

## Out of Africa - Learning to See



**If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.**

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I was filled with all the bravado of an insecure thirteen year old, determined to prove herself capable of doing what everyone had said she was not old enough to do. I wanted to work in the hospital. I was going to be a missionary Doctor. What finer calling could there be, than to serve God, save Africa's starving children, be a political activist and be as beautiful and noble as Katherine Hepburn in the movie, "The Nun's Story?"

Those were the waning days of the mighty British empire, when children were to be seen and not heard, sent to boarding school at age six, did not cry when they were hurt and had impeccable manners. I challenged the hierarchy and authority of the hospital repeatedly until the Matron of Salisbury General Hospital finally issued me a white uniform and told me to report to Women's Medical, sternly stating that she did not expect me to cause any more trouble or complain - if I wanted to do this then I had better do it, do it well and do it the way everyone else in her hospital was expected to do it. There would be no exceptions made because I was an impertinent child. I felt triumphant. I would show them!

I reported to Womens Medical and was met by the Sister-in-charge. She looked me up and down and said, "So you want to be a doctor do you?" It was less of a question and more of a "I'll break you down," statement of intent.

"Come along, someone just died. You can help me dress the body." I quaked inside but was determined not to show it - and dress the body we did, just like a chicken for Sunday dinner - cleaning out and stuffing the cavities, tying the jaw closed, closing the eyes, washing the body. That night I was inwardly tearful and jittery and outwardly stoic and nonchalant as I related the days events to my family.

I settled into a routine of working at the hospital after school and weekends. School was boring and tedious and this is where I was really learning and engaged. I progressed from ward to ward without complaining, no matter what was asked of me, with a growing sense of acceptance from the nurses and doctors and confidence in myself until one fateful day on the oncology ward.

I was handing out lunch when an elderly woman complained that her milk was warm. I dutifully, with a superior, self serving sense of being *so* loving, ran through the hospital maze to the kitchen to get her a glass of ice cold milk. When I returned with it, instead of the expected 'thank you - how kind of you,' she turned her head away from me and muttered that she did not want it. I felt hurt. Surely after all the trouble I went to, specially for her, she could have shown some gratitude!

I made the mistake of expressing this to the Sister who was preparing the sterile tray to do the post surgical dressings, "What a crabby old woman!" She looked up at me with a thoughtful glint of steel in her eye and a tightening of her mouth.

"You can help with the dressings today. Come along." And she marched me over to the woman who had refused her cold milk. With the greatest of tenderness she started opening up the dressing on the woman's abdomen and as she took off the final gauze, soggy with yellow pus, and greenish bloody fluid, a stench rose up from a gaping, suppurating gangrenous mess that had been her abdomen. I involuntarily retched and made as if to go to the bathroom. Without looking up or missing a beat she quietly stated, "You stay right where you are and pull yourself together." I stayed, quelled my nausea, tears springing to my eyes. I was awash with shame and remorse. I silently handed her what she asked for, rooted to the sight of this cancerous horror - it was as if it could not be part of a human being - but I knew it was because the woman moaned in torment and tears of pain coursed down her face. I kept glancing from her belly to her face until I could reconcile that this was happening to a live human being and until I felt my heart break with the pain she was enduring.

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When we were done, she begged us to straighten a crease in the sheet under her that was burning into her back, but every movement to straighten the sheet resulted in agonizing pain. Her suffering terrified me and stopped me from pulling hard enough on the sheet. Again the nursing Sister nailed me down with her stare, "I cannot do this by myself. Now pull!" I did firmly with all my strength and the sheet straightened as the woman groaned in agony. Slowly the morphine shot worked her into a semi comatose state again as the Sister gently massaged her pressure points. I vowed to make up for my attitude the next time I was on duty, but I never got a chance. She died the next day.

The Sister turned to me, "Thank you for your help." Again the tears sprung to my eyes. "You are welcome," I whispered.

I wish that I could say that this life lesson taught me humility once and for all. But rarely do we truly understand the depth and meaning of the lesson the first time. It did, however, prepare the soil for eventually growing into the understanding of the principle that negative human behavior is motivated by some unseen, hidden force of pain and fear. Not sometimes for some people, but *always for everyone, no matter what the behavior*. For years I could not see it as principle but an explanation sometimes in some circumstances. Again and again I have jumped to judgement when I have encountered evil acts, heinous decisions made by others or uncovered some particularly unsavory inclinations within myself. These days I accept with more certainty that no-one wants to be self righteous and judgmental as I was and no one wants to be crabby, unkind or ungrateful like the dying woman on that sunny African day. I seek out the barriers to acceptance and love within my psyche with more ruthlessness, seeking to see deeply into the pain that gives rise to hatred.

Thoughtless, unkind, cruel and vicious behaviors are not natural to our true state of being - which is always loving. They *are* instinctual reactions when we are hurting, shamed or frightened and unaware - always for everyone.

Any behavior can be rationalized, even be seen as a conscious choice. However, even in these circumstances, there is seldom any real awareness of the roots of fear and shame buried deep in the unconscious that lead to unloving behavior. It is so easy to quickly label and diagnose another or ourselves instead of seeking deeper understanding and asking the questions of "what lies underneath my own judgment and what is hidden from my view when I judge the behavior of others? How am I afraid and threatened? How is this person in front of me afraid and threatened?"

Judgment is the quick and easy answer leading to cheap solutions that never address the heart of the matter. Asking the deeper question takes intentionality, introspection, time and work - all commodities that the fast paced life we lead seems to mitigate against. And yet until we seek understanding we can never have compassion for ourselves or others and the world will remain a place of war, not peace. Really seeing requires a seeking heart.

I do not remember that nurses face or her name but I do remember the energy of her love. She planted the seed that would germinate into the little sprout of true compassion for myself and others that day. I learnt that one face of love is fierceness. She was fierce in confronting my behavior. She was firm and clear about doing what was best in alleviating pain for her patient despite the short term pain it caused. The other face of love that I witnessed was the tenderness and presence with which she attended to her patient. She saw my need and her patients need and both of us were changed by her loving presence that day.

As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.

Henry David Thoreau