

Do You See Me?

October 14, 2018

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

READING

In the Storm, by Mary Oliver

Some black ducks
were shrugged up
on the shore.
It was snowing

hard, from the east,
and the sea
was in disorder.
Then some sanderlings,

five inches long
with beaks like wire,
flew in,
snowflakes on their backs,

and settled
in a row
behind the ducks –
whose backs were also

covered with snow –
so close
they were all but touching,
they were all but under

the roof of the duck's tails,
so the wind, pretty much,
blew over them.
They stayed that way, motionless,

for maybe an hour,
then the sanderlings,

each a handful of feathers,
shifted, and were blown away

out over the water
which was still raging.

But, somehow,
they came back

and again the ducks,
like a feathered hedge,
let them
crouch there, and live.

If someone you didn't know
told you this,
as I am telling you this,
would you believe it?

Belief isn't always easy.
But this much I have learned –
if not enough else –
to live with my eyes open.

I know what everyone wants
is a miracle.
This wasn't a miracle.
Unless, of course, kindness –

as now and again
some rare person has suggested –
is a miracle.
As surely it is.

SERMON

Do You See Me?

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

Oh, where to start? This is a ten pounds of rice day ... remember the comment I was given: that I'm so often trying to fit ten pounds of rice into a five-pound bag – oh, geez! I need to find myself a ten-pound bag, already!

But this is important today, thinking about how we are seen, or how we see others; how we might feel excluded or exclude others from the sanctuary of our relationships by not being seen or seeing. There is a lot to it.

I want to start this morning by mentioning a very thoughtful letter I received recently from a member of the congregation, asking about a suggestion I made in the e-news recently. When I announced the idea of a gathering in the e-news several weeks back, I suggested we try a vegetarian night. The idea for the gathering followed closely on the heels of a sermon I gave at the Animal Blessing Sunday at the end of last month, where I said, "I am asking us to represent an aspiration of care as a faith community that does not judge our individual choices but offers an alternative way of being." I should have added the words "in community," i.e., an alternative way of being in community relative to what foods we bring to share with each other. I want to reiterate the middle of that sentence, about not judging our individual choices.

As I mentioned in my response to the letter I received, our dietary wants and needs are highly individual. We must all respect that. AND, I am hoping there is room for a conversation about the ways our choices are made more difficult by two things: first, the agro-industry that manipulates all our choices about everything we eat (plant-based, animal, fowl, or fish), and second, climate change that is impacted by our food sources and their production. Those two things have changed the realities of the equation, and I'm simply hoping we can talk about it. And I very much wanted that to feel like an invitation, not a judgment; and I am very grateful that someone took the time to help me SEE the discomfort that my brevity has created, and I apologize for that. TRULY.

In chapter 7, the Book of Matthew quotes the prophet Jesus:

³ "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

My dear friends, it was not my intent to point out a stick in the eyes of any of my brothers or sisters, but only to raise up an issue we are all confronted with. And I while am generally very aware of the speck in my own eye around the issues of food choices, I did not consider that it might have FELT to another that I was pointing to something in theirs. I was not paying attention to that possibility, so I did not see it. I'm so sorry.

How fortuitous of me to have unwittingly provided such a handy example of the ways like this, and so many other ways, no doubt, that it feels we have stopped seeing each other; or, that we experience not being seen. It's not the obvious differences. We see age, and color; we see size and shape; we see (sometimes) differences in physical abilities; we see different paces in movement. We don't always respond well to these differences, either, but that's not because we don't see them.

But there are huge numbers of other distinctions that are invisible to us: different ways of communicating, for one thing; different ways of receiving the world – like the way that something like ADHD affects our self-perceptions, as we heard in Aoife's story earlier. We don't see the pain of self-judgment that we likely all share to varying degrees. We often don't see in others the periods – sometimes long periods – of suffering sadness; we often don't see shyness, exactly, or the struggle of introverts; we don't see illnesses that aren't obvious to others around us, like cancer or bipolar disorder, PTSD, or the impacts of trauma.

We COULD see them, or learn to see them, if we were more discerning ... though our contemporary culture disinclines us to that depth of contact. From the book *Tribe*, by Sebastian Junger¹: "A person living in a modern city or a suburb can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day – or an entire life – mostly encountering complete strangers."

I can go through entire days mostly encountering no one, if I really want to. When I work from home, on my computer, sometimes the only person I see is the mail carrier, who doesn't hang around because my dog barks so loudly, he dumps the mail through the slot and scoots off.

The hazards of these habits are profound. They are isolating and antithetical to the kind of community building, intimacy, and belonging that is so important to our emotional health. It's easy to get out of the practice of developing meaningful relationships, of reaching out to others to say, "how are you?" Really, how ARE you? What is making you happy today? Or, what is weighing on your heart?

I watched an amazing story the other day about a child – maybe around 10 years old – who couldn't quite keep his body still – or his hands, at least. He kept tapping, tapping, tapping, and it was distracting, even annoying, to those around him. He kept getting told, "stop it!" and given ways to avoid his "bad habit": fold your hands together, or sit on them for the entire class. Leave the class until you can do better. Until one teacher called him after school, mentioned that he had noticed his

¹ Sebastian Junger, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*. (Twelve, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, 2016, p. 18)

tapping, and handed him a pair of drumsticks. “You’re not a problem. You’re a drummer.” And the boy’s life was changed. He is, to this day, a drummer.

It is easy to get out of the habit of seeing each other and the alternative perspectives to what otherwise appear to be problems, even though the doors to opportunities are as available as our rush to judgment.

This has long been a human foible, only exacerbated by our physical isolation from one another – our inability to see each other in all our possibilities.

But I’m also thinking that at least as big a concern, if not an even greater one, is the way we are isolating ourselves across communities.

We UU’s pride ourselves on our radical welcome, right? In the spirit of love, all are welcome here. And, for the most part – truly – we mean it and I imagine we try to emulate that welcome in our personal lives. We intend to understand and welcome the other, unless on occasion – and this won’t shock us – their political perspective is different from our own, right? We know this about ourselves. For years, our indicator was the Prius. I can still spot a UU on the road by seeing the Coexist bumper sticker with all the different religious symbols on it.

I was speaking with our sanctuary guest this week about our capacities across language barriers, how we are able to discern what is being shared among people. “When I don’t understand,” he said, and by this he meant literally not understanding the language, “I feel sad.”

Do we feel that way about those who think differently than we do? Who have different ideological or political persuasions? Does it make us sad? Angry comes to mind more readily. Righteous also jumps up. I’m not sure how often we feel sad about it.

You may have seen an article recently from The Atlantic about our politically correct culture². Author Yascha Mounk, a lecturer on government at Harvard University, references a report by a group called More in Common. Their report suggests there are seven identifiable groups in our political landscape (see which one you identify with): progressive activists, traditional liberals, passive liberals, the politically disengaged, moderates, traditional conservatives, and devoted conservatives.

Where do you locate yourself among those seven?

² (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/large-majorities-dislike-political-correctness/572581/>)

“According to the report, 25 percent of Americans are traditional or devoted conservatives, and their views are far outside the American mainstream. Some 8 percent of Americans are progressive activists, and their views are even less typical. By contrast, the two-thirds of Americans who don’t belong to either extreme constitute an ‘exhausted majority.’” Their members “share a sense of fatigue with our polarized national conversation, [they share] a willingness to be flexible in their political viewpoints, and [they share] a lack of voice in the national conversation.”

Just out of curiosity, what group do we think Unitarian Universalists identify most with? An fyi, the progressive activists are “politically engaged, highly educated, left-leaning Americans—the kinds of people, in other words, who are in charge of universities, edit the nation’s most important newspapers and magazines, and advise Democratic political candidates on their campaigns.”

My guess is most of us identify somewhere on the left-leaning spectrum – exceptionally well-meaning, willing to work hard for the values we believe in.

But what the vast majority of Americans seem to see (of this left-leaning crew) —at least according to the research conducted for “Hidden Tribes”—is not so much genuine concern for social justice as the *preening display of cultural superiority*. Ouch. Is that what my invitation to vegetarian dinner sounded like?

“For the millions upon millions of Americans of all ages and all races who do not follow politics with rapt attention, and who are much more worried about paying their rent than about debating the prom dress worn by a teenager in Utah, contemporary callout culture merely looks like an excuse to mock the values or ignorance of others. As one 57- year-old woman in Mississippi fretted:

The way you have to term everything just right. And if you don’t term it right you discriminate them. It’s like everybody is going to be in the know of what people call themselves now and some of us just don’t know. But if you don’t know then there is something seriously wrong with you.

In a democracy, it is difficult to win fellow citizens over to your own side, or to build public support to remedy injustices that remain all too real, when you fundamentally misunderstand how they see the world.”

I fear, in our extremes, we have become caricatures of each other.

Oh, we’re in a pickle, aren’t we? We’re trying to make things better in an increasingly polarized environment, where we are ever more isolated from each other, even as we are trying so hard to do well by each other, every other.

At the end of the day, I often have to laugh at myself. I asked my son last spring if he had noticed the second base-person throwing someone out on third. “Did you really just say second-base person? It’s American League baseball, mom. I’m pretty sure there are no women out there.” I have drunk the Kool-Aid. And someone from the “exhausted majority” is shaking their head at my efforts. My son was shaking his head, for sure!

It doesn’t mean I’m going to back off my efforts, but I did have to laugh!

Do you ever feel invisible? What is it you want people to see about you? I’m thinking we might start there – with each other – with as much open curiosity and humility as we can muster, to reach out across our atomized environments and find some common ground of our own; to make as few assumptions as possible; to offer the shelter of our bodies during the storm; to not exclude those who may think differently than we do; to believe that we **can see** each other.

Mary Oliver reminds us:

Belief isn't always easy.
But this much I have learned –
if not enough else –
to live with my eyes open.

It is, of course, the only way to “see.”

So let’s start again, just there, eyes open, willing to try when someone says, “Do you see me?”

Amen.