

## INNER VIEWS

**There are times when I've crossed the path of people who got under my skin. The ways this has happened are varied. Sometimes it was over sensitivity on my part. Sometimes a misunderstanding; and sometimes it was just my reaction to meanness or negative judgments.**

**Most often it meant that my ego felt attached and I ended up hurt and angry. Sometimes I could let it go and forget about it, but not often. I'd wake up in the middle of the night feeling hurt and angry – I couldn't get it out of my mind..**

**I've tried many different ways to drive this out my mind. Of course I tried to continue the argument in my head, but this time I came up with clever put downs. I guess you know how that worked out – it just got me more agitated.**

**For years I've tried to understand them and what drives them. That didn't do much good. I've also tried to summon a sense of compassion, a realization of our shared and wounded humanness. That helped a little bit but they still showed up in the middle of the night. Then I tried to simply pay attention to the turmoil caused by the fear and anger broiling inside of me. I thought I'd get tired of carrying that around and that would help me let go. But that wasn't enough to make it go away.**

**I did finally find something that works. It starts with paying attention to the turmoil that we carry around inside. And then when you're tired of holding onto it you simply pray, "God bless them." I think we have to come to the point of being tired of stirring up the pain and anger and carrying it around with us. This is the best motivation I know of to let go. And that's what the prayer does – it allows me to let it go and let God take care of it. Every time you feel the argument begin, or the anger boil up, simply say "God bless them."**

**You don't need to tell God what to do. That will just get the turmoil broiling again. Everytime you begin to think of them again just simply pray "God bless them." You will have to do this over and over again, but you will finally be relieved of the burden.**

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. – PATHWAYS / Stillpoint

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I spent a lot of time in the last two weeks watching the political conventions. I can't say that my opinions about either party have changed much. That's not surprising. It's very clear to me that I start with a point of view and I want that point of view affirmed. And it was affirmed far more by one party than the other.

Everything they said made sense to me, while the other party left me cold. And yet when I listened to the commentators they said exactly the opposite. The party they favored made sense while the other party only told lies. We all start with a point of view that creates our perceptions. So how do we arrive at “truth?”

At the same time I was very much aware that my point of view is not “the truth” or “the answer.” I carry this paradox around within me: I am stuck on my point of view and I want you to agree with it, but I don’t think that my point of view is the answer. It’s just the way I see it at this moment. That doesn’t make it correct. And still the other point of view makes no sense. I’d love to be open to it and let it balance my point of view, but when it is presented in conflict with my point of view I respond defensively rather than openly. And so does the person with a contrary point of view. So how do we learn from each other?

And here’s the thing, I’m very much bothered when people believe that their point of view is “correct” without any doubt. And I get frustrated when they try to impose their unquestioned assumptions on me. I don’t understand how they can be so convinced. Mostly because, the bottom line for me is that there is no simple and correct solution. Life is far too complex to be reduced to “an answer” or “the truth.” I believe that life is best lived by engaging in it and reflecting on it with other people.

But when people are totally convinced by their point of view then they can’t engage in the complexity of living. There is no chance for wisdom. Living is reduced to moralism and their point of view is at best a half truth, but usually not even that. It often demonizes the opposite point of view and condemns it with half-truths.

For most of my priesthood I’ve had the tremendous good fortune to be with groups of people who can share their opinions without imposing them. As a matter of fact I do my best to avoid people who just get angry and insist on their opinion. I know from experience that there will be no real conversation. I end up reacting, getting angry myself and defensive and often take the opposite point of view in defiance. That does me no good and goes absolutely nowhere.

On the other hand I've come to treasure discussions and the people sharing them, when there's a gentleness and acceptance among the group. A humble gentleness and willingness to explore is essential for a conversation. When this happens there is room for the vulnerability needed for creative and inclusive dialogue. At the end of these kinds of encounters I feel graced and engaged. I feel like I'm a better person just from being with these people. I don't necessarily change my point of view, but, it feels softer and becomes more porous. And over time it opens up new perspectives.

I believe that this kind of conversation is essential for my spiritual development. Traditionally people have gone to gurus or spiritual guides for the help they need in further development. I hope this doesn't just show my arrogance but in my forty years of being a priest I've run into few people who had answers for me. I believe, and it is my experience, that a group of people who are comfortable enough with themselves and one another to be vulnerable, are my best spiritual advisors. I also believe that this group needs a mix of personalities and the complementarity of female and male participants.

All of this is a complicated introduction to this simple insight; to live in the graced reality of the present moment needs the support and presences of respectful, humble, explorers. To be in the present moment is all about presence, being present openly and honestly with as little guile as possible, without our egos getting in the way and without condemning them when they do show up.

Presence is a basic way of being that allows us to relate to the "truth" of the moment. And it is in the full truth of the moment that we become alert to the reality of our intimacy with God.

Let me return to my opening observations. I believe we have degenerated into a egocentric, radically self-centered, defensive and compulsively aggressive approach that blinds us to the reality of the present moment. This is increasingly clear in our public, political discourse. The calculating mind of the ego reads everything in terms of personal advantage, short-term effort, and "What's in it for me?" And then, to bolster an advantage, it turns the other half of the truth in

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terms of “wrong” and “the enemy.” You can tell this is happening when the other opinion is demonized or portrayed as absurd.

As far as I can see, and I worry that my seeing is just another half-truth, we don't need different ideas, we need a more spiritual approach to reality. The spiritual mind, built on meditation and prayer, sees beyond the ego, to a more inclusive and creatively open ended perspective. It can do this only when it is rooted in the real presence of divinely unconditional love. Jesus calls this the Kingdom of God.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. **PATHWAYS** / Stillpoint

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We cannot make God “first” in our lives, but we can “let” God be first. “Making” God first is an act of our ego. But our ego structures its sense of reality by creating the illusion of separation. Our ego's sense of self is made up of thoughts and emotions. These thoughts and emotions are by their nature ephemeral, fleeting. These thoughts going through our awareness and the emotions we feel in reaction are constantly changing. This means our ego is caught up in a constant struggle for survival, trying to protect and enlarge its precarious sense of self. To bolster the thought that “I exist” I need the concept of an “other,” someone separate from myself. The concept of I cannot exist without the concept of an other who is separate from “I”. The reality of my existence is much more fundamental than my thoughts about me or who I am. Unfortunately when all our attention is on our thoughts about our self we loose contact with the fundamental sense of self in union with each other.

This is just as true with our sense of God. We think of God as separate from our self, as somebody we have to reach out to and get God's attention. We think of God as distant from our self and from each other. And since we've felt the bonding created by love we try to bridge the gap by winning God's approval. Actually the bonding is just an experience of love's reality. It's not something that we make happen by loving, it is our reality and love makes it conscious. When asked “How do we bridge the gap between God and ourselves,” Anthony De Mello simply replied “Realize that there is no distance.”

The remedy is not to get rid of our ego. That is just another action of the ego creating separation in our thinking between ego and our self. Salvation occurs when we can see simultaneously both the validity of our ego and its transparent, temporary nature. Love makes room for both our ego and our true self which is larger and more fundamental than our ego. Love loosens the boundaries that create separation

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and leaves us in peace. The rightful function of our ego is to sustain and direct our efforts and in recognizing God as the source of love for our whole self we let God be first in our lives.

This is why we start the Mass with the sign of the cross, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Notice the words very carefully: "*in* the name..." We are letting go of the boundaries between our self and God, steeping inside the communion of God, of Trinity, into the one-ness of the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love who is the spirit of both, uniting "them" into "one" God. And we, who are created in the image of this Trinity are accepting the reality of our true nature.

With the sign of the cross we are accepting the sacred mystery of who we are in God. There is no separation. We are accepting God on God's terms. We make the unity of Love our basis for all that is to come.

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One of my favorite wisdom stories is about the six wise scholars who went to see an elephant - although all of them were blind. The first walked smack into the side of the elephant. It was clear to him that the elephant was like a wall.

A second grabbed the elephant's tail. "What a fool" she thought, "its nothing like a wall, it's clearly like a rope." You know the rest of the story; each scholar became convinced of their own point of view and spent the rest of their scholarly careers writing treatises expounding their positions. After all they knew from their own experience what the elephant was like.

When we come together as a community of faith we each bring a point of view created from our understanding of our experiences. Our point of view fits our personality more than it fits the reality around us, but it's what we bring and it's what we have to work with. I believe that a major value of coming together as a community is to share our point of view. We need each other to expand the horizons of our vision. The more expansive our vision the more we are able to relate to God for God's sake, or in an expanded vision, to relate to Trinity for Trinity's sake.

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For the last seven hundred years in the Church, and even more aggressively in our Western culture, we have created our point of view through the lens of our ego. Our ego is a set of thoughts about our self, as well as an interpretation of our memories, that we use to create our point of view. Our ego is more interested in our opinions and defending those opinions than it is in dealing with the full spectrum of our experience. If we pay attention to our full experience we would often have to dismantle our point of view. Albert Einstein said that "A genius is someone who sees the obvious that everyone else misses." Every one of our opinions is one point of view. We are blind scholars.

Recently I had back spasms and when they got severe enough I asked my doctor for some muscle relaxants. They worked for a week and then lost their power. So I decided to go to a chiropractor. I thought the chiropractor would hook me to a machine of some sort and then work on my spine and that would be it. But that's not the way it works.

"I will work with you to help your body heal itself" she told me. She stressed drinking lots of water and avoiding foods (she gave me a list) that enflame muscle tissue. She also gave me vitamin supplements to give my body the nutrients it needs to heal.

This was only a beginning; I needed to learn stretching exercises, start riding my stationary bike daily, and then learn further exercises to strengthen specific groups of muscles that would help her in aligning my spine. But there was more. She asked if I had anybody I could share the stresses and joys of my life with. Fortunately I do. And fortunately I live in a supportive community that gets along very well. I also meditate with a group which has become a community and that helps my whole system function more freely.

As we continued to talk over time I became aware of how the ways I imagine myself affect the way I carry myself. That meant spending some time re-imagining myself. I also realized that my spirituality helps create a gentler, more peaceful and less judgmental approach to my whole self. I am gradually becoming aware of how my whole personality interacts and builds on the various elements of my body, mind, spirit and shadow.

I should know better than to think there was a simple fix. I often talk to people who coming asking for spiritual advice. They are looking for a specific way of praying that will enlist God's help. When I tell them it's not that simple they are often disappointed.

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I think we're at a crucial time in church history when we're looking for a more holistic vision of life. We want our faith to have a real effect on our life. We're no longer content with moral ideals that promise a future life in heaven as the payoff. Sacred pronouncements that have little to do with our lived experience also have little impact on us. We need the wisdom of Church tradition, the applied wisdom of shared experiences as well as people who take the time to pay attention to more of their experience.

So here we are standing around an elephant once again. The challenge is not only to share our various experiences and perceptions but to become aware of their limitations. We need encouragement from each other to do this. And we need the guidance of God's Spirit. There's nothing easy about this but I believe it is the necessary future of our faith.

My personal dream continues to be about making St. Michael's a place where the genius of our faith creates openness to the full spectrum of our life.

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