

Hatch ‘em, Match ‘em, and Dispatch ‘em

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August 27, 2017

Food for Thought

Now I Become Myself

May Sarton

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
“Hurry, you will be dead before –”
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)

Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!
The black shadow on the paper
Is my hand; the shadow of a word
As thought shapes the shaper
Falls heavy on the page, is heard.
All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.

As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give,
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted by love.
Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

Opening to the Spirit

The Way It Is

William Stafford

There's a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die;
and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-18 from *The Message*

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand — shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

I read the novel *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry many years ago before going to seminary or becoming an interfaith minister, or having the slightest wisp of an idea that I would find my calling, doing what I now do.

Jayber's old uncle was a preacher in Arkansas, and when they tried to get him out of the pulpit, they got a young preacher in there for Sundays, but Jayber's uncle couldn't give up the baptisms, the weddings and the funerals; he knew he was doing God's work. So they let him stay on that way, doing what he loved to do (as his uncle described it): hatch 'em, match 'em and dispatch 'em. I'm going to tell you a bit of the story of *my* journey to my present calling: to (among other things) hatch 'em, match 'em, and dispatch 'em.

I had been selling real estate for 20 plus years, and was losing heart for this work. I longed for more meaningful relationships with people; I wanted to know them — deeply — which most of my clients weren't interested in. They wanted me to help them buy or sell a house!!

In my spiritual seeking I became an active member of Glide Church in San Francisco for about 17 years. Glide was great; it supported me in being an activist, which my Quaker parents had modeled for us. Social action was how you practiced love, devotion, and service in the world. But even there, involved in issues of poverty, race, hunger, injustice and more, I questioned myself. Was I really of service? And all these “good works” didn't give me a feeling of worthiness. It felt like a dis-equal relationship, feeding the homeless, even serving on church committees and singing in the choir. I approved of what I was doing, but I didn't very much like myself.

Eventually, my life began to fray at the edges until it was in tatters. Over a very few years' time my marriage was failing, I was drinking too much, got into big debt, was walloped with depression and crummy self-esteem, and my real estate business dwindled to a trickle. I did seek help, stopped drinking, and joined AA and Al Anon. To my surprise, I discovered a structured communal spiritual journey in the 12 steps that I could and did follow. And I came to discover my soul's deepest longing: to be living a life of spiritual intimacy with people.

In 12-step meetings (for the first 8 or 10 years, I attended about 10 or 12 meetings a week – AA and a couple of other programs), I turned to the stories I heard (and of course mine was one among them). I felt safe and comforted by the careful discipline of anonymity and the rule of no cross-talk or advice-giving, so I began to recover from the devastating diseases of shame and guilt. In this way, I learned how to have true intimacy with people – the courage to tell the truth and to hear others' truths without judgment. I discovered “spiritual intimacy.” I also got a big dose of humility, which has served me well to this day. Well, at least when I remember to *be* humble! Here's my favorite bumper sticker: *I am very proud of my humility!* Anyway, I gradually came to discover my calling.

I became a student at the Chaplaincy Institute for Interfaith Ministry. I was taught something about how to create ritual, how to sit with people at the end of life, and how to be present with people without having to know everything, or provide answers, but just to listen – a practice called spiritual direction.

In seminary we were required to find a spiritual director and to receive spiritual direction as long as we remained active members of the clergy. This has turned out to be a divine gift for me, both in my ministry and in life. In spiritual direction, I am seen as not only acceptable despite all my messiness, confusion, doubt, fear, and self-loathing, but worthy, and loved, and even forgiven! Because of this positive experience receiving spiritual direction, I became a spiritual director myself – and this was the first work I engaged in – the foundation for my ministry. It's where I first practiced humility (outside of 12-step meetings), and came to understand that I did not need to know answers and be smart or perfect (thank God! I'm telling you, trying to be perfect will KILL YOU! Get over it!). I just needed to sit still and pay attention, hear what my spiritual direction clients (“directees”) said, and acknowledge what they were feeling. And in this way, I helped them know and honor themselves, forgive and celebrate themselves, and see the place of love in the center of their lives – the divine spark, whatever it was for each of them.

After ordination, in addition to giving spiritual direction, I worked as a hospice chaplain — another huge opportunity to be humble and imperfect. After all, besides knowing I couldn't control anything about the outcome, I had to help patients and families let go of that desire to control outcomes, too. I found I loved creating ritual for people around the most profound and sacred life passages: birth, marriage and death. By helping people create these rituals for themselves and their families and friends, I was helping them bring forth love, authenticity, significance and connection — and celebrate these sacred passages in community.

I don't do so many “hatch ‘em” ceremonies; instead I concentrate mostly on weddings and memorial services. For me, these two significant rituals or sacraments have a great similarity. One is a joyful celebration of the holy union and the vows, binding two people to one another for a lifetime. The other is a sorrow-filled celebration of the life of someone who was loved and an honoring of their death, their departure from this life and from all who loved them.

These ceremonies are of course about love, connection, and intimacy, and also about purpose and meaning. These rituals uplift each person as a distinct and unique part of the tapestry of the whole human community over our lifetimes. And so when I speak with wedding couples, or people planning a memorial celebration, I find people tend to bring forth their deepest truths, reveal who they are, and who their loved one was. My years of spiritual practice in 12-step meetings was the perfect training for eliciting this kind of deep speaking! But of course I had no idea that being active in AA was a *training*, or that through it God was leading me towards myself and an authentic life!

I am blessed with people's lovely comments on my work. Why are people pleased with my work — hatching, matching, dispatching; giving spiritual direction; leading groups of elders? I don't believe it's because I am brilliant and clever and work so darn hard. (“No” on the first two, and I *certainly* can't be accused of *working hard*, much less darn hard!) I think I get these comments because — mysteriously — I am led to bring forth the very process of my own spiritual journey in all my interactions, so that when people talk to me about their wedding, I am listening to their story, paying attention to the love in their intentions and longings, not judging, not giving them unsolicited advice.

When I am facilitating a circle of elders who are talking about the journey into old age and mortality, I (mostly) don't preach or proselytize. With spiritual directees, I can see their light, and I do my best to reflect that back to them. I trust that they not only have a light within them, but also that they have within them the wisdom and strength to bring it forth. And I love them without judgment (as best I can—the way my sponsors have done with me).

I feel I have been becoming myself all my life, but especially in the last 20 or so years. As May Sarton said in her poem *Now I Become Myself*,

*It's taken Time, many years and places;
[And the self I have become IS]
my work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.*

As Jesus said to his beloved cohort, his spiritual brothers,

You're here to be light... I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God!

Looking again at this lovely William Stafford poem, *The Way it Is*, I invite you to pay attention to the seventh line, “While you hold it you can't get lost.” And then the last line, “You don't ever let go of the thread.”

Finally, I have come to believe that while I hold the thread, I can't get lost, and now, at 73, I know never to let go of the thread.

Amen.

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