

Ponder Day

(title from Robert Fulghum, sermon by Deane Perkins)

We have this fascinating secular ritual around this time each year of making New Year's Resolutions. Apparently, however, making resolutions was a **religious** ritual some four thousand years ago as a means by which the Babylonians curried favor with the gods. One had to be quite circumspect about the resolutions made, since to break one was considered bad luck; indeed, it could anger the gods. (see website, Mesa's New Year's Resolutions) Today we might merely feel some guilt if we break a resolution, but at least this is a far cry from the fear of divine retribution.

It seems, however, that the date of January 1st as the New Year came primarily from an arbitrary decision made by Julius Caesar. The Babylonians marked March 23rd as

the New Year, since it was a celebration of spring, fertility, and the planting of crops. Julius Caesar, however, wanted “to honor Janus, the two-faced god who looks backward into the old year, and forward into the new.” (Ibid.) So the Romans named their first month after Janus, the god of beginnings, and, as such, of resolutions.

We can imagine that Janus had eyes in the back of his head and could see all the lies, deceptions, errors of judgment, mismanagement, greed, avarice, and wanton ways of the past year. And looking into the future, Janus might see a world filled with honesty, compassion, and care. So the Romans resolved, too, “to do better and used the new year as an opportunity to ask forgiveness from their enemies, delivering gifts of sacred tree branches on New Year’s Eve.” (see *Funny Times*, Raymond Lesser, Jan., 2010, pg. 23)

Although tangential, it's also interesting to note that January 1st was declared by the Catholic Church in the sixth century to be a feast—not the kind of feast you and I might think of. January 1 was declared the Feast of Circumcision. This commemorated Jesus actually, who, as a Jew, was circumcised soon after his birth. (website, Mesa's New Year's Resolutions) I admit that I have not figured out how circumcision and the New Year relate at all—or why the church would even care about Jesus' circumcision and come up with an actual date for it.

Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and New Year's Day are all passed. Whether these holidays have been good, bad, difficult, joyful, the same or indifferent—we all managed to get through them. Rather than making resolutions, however, which are often

temporary and can be a set-up for failure, I would like to suggest that we consider a Day to Ponder.

Actually, it is Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian Universalist minister, who suggests in his work, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, that we have Ponder Day.

And to ponder, he states, “is not to brood or grieve or even meditate. It is to wonder at a deep level.” (R. Fulghum, *It Was On Fire*

When I Lay Down On It, pg. 59; also see pages 57-61)

About what would we ponder? What is it that makes us wonder?

Robert Fulghum notes that, in the story of Jesus’ birth, “Mary pondered all these things in her heart.” And certainly Job, while calling Yahweh to task for all his suffering, pondered a great deal about his plight. But Fulghum also confesses that on Ponder Day he has

wondered about the girls he used to love a long time ago.

Where are they now? What are they like?”

He continues, “I wondered about all those people who don’t know it now, but who will not be here to ponder at this time next year. If they knew it now, would it help?

And how about all those children who will be here this time next year, but who are just made up of parental desire at the moment?” (Ibid., pg. 59)

“I wondered about all the people in prisons— especially about the ones who are unjustly punished— tortured. Do they have hope?” (Ibid.)

Here is something that I have considered in my Ponder Day wondering this year. I, too, wonder about our children. I wonder if they are learning to accept themselves for who they are, and learning to accept others as well. I want them to be able to live life fully in an awareness that

they are gifts of life and light and hope. I want them to learn to expand their minds, their hearts, and their spirits. I want them to live a life of compassion and empathy. I want our children to dream, to create, to be equal partners with adults in their own growing.

So I wonder, too, about the way we *treat* our children. Marshall Rosenberg, in his work, *Raising Children Compassionately*, talks about the quality of respect given to a child. And he demonstrates his concern this way: “In parent workshops that I’ve done over the years,” he writes, “I’ve often started by dividing the group into two. I put one group in one room, and the other in a different room, and I give each group the task of writing down on a large paper a dialogue between themselves and another person in a conflict situation. I tell both groups what the conflict is. The only difference is that I tell one group the other person

is their child, and to the second group I say the other person is their neighbor.”

“Every time I’ve done this, the group that was working on the situation with the other person being a child was seen as being less respectful and compassionate in their communication than the group that saw the other person as a neighbor. This painfully reveals to the people in these groups how easy it is to dehumanize someone by the simple process of simply thinking of him or her as ‘our child.’” *(Raising Children Compassionately, by Marshall Rosenberg, pgs. 1-2)*

If we saw our children as the embodiment of the incarnation or divine as Rev. Dick Snyder told us a few weeks ago, we would treat *all* children in a way that reflects their inherent worth and dignity.

Let me use some poetic license in quoting Shakespeare’s Hamlet by replacing “man” with “child”

when Hamlet talks about the wonder of the human being:
“What a piece of work is a child! How noble...!” How
infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and
admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension,
how like a god! The beauty of the world!” (*Twelve Steps to a*

Compassionate Life, by Karen Armstrong, pg. 125)

I wonder, then, how this can be manifested in our
educational system as well. Do we treat our children at
school as people with feelings and needs, or do we
determine for them who they are, and what it is—including
the curriculum—that is appropriate? Are we teaching with
and for the child, or teaching to and for state and federal
examinations and regulations?

I am concerned here with the *system* of education that
we have, and not so much the teachers and principals who
try to care and love their students in spite of the

bureaucracy. I am always concerned about systems which tend to dominate rather than partner or share with people, which make children into objects rather than human beings who are to be honored; systems which motivate children through guilt or fear or punishment rather than through love and compassion.

What I wonder is if we truly see the mystery of another. In her work on Compassion, Karen Armstrong mentions another scene in Hamlet: “The prince is causing a great deal of trouble in the Danish court, and the king has employed two of his old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to spy on him. It does not take Hamlet long to realize what is going on, and one evening he presents Guildenstern with a pipe and tells him to play it. ‘My lord, I cannot!’ Guildenstern replies. ‘It is as easy as lying,’ Hamlet remarks caustically, and goes on to insist that it is a

simple matter of blowing through the mouthpiece and putting your fingers over the stops. ‘I have not the skill,’ Guildenstern protests. ‘Why, look you now,’ says Hamlet bitterly,

How unworthy a thing you make of me!

You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass...

Do you think I am easier to be played on than this pipe?’” (Ibid., pg. 126)

You see, I wonder if all too often the heart of a child’s mystery is plucked out. This can be done in a variety of ways, including assuming, diagnosing, and judging a child’s motives, desires, feelings, and needs.

Let me speak of a particular child, not one of our own children here—though it could be-- but of a child for whom, in some sense, we, too, are the parents. I can't help but wonder if the heart of his mystery was plucked out at an early age. For he was only 20 years old and clearly in a great deal of pain, for he killed himself. That's not the only tragedy. Adam Lanza went into the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, killed his mother and 26 others, and then committed suicide.

So I wonder if we need as much compassion for the victimizer as for the victims. I wonder if this is what we are called upon to do as spiritual beings trying to help heal the world. If we emphasize only the issues like gun control and mental instability, I wonder if we will simply continue to “pluck out the heart of others’ mystery.” If compassion

is conditional and directed only to the victims, I wonder if we are plucking out the heart of our own mystery.

Karen Armstrong seems to agree when she talks about people who have radically different ideas and opinions from us, including terrorists. While we must dissociate ourselves from all atrocities and not be passive in the face of injustice and cruelty and discrimination, Armstrong is clear when she states: “As we develop our compassionate mind, we should feel an increasing sense of responsibility for the suffering of others”—and I would add **all** others, victims and victimizers alike—“and form a resolve to do everything we can to free them from their pain. But it is no good responding to injustice with hatred and contempt. This, again, will simply inspire further antagonism and make matters worse. When we speak out in the defense of decent values, we must make sure that we understand the

context fully and do not dismiss the values of our opponents as barbaric simply because they seem alien to us. We may find that we have the same values but express them in a radically different way.” (Ibid., pg. 140)

It is a New Year. It is a time to ponder, to wonder on a deep level. It means that sometimes our hearts will be broken, that sometimes our hearts will be full of joy, but that always our hearts are of wondrous mystery.

It is a New Year. It is a time to ponder, to wonder on a deep level. It is a time to have faith in our own process and ability to help heal both ourselves and the world through love and compassion.

May it be so. Amen