinguishable from preserving the life and rights of one's self.

All that being said, a choice to express justice in whatever limited way is available may be measured as a valuable experience, not because

of its political accomplishment but rather because of who I become by being the one doing the expressing. In each such circumstance, I have a golden opportunity to respond to the general question, "What sort of person will you prove yourself to be?"

One other very important aspect of the expression of justice, which now comes to mind, is the essentialness of integrity. True justice (harmonious and healed relationships) cannot occur without integrity because the relationship one has with one's self is not harmonious if one is acting in direct contrast to one's own beliefs, words, and actions.

It is important to note at this point, however, that I am not suggesting that any of us is unredeemably enslaved to our past thoughts, words, or actions, nor to the past words and actions of any group with which we are or have been associated. In all such cases, we can find the courage to stand up and call past mistakes what they are (or were) and work to resolve and heal any of the consequences or results of those mistakes, using the greatest wisdom we have available. This is the two-sided social and spiritual practice of forgiveness in action: the demonstration in actions as much as in words that we are sorry that what happened did in fact happen and the corresponding opening to possibilities of better future relationship within whomever was thereby victimized.

Justice expressed, however, is not synonymous with that expression being rewarded and in this regard it must stand with an aspiration toward the practice of unconditional love. Within the practice of unconditional love, we give without expecting anything back; we give even if nothing is given back; and we give even to our enemies because we understand that it is essential to their healing, regardless of whether or not our gifts are well-received.

Similarly (ideally), we express justice and expect nothing in return; we express justice even when such expression goes completely unnoticed; and we express justice even to our enemies so that they may begin to learn and to better understand by our demonstration of it, what justice is and perhaps even why it is a recommendable practice within their own lives.

Ultimately, we express justice as a contribution to the healing of our world.

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

Justice Denied

First and foremost (perhaps it is even glaringly obvious, whenever we choose to notice it), the denial of justice will not occur without an appalling lack of unconditional love. More concisely, the denial of justice and the presence of unconditional love are mutually exclusive.

Of greater concern to me at this moment, however, are the innumerable times when individuals who have been neglected, hated, devalued, wounded, and even tortured for years and sometimes decades, are nevertheless punished for expressing their brokenness in any way whatsoever.

Expressions of brokenness may in fact be the souls of such individuals calling out for healing from those around them. When one call for healing is ignored, a more powerful one will generally take its place, escalating the severity of the expression until such time as an adequate response is received.

In far too many cases, however, those who have the resources and ability to provide healing, stubbornly refuse to respond and ultimately opt for a greater evil by killing rather than healing the particular victim.

Life is thereby devalued--the other's life as well as our own.

This dynamic could similarly be applied to international circumstances resulting in terrorism. When someone is in need and has been crying out for healing, possibly for decades, possibly (in the

case of certain tribes or people groups) for hundreds of years, the manner in which these cries for help escalates with each negative response.

The fact remains that brokenness, like cancer within a human body, will not indefinitely tolerate being ignored. Phrased another way, justice will not indefinitely tolerate being denied.

Why do the voices calling for healing justice continue to escalate? I suspect because they have greater faith than I do, that healing will somehow ultimately happen--perhaps even that somehow healing must ultimately happen.

From a more theological perspective, one might argue that healing justice must happen simply because of the reality and specific definition of God's existence, but that doesn't give me much help in making sense of the world in which I live, nor guide me in the relational decisions with which I am faced every day of my life.

What does concern me is the recognition that without God, without unconditional love, and without at least an aspiration toward true justice, life loses all meaning and forward momentum and suicide becomes a very rational option.

When all has been said and done, justice is a very collegiate and academic word. What is perhaps more real to the majority of the world's population is the hope that perhaps somehow--against all odds and improbability--tomorrow will be better than today. This too is a questing after justice, a protest of all of those times when justice is denied, and a yearning for healthy and harmonious relationships not only with everyone and everything within the world around us but also with God.

Once again I am drawn to the words of Loretta Young's role of Mrs. Kingsley within the movie "Christmas Eve" (if you haven't seen it by now, do whatever you need to do to see it soon), in response to her son's insistence that "You can't change the world!": "That's such a poor excuse for doing nothing."

Ultimately, justice is denied whenever we withhold an available word of encouragement, whenever we withdraw an enabled helping hand, and whenever we trivialize the struggles of another to be truly heard. With or without a forest, a tree is a tree. Even if we must stand alone, we can stand against the denial of justice, just as a tree stands against the erosion of a hillside.

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

"I f I speak of justice
(in the usual ways
in which it is described),
it is difficult to do so
without including vengeance.
I f I speak of vengeance,
love is repressed.
I f love is repressed,
then life is not worth living --
except for the hope
that love will return."

--*Sister Who*

Justice Fulfilled

Perhaps the greatest evidence for me of the existence, reality, and immediacy of God are those times when in defiance of all odds and statistics, things go inexplicably and wonderfully right: wrongs are forgiven, relationships restored, and life grows and blossoms in ways that a wintery experience has long hidden from view.

"If only such times were not so few and far between!", I immediately protest. Nevertheless, I am simply glad that they happen at all; that there are mornings when I awake and see the sunbeams stretching over the eastern horizon, and remember once again what an absolute miracle the occurrence of this moment is, upon which all subsequent life is somehow dependent.

The fulfillment of justice is just such a moment, rising into view in ways and with a power and presence we cannot begin to explain, except perhaps in the most superficial ways. Yet all subsequent life is dependent upon the regular occurrence of just such moments. In recognizing such moments, I find myself suddenly impressed with the realization that life and the world are neither so ugly nor so without hope as I might have previously imagined.

Yet each day will visit me with both new beginnings as well as the need to let go of the beautiful day that has been, when evening again draws its darkening cloak over the world around me. Just as to live within only one moment is to withdraw from life's inherently ongoing march through time, a moment of justice is equally as transitory, giving way to other struggles which will follow, even as the human body both inhales and exhales for as long as one's spirit lives within it.

Sometimes the inhaling and exhaling is smooth and calm; sometimes sharp and fast; and sometimes labored and difficult. Always, as life goes on, fulfillment must include both extremes--allowing the exhalation to identify the need for fresh oxygen; allowing the inhalation to identify when the lungs have drawn all that they can from the current encompassed air and now need to move on to yet another breath beyond the one that is known and possessed.

As the old adage reminds us, life goes on; so also must the practice of justice, in whatever limited but hopefully increasing ways we understand it.

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

On a Personal Note

Regarding my recent trip to Montreal, Quebec, Canada, insights and experiences could fill the pages of a book.

Regarding specifically the bodybuilding (physique) competition in which I participated, I was awarded a silver (second-place) medal in the Mens Masters (age 40-49) Heavyweight category.

Regarding specifically my appearance on the streets of Montreal, only a couple of conversations come to mind, but on numerous occasions in the past God was busy doing other things with my contribution, just when I was certain that nothing significant was happening. Ultimately, perhaps only time will tell the ways in which this trip has shaped and empowered me and those whom I met, for life challenges ahead. I do know in any case, that I am somehow more than I was before this trip.

My dormitory room at McGill University allowed many opportunities for meeting new friends and drawing insight from those around me. Many things about myself became more clear, although the only clue about my life ahead, was that things will be significantly different. My work as Sister Who, however, is by no means finished.

Additionally, my perhaps austere room was a breath of freedom, dismissing for a time all concern for renovation, housekeeping, or the care of possessions. Returning home again was more difficult than anticipated, but I am pressing forward with a renewed and larger sense of who and what I am and what God would have me do. Your thoughts and prayers are much appreciated, throughout the months ahead, as I complete my education at Iliff School of Theology and receive a master of theological studies academic degree.

I've often repeated the quote, "Life is an adventure or nothing at all." Do you know who said that? Helen Keller--which makes the words so much more profound. On that note, onward to the God-given adventure of life before us!

May God's blessings, love, and peace be with you now and always, *Sister Who*

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