

ARCHIVES STORY

INNER VIEWS

Self Reflection

We need to understand the eyes through which we see because we often mistake mirrors for windows. We think we are looking directly at life when we're actually seeing reflections of our self.

As children we built our perceptions from the outside in. We followed the example of people we admired and accepted the word of adults. We created a point of view from the debris of their perceptions. And then we identified with this point of view as being ourselves. We come to believe that we are our ideas about our self and the world in which we live. And we take it for granted that these perceptions and the resulting feelings that attend them are what everyone sees and knows and feels. But it is just a mirror image of our gathered thoughts, ideas, expectations and judgments.

We rarely question our point of view because it's the way we know things to be. And yet there are hints and clues along the way. Have you ever been quoted and to your surprise it is the opposite of what you meant? Or you may find yourself running into emotional brick walls and you begin to wonder "why?" We live in a far more subjective world that we would ever imagine and the way out is to go inward.

Without knowing it we have come under the tutelage of our soul drawing us into our depths in Trinity's presence. We can begin to discover the inaudible subjectivity of our perceptions and perspectives by learning to reflect on our self. We can begin to explore our selves, our inner motivations, impulses, conflicts and assumptions. We need to do this so that we can experience the rigidity and limitations of our ego. When we recognize how much of our life and our judgments are half truths our soul will be able to express her hunger for our truth, for the deep reality of our divine Source. Understanding our self will lay the foundation for transcending our self.

Self-reflection often begins with a critical and awkward form of self-criticism. We may need help in loosing up and receiving our self with gentle acceptance and love. By its nature our soul is receptive, open and loving. But the critical and negatively aggressive nature of our ego will shout it down unless we receive some support. Self reflection can also become caught in an endless loop of analysis and self-explanation. We are so much more than this, but we need to pay attention to our soul's gentle urgings. It is far too easy to identify with the contents of our reflection as if there are who we are. This is a return to our ego.

There comes a time when we need to let them go and trust ourselves into the unknown of Trinity's love. Our reflection is not the Source of who we are. It's a help in sorting out our perceptions and perspectives, but these perceptions and perspectives exist in the larger reality of our soul's spaciousness.

This is why we need to wander. In our wandering we experience the incredible range and variety and creativity of our life. We find answers and then find that they are not big enough. We make connections and they evaporate into greater connections. We often feel lost or floundering and

ARCHIVES STORY

then we realize that we remain, we survive, and something more than we can understand is living us.

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INNER VIEWS

On summer nights the kids in our neighborhood would gather around a candle out in the back yard and tell spooky stories. We loved the thrill of being scared but knowing nothing can hurt us.

We tell stories to make sense of our life and to help us feel like we know what we're doing and that we can handle our life. As adults we continue to tell ourselves scary stories but without the thrill. For adults these scary stories are called "worrying." We scare ourselves in order to prepare ourselves for the future.

Stories are basic to our thinking process. Our understanding proceeds not from principles to action but from story to story. We live in the concrete world and begin to understand our place in the world through the stories we weave.

We think in stories. We make sense of new events or problems by reference to old previously understood stories and we explain our self to others by our stories. We understand our personal problems as well as relationships between people through the stories we tell about them.

We're living in a psychodrama of our own making. We are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our stories about what it means. We began creating our story to gain a sense of control and power over our life and to defend our self against all that we found frightening. Since it is a fearful reaction our story continues to lock us into that fear as we interpret our life through its retelling.

Our stories are necessary fictions: Necessary in the sense that they give some stability to our lives. But fictions, because they are a temporary interpretation which is meant to grow, develop and expand as we grow, develop and expand our awareness.

Our thoughts are harmless until we believe them. Most of us think we are what our thoughts tell us about our self. This leaves us reacting through memories of past events; trying to live up to abstract qualities that exist only in our head; and separated by a wall of thoughts from the reality of our self, God and one another.

Too often instead of expanding our awareness we remain focused on expanding our interpretations. Often when we think we're being rational, we're being spun by our own thinking. Its basic themes reflect our innate personality, the themes of our family story as well as those of our culture. As my friend's Aunt used to say, "No matter how much happiness there is I keep a sufficient store of sadness to get me through."

ARCHIVES STORY

We live according to a plot that is based on beliefs, assumptions, standards, judgments, ideals, worries, prejudices, and other such notions that we learned as children. We then reassemble these to fit new situations with littler reference to what is actually happening..

Usually we are not aware that we are doing this. It seems so natural, just the way our life makes sense. But it comes down to being our own spin doctor.

If we want to expand our awareness and be more open to reality as it is we need to break the confines of our story. When you listen to a talk or read a new approach there are questions that can help you let go of your story so that you can absorb some of the new insight. Here are some questions you can use to do this.

What am I aware of in my response to what I've heard or read?
 Is there anything that I did not expect?
 Do I feel resistance to anything in what I've heard or read?
 How do I feel inspired by what I've heard or read?.
 Do I feel inspired to act in any way?
 What do I need to ask of God at this moment?

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

INNER VIEWS

Music is what words would like to be. It carries words beyond literal descriptions to the spiritual beauty hidden within us. Music grabs that exquisite goodness living in the meaning of words. Prayer, silence, love and spirituality are like music, they take us to a beautiful occurrence of divine meaning within that part of us which generate words. They don't allow us to reduce meaning to this or that. And in this way they remind us of our genesis in Divinity.

Most of our world, however, is lived in the relentless pursuit of the factual. It is a blatant attempt to capture certainty as an ally of our point of view. Unlike music, prayer, silence, love and the spiritual the factual world lacks the warmth and reverence of connection and community. Instead it leads us to ideas that separate us from one another.

This is most clearly evident in our religious and political points of view. The point of religion is to joint the right one. The point of politics is to pick a side that we can use to deny the other side while projecting our fears and anger on that side. In our attempt to affirm our knowledge as factual we use religious and political ideas as our pole star, as our attempt to create a moral compass for ourself.

In both religion and politics we bolster our correct point of view by judging other points of view. And then we figure out mental justifications for our judgments. We use our reasoning to conjure toxic and nasty stories about the other point of view. Inherent in the correctness of my belief is an assertion that other points of view are wrong. How else could I be sure of the truth of my belief? I affirm my belief by denying other beliefs.

ARCHIVES STORY

And yet we are graced with the musical ability to find beauty in our life. Beauty is an opening in which the Divine shines through our limits. Like our Creator in whose image we are made we are artists. We are involved in the shaping of our world through the construction of our perceptions. Our world is not as solid as our ideas pretend to make it. We continually shape our world and create it. And when we look for its beauty, its divine intimacy, we release the creativity of our imagination. We allow our world to be stranger and vaster than our best thoughts.

This often happens through loss of our world as we know it. When we lose a loved one, our health or our job we are plunged into chaos. Loss of any kind shakes us free from the veneer of who we think we must be and we awaken to the illusion of our immortality. This leaves us vulnerable and at the same time opens us to the ultimate significance of this moment. We begin to pay attention to what really matters – which is basically the importance of each other. We are stripped of our pretenses and exposed to our essence. This is what spirituality is about, the experience of our pretenses and the awakening to our life as a gift of God’s love. We experience the preciousness of our life. And we find that love is a grace that must be received and given. We recognize that we are helpless to hold onto or control, or even give love the way we want. Our self expectations elude us and we find that we can only give love to those who are willing to receive it.

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INNER VIEWS

We are more than the stories we tell about ourselves.

If we want to know God’s love as an experience of our existence we need to loosen ourselves from our thoughts; extricate ourselves from our ideas. If we want to experience the freedom to be loved and love in return we have to become aware that we are more than our thoughts. We have to wake up to the truth of our reality beyond our judgments and expectations. Jesus calls this “poverty of spirit.”

“Poverty of Spirit” cannot be grasped by trying to be poor. It is a grace we receive by making inner space, a spiritual opening to receiving the gift of being loved by our unconditional Creator. And this begins simply by being aware of the stories we weave about ourselves.

Our point of view is narrative in character. We think in terms of stories. We have a story we tell about our personal path. We make sense of the meaning of our experience through telling ourselves and others our “story.” Our stories place what happened to us in sequence and allows us to describe our feelings. When we create our story we pick the events we find most representative of how it was for us. We check our memory banks, and out of the millions of moments of our life we select a few. And from this we create a story that shows a picture of our experience.

ARCHIVES STORY

Our stories create a commentary on the events that we select as meaningful and provide interpretation of people's actions. And most important, they allow us to say what the experience means to us. To do this we decide which events to highlight and which to minimize or dismiss. This reduces our "reality" by interpreting our experiences in "either / or" categories. This experience either fits the way I am making sense out of my life, or it doesn't. It either supports my view and my values, or it doesn't: if it doesn't it's dismissed and deleted from our awareness. The point is that stories don't mirror our life they interpret it according to our point of view.

So our story is a spin doctor. It doesn't report our experience it interprets that experience so that it fits our ways of understanding and helps us feel in control. When we believe we're being rational and following common sense we're actually being spun by our own thinking. We tend to believe our own press releases. We agree with our point of view and exclude anything that does not fit in.

So, we think in terms of stories. We understand our world and new experiences in terms of stories that we have already used to make sense of our previous experiences and we then use these stories to explain our selves to others. We understand personal problems and relationships between people through stories that typify those situations. We also understand just about everything else this way as well. Stories are basic to our human thinking process.

For each memorable thing that happens we create a story. This story can be something we keep to our self or share with others. Just because we do not tell anyone else does not mean that we do not have a particular way of talking to our self about what happened. This story, how often we tell it, to who we tell it, and in what way we tell it dramatically affects our life.

These stories are meant to be shared. They allow us to tell others about our experiences, not by recounting all the details (like a videotape replay) but by describing the strategic and significant details that remind the other person of parallel experiences they might have had. Stories are our human way of making and sharing meaning.

Stories are also our ego's way of feeling in control. We choose and interpret the details, we spin the story, to bolster our sense of self and defend our point of view. We spin our stories so that we end up proving what we already believe to be true about ourselves. If I consider intelligence to be one of my primary qualities my stories will often end with a realization of how dumb the people are who do not go along with my insights. If I consider myself to be a caring person, I will often tell stories about how my caring was met with ingratitude or taken for granted. Pay attention to your mind, especially in stressful situations, and you will see it at work creating your personal kind of spin.

Our stories are helpful at times. The problem lies in coming to believe that they are our whole truth. We are so much more but we will never experience our full reality as long as we reduce ourselves to our story and take them for fact.

One of the major outcomes of contemplative prayer and meditation is that we begin to notice the stories we are telling ourselves. We begin to see how we are creating our experience of other people and the world around us. We begin to become an "observer" of our thoughts and stories.

ARCHIVES STORY

And this becomes the beginning a whole new freedom and paradoxically, stress reducer. Since our mind is adversarial by nature it creates a stressful perspective on living and it generates more stress by constantly replaying our story in our head. You've had that sense of your head spinning, filled with a jumble your story replaying itself over and over. One of the ways out of this self imposed hell is by allowing our stories to be expanded by Jesus' story.

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INNER VIEWS

The Gospel Story expands our story

We all have a story that we tell about our self. It is made up of words and ideas generated by our point of view. These are meant to convey our right to be the way we think and feel. It is an attempt to make sense out of our life as we see it.

We get the kind of relationship to God and to our world that we create through our stories. The spiritual writer Louis Evely wrote: "How about our God, the one we think we're serving? Is God tender, solicitous, responsive, persecuted – and thereby persecutable- the being who was revealed to St. Paul? Or is God some almighty remote bookkeeper who'll catch us the next time around if our accounts are not in order? Many Christians would not want to be the God they have fabricated. They'd be more likeable than that!"

We can spend a lot of time talking about various images of God and theological visioinis of what God must be like but we are all called to be a mystic of some sort. This means we must be open to a Mystery that is more than human knowledge can grasp. We're meant to relate to God more from love than dogmatic concepts.

As Catholics raised in a sacramental reality, we know from experience that the intuitive and non-rational, art and ritual, nature and the sensual are what makes room in our spirit for a God bigger than our beliefs. If religion is meant to be more than an arm of politics, social control or an ecclesiastical lock step it must reclaim and re-imagine a mythic awareness that takes us beyond the literal. We need to take the parabolic nature of Jesus' Father to heart and let prayer and silence make room for God as God is rather than a remake of our imagination.

We know we are on the path to God if our capacity for holding paradox expands, our sense of humor broadens and softens, our commitment to justice deepens to concretize our compassion in a way that transcends race, color, creed, tribe, religion, politics and sexual orientation. People created in the image of our Creator are so much more than the categories we try to impose upon them. And God is far more than anything we can describe in words. We need to meet God by opening to God through every aspect of our self. And this means expanding our story.

One way to change the kind of world we experience is to change the kind of creative consciousness that our beliefs express. It is our beliefs, our story of how we understand our

ARCHIVES STORY

Creator and the world our Creator fashions that profoundly affect the world in which we experience ourselves.

Religion is story before it is anything else, a story to explain the meaning of life, death, relationships. Religion is a story after it is everything else, a story born from spiritual experience, embodied in symbol, incarnated by calling forth our spirit and shared with others. Religious stories create the form that gives shape to our faith, to our underlying relationship to God.

Jesus didn't offer us a set of intellectual beliefs or dogmas. He used stories and parables to plunge us into the intimacy of our Father's unconditional and creative love. His stories and parables involve our imagination in softening our defenses and resistances to God's creative love.

Jesus' life reimagines our story as one immersed within generous and unconditional love. It is created around the awareness of God's intimate faithful, courageous and eternal closeness. Along with Jesus and because of him we can feel absolutely safe with God who loves us into being and sustains us. Along with Jesus we can relax our need to grasp at and control our life. With Jesus, our Brother we can let go of anxiety and replace it with trust and confidence. Along with Jesus and because of him we can feel absolutely safe with God who loves us into being and faithfully maintains us. Along with Jesus we can recognize our community with life everywhere we look and sustain all life with the same generosity with which we are sustained. Along with Jesus we are meant to live and help create "The Greatest Story Ever Told."

Jesus set out to help us open our lives to God in faith, to undergo a metanoia, that is, a shift in our mindset by opening (thinking again and expanding our stories to be more inclusive), and converting (turning around to see new point of view). The story he wants to change is the one in which we see people as judged according to whether they fit or oppose our story; that lines them up as friends or enemies, superiors or inferiors, insiders or outsiders. He wants to change the story in which we see a world of scarcity and hostility and insecurity, in which we can't help being afraid. He wants to change our story that imagines God as distant or uncaring or threatening or rewarding and punishing, or confine within dogmas. In effect he is moving us from ego to spirit. He is using stories to help us imagine our lives and expand our experience of God according to God's original creative story. The gospels tell Jesus' story as our Father's renewal of our present world according to God's pristine story of harmony, intimacy and community.

Jesus' life death and resurrection are the story of our lives unfolding in harmony with God's intention to draw us closer in creative partnership. At the same time Jesus is the healing of our lives, the freeing of our awareness, the way to open to the freedom to become who we are truly meant to be. He is not only the template, the example of our life, he is the healing of the wound that cripples our life. He is the living water that quenches our parched spirit.

The point of Jesus' Incarnation is that God saves us by pouring divinity into our humanness. The Word becomes Flesh, God becomes human, the Darkness glows with Light, all tell us of the unconquerable God who gives himself into the vulnerability of our humanity. Who but Jesus

ARCHIVES STORY

would ever imagine a God like this. This is not the unapproachable, all powerful and abstract God of the philosophers. The Father of Jesus' story is a God who surrenders to each one of us in the mystery that Jesus lived. Jesus' Incarnation is linked to our becoming. Christ is born today through our rebirth. This is the great transition of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. We are meant to be his continuation, the bearers of his Spirit, the embodiment of his body broken and his blood poured out. We are fed at Mass so that we become what we eat. We are fed because people still hunger for divine sustenance and we are meant to be given as that nourishment as a continuation of Jesus' resurrection.

The Gospels weave a rich tapestry of images which draw us into God's imagination and vision. As we tell and retell the story of the unexpected and marvelous birth of the Holy One among us, we experience the intimacy and the mystery of that relationship in a new way. Our relationship with Jesus grows and matures as our imagination grows and matures. Jesus who began by snuggling up to our hearts as a child, uses that heart to pry us open to the unrestricted grandeur of unconditional Love. We are living a mystery that resonates with our deepest self and yet is always more than we can grasp with our minds or even hold in our hearts. We intuit its reality but never grasp its breadth. Its meaning comes from the deepest level of our sense of our own reality.

The life of Jesus does that. It incarnates our desires for what is missing. It helps us pay attention to the rest of our story. Most of the time we settle for getting by, numbing ourselves to the pain of our frustrated deep desires. We long for a home, a place where we truly belong. And we ache for companions who can rescue us from that aloneness we feel even in crowds.

In the private and quiet moments of our life we long for a Savior. We long for healing and completion. We are reminded of who we really are, human beings who are incomplete when alienated from the divine as well as the divine in one another. The tragedy is that we are so often trapped by the "incomplete" part, the story too small for Divine Presence.

Teilhard de Chardin puts the greater truth succinctly and encouragingly: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience." Spirituality is about who we are because of who God is. And God is the one who becomes our flesh in order to recreate love in this world. We continue the incarnation of Jesus by becoming his continued incarnation, by becoming the incarnation of his Spirit in today's world. Now go tell that story with your life.

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