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William Martin

Kaleidoscope (The Gift of a Second Time at the Rodeo)

On Palm Sunday, the day Jesus entered Jerusalem, I find myself considering this time of Corona Virus which we have entered into. I am standing in the middle of my room at Benton Hall having taken a secular vow of refuge to “Shelter & Care,” and I am considering how to accept the invitation that I know quivers in the air around me to make this a spiritual vow of refuge as well. I think, that in order to do that I need to understand what is going on. So I prepare to start reasoning and thinking though....

Instead, an image wells up inside me.

I am a child holding a kaleidoscope. Looking into it and turning the base. And witnessing separate fragments of form and color and shape flow in motion around me and break up and change, break up and change. All of this happens around a central point and no fragment seems

joined to any of the other fragments. Nor even to the empty space in the center of the kaleidoscope.

I feel that right now I am that child seeing the coronavirus through a kaleidoscope. Fragments are coming at me from all directions. The politics of this time, the failed leadership of this time, the inspired leadership of this time, the stories of the first responders, the webinars of the physical symptoms and the genetic structure of the virus, no toilet paper, no masks, no testing, classes canceled, church services on Zoom, no contact, no touch....

And all of this breaking up and changing, breaking up and changing, reforming every day. As we all scramble.

None of this tragic and fearful play of forms joins together for me. I experience it all in pie pieces, silos, the separate shards of broken glass I seemed to see when I looked into a kaleidoscope when I was a child.

What is wrong with me that I see all this like this? Is it my way of perceiving? Or do we live in a divided world. Have the divisions and severings created by Empire and Patriarchy among people become so epidemic that the very flow of life is now fragmented and divided as well? And does this division outside complement the inner divisions that Patriarchy and Empire have created within us?

Didn't the word *divide* come to us through a more ancient word from which first came the word Diabolical? Wasn't one of the first nicknames for evil in the world, "The Divider"?

So how do I re-gather? Wait a minute! Isn't there one of those old words that has to do with regathering but adds some extra sauce on it? "Re-legio." Religion.

Well, if I am going to think through what is happening around me like this, I guess it is a good thing I am in divinity school! I think I am doing Theological Thinking.

So how do I re-gather? How do I put it all together? As an adult, ignited with a commitment to social justice, my first instinct is to scoop up all that is going on around me and call out disparity and injustice. This needs to be done. Lives are being lost. As usual, those lives are the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalized among us. As an adult I need to go to the place within me where my sense of social justice dwells. But if I am off to the races pronto I am going to miss something. I am going to charge into the fray fueled by the voices of the oppressors and abusers who live inside me. The internalized aggressors.

Now it is a miracle, that I have reached the point in my personal growth where those demons who live inside me as internalized homophobia, the poisonous pedagogy of white supremacy, all the "isms"—it's a miracle that I have been able to more or less stop those things from destroying

me, and harness their energy for social justice rampaging. That is an alchemy. That is a turning of lead into gold. But, at the end of the day, it is using the tools and ways of the oppressor.

My creator gave me other gifts. Mostly forgotten. Because they are mostly not invited to the fast-food table of twenty-first century life. It is very hard for those gifts to take root in the world. To find my way back to the gifts of my creator an image was given me.

I am a child holding a Kaleidoscope. What does a child do when a child looks into a Kaleidoscope? They take in the play of form and let what they see move them. Create in their body, feelings of delight, and joy, and amusement. We love that kind of play of forms. When it comes to taking in fear and death and suffering, adults freeze up and shut down and disassociate from their bodies. Children, most of the time are more courageous and more authentic. They express what they are moved to express.

When I was a child. I just knew instinctively, in my body, with my DNA, that my place in creation was to take in, and to witness and to experience and to express.

Ouch!

Sometimes that hurts.

A lot.

Eventually, when I was that child looking through that kaleidoscope, after I just looked long enough without having to think through anything, no induction or deduction needed, I would feel arise within me an understanding of what I was seeing that included and transcended the fragments, included the break up and change of it all.

We might call that a Gestalt, a *Weltanshaung*, or reach further in our re-legio and call it a sense of cosmology.

Two years ago I read, *The Dark Night Of The Soul* by Saint John of the Cross in order to begin to make peace with seven years of depression I had finally come out of. The book was so beautiful, but Saint John of the Cross kept calling us “creatures.”

“What the hell,” I said to the book. “I am not any creature. That was ridiculous. I am from the “Me” generation 1970s. Where we all wanted to be gods. Artist gods, Business gods, Political gods. To quote one of the most notorious citizens of heaven, our message to the universe was, “I will not serve.” I can’t speak for everyone, but in those days having any humility just felt like the humiliation we experienced being bullied and gay bashed. So many of us wanted to erase that by becoming god-like. We no longer understand cosmology. Many of us thought we were cosmology.

A couple of weeks ago, the dean of the Pacific School of religion, Dr. Susan Abraham reflected in our “Reimagining Democracy” class (and I am paraphrasing): “We need cosmology right now. We need to re-find and re-know our right place in creation. We are creatures. God’s creatures.”

And she smiled when she said that.

I don’t know exactly what that smile meant, but what I felt from it was that it is beautiful to feel humble, and to take one’s proper place in creation and cosmology. There is not humiliation or shame in it. We do not need knowledge that will make us like gods. Apples were never my favorite fruit come to think of it.

What happens when we step down from our celestial thrones and take our proper place in creation as one of God’s creatures? For me, I find myself in the presence of apophatic mystery. And I need to cultivate a capacity to hold and honor that mystery. Joyful mysteries. Sorrowful mysteries. Luminous mysteries.

That’s where I need to start.

Before I let the social justice adult be inspired by Jeramiah calling out sin, disparity and injustice, or by Jesus in a fury overturning the tables of the moneylenders, I need to first spend time with Elijah in the cave as he listens to silence. I need to be Job hearing about the whirlwind and realizing that neither he nor I was there on the first day personally running the unfolding of creation and setting it *raison d’etre* in motion.

I need to be Jesus kneeling in soul searching torment on the Mount of Olives while the apostles sleep. I need to let my eyes be his eyes as I look up into the night sky and ask, “Why? Why? Why” but then to let the alchemy of faith turn those words into a prayer and an acceptance of mystery that does not demand an answer.

I need be Mary and the foot of the cross pondering the un-ponderable, contemplating, holding it all in my heart. Holding everything. Seeing everything.

My favorite Crucifixion painting is by the Italian Mannerist, Tintoretto. He does not show us the event of the Crucifixion in close-up, as is art history usual. We see it occur in the context of cosmology. We see how it effects all creation. (It’s a big painting by the way.)

Once I have made a place in my heart for mystery and once I have taken my proper place as a creature in God’s creation, then I can go out to call out and to overturn tables. And hopefully from my contemplative moments there will be born a kind of compassion and holding capacity within me that might make a difference when I reach across the table to the “enemy” and the “other.” To demand fairness and equanimity.

Hold up though....

There is a more important reason for me to understand that no matter how many transcendent themes I find in all the fragments of this time of coronavirus, no matter how much I get everything linked and joined and arranged, there still must be mystery.

Here is why.

Mystery is the threshold through which God enters and leans in to love his creatures.

To love us.

Me.

This pandemic is my second time at the rodeo. I lived through the AIDs years. From 1982 until 1995 I was consumed with worry and fear, and grief and anger. And I would have been consumed by the virus itself except that medication was invented just in time to save my life.

But not the lives of so many people I loved.

I hope I am not being disrespectful to the coronavirus pain and suffering I hear about and see all around me when I tell you I am experiencing a gift in being back at the rodeo. In the AIDS years, I was consumed by intense visceral feelings. And today, something strange has happened. I have been through these feelings before and this time I am able to find some space around them. Because I am a little used to them.

In that spaciousness there is mystery.

And before I can open my mouth and fill up that mystery with, "This is not fair, God! How could you?"...before I can get those works out, the spaciousness within me fills with mystery and a door opens and I am being leaned into with such love.

It is a call. And my body knows how to respond before my mind gets in the way. I open up to the love, and gratitude wells up in me for every second I have lived, and everyone I have had the honor to love, and everything I have ever felt. Even the hard stuff.

I am now looking up with love and awe and wonder and whispering,

"I am a creature. And this is cosmology."

I enter into the mystery.

Man of 1000 faces and 1000 pens, William Martin has, over time and across space, flowed through the identities of Playwright, Clinical Writer, Screen Writer, Memoir Writer & now Theologian. At this very moment he is preparing book 3 and 4 of his series, San Francisco: The Luxury of Eccentricity.