

Out of Africa - Compassion - Processing Anger and Self Righteousness

“The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth.”

~ Rumi

During our last retreat to South Africa we went swimming and snorkeling with seals. We all got dressed in our wetsuits, collected our snorkels and goggles and took off for the rubber raft that would take us out to the Robberg peninsula which is home to a colony of 5000 Cape fur seals.

As always I had encouraged our group to engage the South Africans in conversation, show interest and be bridge builders in the world. One of our group asked one of the guides, a beautiful blonde California surfing type guy, bronzed and built, whether he had ever been to America. When he replied, “no,” she asked if he would like to? He replied, “I have heard New York is the land of Sodom and I have no wish to go to a country that legitimizes homosexuality.” End of conversation. Shocked and hurt by the response, our young retreatant came and told me about the conversation that seemingly ended all possibility of connection or relationship. Or did it?

I felt outraged by such blatant homophobia and hatred and the way in which he treated this young person. I resisted the temptation to confront him and empathized with the young woman asking her what she wanted to say and what she actually did. Once we were launched on the sea, I watched the young man, considering carefully what my own response to him might be. The one person he engaged on the boat was a gay man. He laughed and joked with him and had a sparkle in his eye. He helped him with his camera gear and was attentive to his needs. I wondered if I had perhaps more insight into his pain than he had himself. What might a creative and compassionate response be?

As we approached the seal colony the young man pointed out that amidst the 5000 fur seals there was one lonely southern elephant seal that visited the colony every year in the spring. He was 2000 miles away from the nearest elephant seal colony. He remarked that he was probably drawn to the water because of all the hormones in the air and water during breeding season.

The elephant seal was a lighter color and at least double the size of the largest fur seal with a big protuberance on his nose - hence the name elephant seal. I watched as he languished in the water, alone and disconnected from the colony and thought of how he was like this young man - alone, isolated, unaccepting and unaccepted not knowing where he fits in. How did he get lost and separated from his own kind? Was he rejected for some reason? Was he confused about his identity? As an animal I assume he was unaware of himself as an elephant seal - he just lived the experience of his being. Mulling all this over, I realized that these were the questions I had to ask about this beautiful young man, not the seal - anthropomorphizing the seal was the catalyst to my deeper questioning. I reflected on the fact that I had immediate empathy and warmth towards the big old lumbering elephant seal and irritation at the young man. Hmmm....

And then on the way home from Africa the world mirrored for me my own growing edge of irritation when treated badly. I had to fly through Paris on the Sunday after the Friday terrorist attack in Paris. I was able to observe myself in all the officials of the airports - both in Paris and Minneapolis. They were all edgy, irritable, rude and officious. They had lost all perspective and were searching everyone without any discernment or civility. They were all pumped up with their own self importance and righteousness in protecting the innocent from terrorists with no recognition of how they were turning into mini-terrorists themselves. I heard senators here in the United States finding a way to further their political power and trump themselves up by saying they will not allow refugees into their states. And I saw them all mirroring my reflexive irritation at the hostile comment of the young man and how quickly I went to wanting to report him, out of self righteous indignation and “protectiveness” of the

young woman he offended. I watched my own judgement that he should not be working with tourists if he had such bad manners and poor social skills, and I would be the one to report him... Hmmmm.....

I reflected back on my role in the family system. The dynamics of the system were set up for me to be the protector of my younger sister, to look out for her, to take care of her needs. My inner responses are deeply imbedded in the psyche - but I can see my tendency to disempower the victim even further by taking over instead of encouraging others to speak up for themselves.... Hmmmm.....

The ego is so powerful and so convincing in creating barriers and distance.

People often say to me, "Well what is the right response? What should you have done? Is it okay he behaved that way? Should he just get away with it?" Apply the same questions to the Paris terrorists.

The answer is: "Do your own inner work." Until you have clarity about your own inner reactivity you have nothing to say that would be really creatively helpful or compassionate. This is not to say that having gotten inner clarity you are exempt from acting in the world.

As it turns out I did respond to Trip Advisor, as requested, and did mention this young man's comment. But now I did so because I wanted by confronting his comment I hoped he would hear that there is nothing wrong with being gay and that his inner self hatred projected outwards is simply not acceptable to me; that I accept him for who he is and wish that he could too; that I do not condone a relationship with oneself that is rejecting and punitive.

I have no control over how he hears me or what the company does as a result of my comments. I do know that my own irritation and judgment had dissipated before speaking up. And in the end that is all that any of us can do - our own inner work - and only then speak the truth and set limits with compassion, let go of control and have endless gratitude to the all the mirrors that help us get aware - in this case, the young man and woman and their interchange, the elephant seal, the terrorists, the airport officials - all serve my evolution in consciousness, and all are the same as me in consciousness, with very superficial differences of race, species, sexual orientation or gender. What separates us is illusionary and the result of opportunity, experience and luck. I am blessed indeed.

"The very perception of what you are, as you are, in the moment of action in relationship, brings a freedom from 'what is.' Only in freedom can there be discovery. A conditioned mind cannot discover truth."
~Krishnamurti

Exercise:

Read the story carefully and see if you can outline the steps taken to get from anger and compassion

Process a time when have you felt self-righteously angry?

What was the offense of the other person?

How did it activate old feelings of hurt when your need for value and love were not met as a child?

What might be behind the other person's actions or words?

How are you both similar in your reactivity?

Can you have compassion for yourself AND the other person?

"If you are irritated by every rub, how will your mirror be polished?"
~Rumi

