

Relationships and How to Survive within Them, Rev Linda Simmons, June 23, 2019

The strain on relationships in today's world is increasing as is our sense of loneliness and alienation. We have more communication with others now than we ever had before, we are connected through facebook and Instagram and tweets, connected in ways we have never been, and yet suffer from lack of connection as a people in ways quite new to this time and place.

I had a riveting conversation at the hairdressers the other day, gabbing with customers and hair stylists about social media. The consensus after the rowdy jokes and personal asides (salons incite intimacy and laughter in many of us) was that social media is making us more prone to comparison, posturing, and disconnecting with the end game being to distinguish ourselves from others, while desperately hungry for more likes than anyone else gets. We are becoming people who tend toward posturing amid a deepening loneliness.

A social media connection to the world, its constant stream of news and pictures and tweets, breeds a lack of the restfulness, a pacing through now, a worried incapacity for intimacy and vulnerability.

There is no place to become lost, to dream, to bump into a stranger who does not look or sound like us and take the time to find the places that we look and sound so similar.

In all of this drive to stay informed about friends, the world, the news that we hate but cannot stop reading, I find that I am worn down, spent, too tired to engage the rules of communication in the present.

The other day Gary asked me how I was, and I treated it like a trick question!

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations."¹ How many times these days do you get intentionally lost in thought or location and through this discover not only yourself but everyone else too? For me, these times are becoming increasingly fewer.

We could say, *Just Disconnect*, which sound similar to *Just Say No*. Neither address both the longing for meaning or the social, physical and environmental collapse of connection.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, **Walden** (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1960), 118.

Makes me want to zone out with facebook for a minute just thinking through it all!

For me the question becomes, how to live in right relationship with self and others?

To determine how to get at what right relationship might entail, I read up on different kinds of ethical schools. There are Virtue Ethics which is person rather than action based: it looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather at the consequences of particular actions. If the person acting is a virtuous person, then the action must be good.

Then there are situational ethics, contending that moral judgments must be made within the context of the entirety of a situation. The guiding framework for moral decision making is acting in the most loving way, to maximize harmony and reduce discord, or to enrich human existence.

Then there is the ethic of individualism which holds that the primary concern of morality is the individual, rather than society as a whole, and that morality concerns individual flourishing, rather than one's interactions with others.

And of course for the Buddhists right action is a practice in which the least harm is done to self and others.

But this is all tricky isn't it? Defining right relationship is not always clean cut. How do we show up for others and ourselves when needs are conflicting, which they so often are?

I have a friend who is married to an alcoholic and whose alcoholism is the center of her world and his. Like most relationships that swirl around this disease when it is unnamed and untreated, there is little room for anyone or thing else. I have watched this disease consume her and her children while she refuses to get help that is all around her in the form of al-anon and therapy.

What is right relationship for me in this context? Do I tell her, who feels so victimized, and that until she seeks knowledgeable guidance, she and her children will always be victims? Or do I recognize that her reflection lives in me too, that in my first marriage my husband was an addict as was my father and I know what it is to fail and be lost in the same world? Or both, or neither?

The ethic of individualism advises me to walk away: too painful, too much denial and no willingness to take responsibility. Virtue ethics asks me to remain and practice the virtue of compassion; situational ethics wants me to consider not only what is not happening but what is happening and why and who I am within it; the Buddhists would ask me what does

the least harm to her and myself. It is not always easy to untangle these webs. No wonder we prefer facebook & twitter!

There is a biblical story about the road to Jericho. This road was notorious for being dangerous. Many lost their lives on this road, of cliffs and sharp curves, after being robbed and beaten. Jericho, where this treacherous road led, is one of the earliest continuous settlements in the world, dating perhaps from about 9000 bce. By about 8000 bce the inhabitants had grown into an organized community.

The size of this settlement justifies the use of the term *town* and suggests a population of some 2,000–3,000 persons. There is evidence in Jericho of very early agriculture from grains of cultivated types of wheat and barley which have been found. It is highly probable that, to provide enough land for cultivation, irrigation had been invented. This first Neolithic culture of Palestine was a purely indigenous development.

One can see why risking this dangerous road was worth it. Jericho is one of our first example of intentional community, of plans beyond family and tribe, of design for the common good.

The biblical story of the road to Jericho It goes like this, more or less:

There was a Jewish man on a journey to Jericho, walking down Jericho Road. As he was walking down the road, he was beat up, left on the side of the road, stripped of all his clothes, had everything stolen and was left to die. And then a priest came by, saw the man on the side of the road, maybe said a silent prayer, hopes and prayers, prayers that he gets better. Maybe saw the man on the side of the road and surmised that it was ordained by God for this particular man, this particular group to be on the side of the road, there's nothing I can do to change it.²

After the priest walked by, maybe a politician walked by....saw the man on the side of the road and saw how beat up the man was, saw that the man was a victim of violence, or fleeing violence. And the politician decided, "You know what? Instead of welcoming this man in, let's build a wall. Maybe the politician said, "Maybe this man chose to be on the side of the road." That if he just pulled himself up by his bootstraps, despite his boots being stolen, and got himself back on the horse, he could be successful, and there's nothing I could do." And then finally... a good Samaritan came by, saw the man on the side of the road and looked and saw not centuries of hatred between Jews and Samaritans, looked and saw not his fears reflected, not economic anxiety, not "what's going to happen to me because things are changing and I know not what helping another will lead to" but looked and saw a reflection of himself. He saw his neighbor; he saw his common humanity. He

²https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_tubbs_the_political_power_of_being_a_good_neighbor?utm_source=newsletter_daily&utm_campaign=daily&utm_medium=email&utm_content=image_2019-06-14#t-511822

didn't just see it, he did something about it.”³ He saw himself in this man. He noticed his own reflection.⁴

But there is something about this road to Jericho. “This Jericho Road is narrow, it's conducive for ambushing...a man on the side of the road wasn't abnormal. Wasn't strange. And in fact, it was something that was structured to happen, it was supposed to happen”⁵ and it did.

With all that is going on this world, are we getting used to rage, anger, dismissal, less than human responses to error, miscommunication, and even differences of opinion or ways of living one's lives. Is this road structured for ambush, the ambush of empathy, of knowing that we are all part on one another, that in each of us lives a piece of who we all are?

How do we decide what is necessary to say and do, even when it is hard?

I think the ethic of interconnection is the only way toward right action and it is a way that has nothing spelled out, no morals or virtues codified for all time, no clear understanding of harm or lack of harm to hold us up. I consider it to be the only reflection that asks us to look at ourselves and others and see us are one people, one family, and that together we have built one another's landscapes through time and ancestry and culture and despair and love.

And then, and only then, when we know that we are not lying by the side of this road at this time only because it is not yet our time to lie here, and when we know too that we are not judging the ones on the side of the road because it is not our time to do so, not because we are unvirtuous, only then are we ready to consider what is ours to do next.

Karen Armstrong in her book The Spiral Staircase writes about the damage of caused her from being a nun for 8 years and how she left the order and Catholicism and went to University and through a long and difficult road, found her way back to religion, but a new kind of religion.

She writes, “Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave in a certain way, you will be transformed.”⁶

³Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Karen Armstrong, The Spiral Staircase (New York: Random House, 2014), 270.

When we put our interconnection at the center of our considerations, we risk seeing ourselves in another, which can burn like a hot coal in the hand, leaving marks on our skin. It is easier to put ourselves above others. We stay clean, untouched, unbroken. When we have faith in the interconnection that forms not only an ethic but a container into which we can fall and be comforted, even loved, this can intentionally blur the distance between you and me, while never erasing our authenticity and integrity.

What does the ethic of interconnection ask of me in terms of my friend? That I recognize that she is where she is because of a disease that follows family lines like at GPS and to balance this with the understanding that she too has responsibility to name where she is and how she got there so she can begin to heal. And that I, with so many intersections to her and her story, have parts of her within me and that the self that judges her must live in balance with all other understandings.

And then, with no mandates of what to do next, to risk becoming lost in these recognitions, to meandering inside of them not seeking solutions for a short time, gazing out the window, recognizing complexity, walking along the sea that connects us all and letting the wind, waves, time, ancestry, hope and connection change me, not her, but me. And then, only then, consider what is mine to do next.

Karen Armstrong writes that, "The purpose (of faith) is to compel us to act in such a way that we bring out our own heroic potential."⁷ Responding to the ethic of interconnection is heroic. It creates confusion and questions boundaries and leaves us undone.

We can know what is right to do next when we see everyone on the road to Jericho, as part of who we are, both the ones beaten and the ones who walk away with self-righteous justification. And this journey we must make, we know it in our bones, arriving is worth the risk.

The people we most frequently expose within ourselves on social media are one dimensional, typically narrated from strength and courage or ease and simplicity. We need more from one another, we need the complexity that asks us to wander in the connectivity we share, in the unknowing, in the lost spaces that have no easy guidelines summarized by hashtags, that suspend judgment knowing that within us that we all on the road to Jericho one way or another, and that Jericho, intentional community, is worth the risk.

May we all take more time to wonder and wander and so find one other in the field where judgments are only used when they lead us closer to the divinity in ourselves and others.

Amen.

⁷ Armstrong, 270.