

Loving Ourselves, Facing Death,
Confessing White Supremacy:
Seeing Reality and Growing Up

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John 9: 1-12

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The poet, Derek Walcott, died not too long ago. Here's one of his poems, *Love After Love*.

The time will come
When with elation
You will greet yourself arriving
in your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say sit. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was yourself.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
For another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes
Peel your own image from the mirror
Sit. Feast on your life.

A stranger loves you. A stranger who has always known you. A stranger who has loved you your entire life. You know nothing about the stranger. You have ignored the stranger. But the stranger knows you by heart. And loves you.

The time will come when you will see the stranger. With elation you will welcome the stranger through your door into your home. And you will recognize the stranger.

You. You are the stranger. You have ignored you. You have not known you. You have not loved you.

The time will come when you will welcome you home. With a smile. And give wine. Give bread. You will give your heart back to itself. And you will no longer be a stranger to yourself.

Some years ago I had an insight. It seems so simple and obvious now, but it was a big deal at the time. I realized, I am the person with whom I will spend the most time in my life. I will spend more time with me than with anyone else. Far more time.

Like I said, simple and obvious. But here's the big deal. I realized, if I am going to spend that much time with me, then I need to see me. Clearly and truthfully. I need to know me. Deeply and intimately. I need to love me. Fiercely and tenderly.

I realized, I am a stranger to me, and I don't want to be a stranger to me. I don't want to go through life not seeing, not knowing, not loving the person with whom I will spend the most time.

That realization changed my life.

In our spiritual tradition, we experience God as love. One of the most profound ways we can experience God is by loving the person with whom we will spend the most time in our life, and by accepting love from that person. To see ourselves, clearly and truthfully. To know ourselves, deeply and intimately. To love ourselves, fiercely and tenderly. To no longer be a stranger to ourselves.

I have found that many people have difficulty seeing, knowing and loving themselves. Some hardly see, know or love themselves at all. They really are strangers to themselves. Few people seem to take the time to intentionally see, know and love themselves.

But what is it to go through life hardly seeing, knowing or loving the person with whom one will spend the most time? It seems like a great loss. To go through life largely blind to oneself, a stranger to oneself, is to squander a most valuable gift. It is a wasted opportunity, always present, to experience fierce and tender love. One's love for one's self. It is a wasted opportunity to experience God.

Don't be a stranger to yourself. See yourself. Know yourself. Give your heart back to you. May your love for you be one of the ways you experience God in this world. One of the ways you see God in this world.

Janet Wellwood offers another insight, an insight into the nature of life itself.

My friends, let's grow up.

Let's stop pretending we don't know the deal here.

Or if we truly haven't noticed, let's wake up and notice.

Look: everything that can be lost will be lost.

It's simple—how could we have missed it for so long?

Let's grieve our losses fully, like ripe human beings,
but please, let's not be so shocked by them.

Let's not act so betrayed.

As though life had broken her secret promise to us.

Impermanence is life's only promise to us.

And she keeps it with ruthless impeccability.

Everything that exists is impermanent. All who are born eventually die. Including us. Including every other person we love.

All of us will die. Everyone we love will die. This is a bitter pill to swallow. Not just the reality of death, the cold reality of our non-existence, but the process of dying itself. The process of our own dying—what we imagine what our dying might look like, how it might feel, how others might witness it—the process of our own dying agitates us with unsettling thoughts and feelings. Thoughts and feelings we don't like to think or feel.

Yet swallowing that bitter pill, facing the reality of impermanence, facing the reality of dying and death, is a necessary part of growing up. One grows and matures as one fully faces the reality of dying and death. My dying and death. The dying and death of others. Avoiding the reality of dying and death by creating fantasies about it, trying to wish it away, ignoring it, repressing it, down-playing it, being blind to it, keeps us in an immature state.

Many of us were deeply moved and inspired by Chuck Jackson, by the way Chuck lived his dying and faced his death. Chuck fully accepted the reality of his death, and the reality of the process of dying. Chuck shared that he experienced some fears around dying of lung cancer. He feared it might be a long and agonizing process. But he also understood that his fear was a natural human response to the process of dying, so he accepted the fear. In fully accepting, feeling and sharing his fear, in owning up to death's inevitability, Chuck was able to experience a profound curiosity about death as well. An openness to death. A trust in death.

Chuck was grown up. That's how he moved and inspired me—being in the presence of a grown-up man. A man who really saw, knew and loved himself. A man who saw, knew and loved me. A man who lived his life as fully as he could while being fully aware that he was dying.

My friends, let us grow up.

Let us stop pretending we don't know the deal here.

Death is real.

Let's love ourselves and live our lives more fully because we know that death is real. Because we know that death will happen to each one of us. And let's love one another and live with one another more fully because we know that death is real. Because we know that every person we love not only will die, but *could* die at any time, in any moment.

Ouch! Knowing that hurts! But that hurt makes life more precious.

And yes, how painfully it hurts when someone precious to us dies. Especially someone too young. Someone too unexpectedly. Someone we feel we cannot live without. There's no greater pain on earth.

Let us "grieve our losses fully, like ripe human beings."

Let us see that dying, death and grief are inevitable. They are not a betrayal of life, but a part of the ongoing expression and unfolding of life. And it is far better to see reality for what it is, than to be blind to it and feel betrayed by it.

James Baldwin also saw a relationship between seeing reality and growing up.

This past, the Negro's past,...this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity,...yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering...but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they really are. ...It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your children to hate...I am proud of these people not because of their color but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and beauty. This country should be proud of them, too, but, alas, not many people in this country even know of their existence. And the reason for this ignorance is that a knowledge of the role these people played—and play—in American life would reveal more about America to Americans than Americans wish to know.

"People who cannot suffer can never grow up." Baldwin is referring to white people who are avoiding suffering, in contrast to black people who have learned how to suffer without hating, who have learned how to suffer without teaching their black children to hate the white people who are oppressing them.

People who can refrain from hating those who hate them, people who can refrain from teaching their children to hate those who are subjugating them, are people with great spiritual force and beauty. People who are grown up.

But white America refuses to see the spiritual force and beauty of these black Americans. White America refuses to see black Americans as grownups. White America insists on maintaining its own blindness and ignorance.

“And the reason for this ignorance,” Baldwin writes, “is that a knowledge of the role these (black) people played—and play—in American life would reveal more about America to (white) Americans than (white) Americans wish to know.”

In other words, white Americans do not want to see, do not want to acknowledge, do not want to confess the reality of white racism, of white supremacy, of their brutal and violent subjugation of black people.

Why? Because doing so will make white Americans suffer.

To clearly see, to fully acknowledge, to truthfully confess the brutal and violent reality of slavery, Jim Crow, the terror of lynching, segregation, separate and unequal, will cause suffering for white America. To fully avow what white America has done, and is still doing, to black America will cause more suffering for white Americans than white Americans are willing to bear. White America is committed to remaining blind and ignorant. White America is committed to avoiding this suffering.

And what did Baldwin say about growing up? People who cannot suffer can never grow up. What does that say about white America? What does that say about the maturity of white America?

James Baldwin offered not only a searing critique of the times in which he lived, he offered a prophetic vision for the future of America, which is the time in which we now live. White America has still not grown up. White America is still for the most part blind. White America still refuses to clearly see, fully acknowledge and truthfully confess the brutality and violence with which we have subjugated black America, and still do to this day.

As Christians, we have faith that Christ can give sight to the blind. But what does that really mean? In John’s Gospel, we have learned not to take much of the imagery Christ uses literally. Being born again doesn’t mean being physically born again. Living water is not the water we draw from a well and drink with a cup. So maybe blindness and sight do not necessarily mean physical blindness and physical sight. Maybe like rebirth and water, giving sight to the blind can mean different types of blindness and different types of sight.

Derek Walcott, Janet Wellwood and James Baldwin all describe different types of blindness and different types of sight. Seeing yourself. Seeing how dying, death and grief are inevitable to life. Seeing the brutality and violence of racism and white supremacy, and one’s own guilt in benefitting from it.

Wellwood and Baldwin make an explicit connection between seeing and growing up. To see and face a reality to which we were once blind is to grow in maturity. I have long thought this is what Christ helps us do—to grow up and to become more mature human beings by seeing and facing reality. Including the reality of who we are, the reality of dying and death, the reality of the world in which we live.

I think of Eugene Peterson’s translation of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount where Peterson translates Jesus saying, “In a word what I’m saying is *Grow Up*...live out your God-given identity.”

Your God-given identity includes seeing, knowing and loving yourself.

It includes seeing that dying, death and grief are part of life, and therefore seeing how precious life is, and seeing how you can live your life as fully as you can with those you love.

It includes seeing the reality of brutality and violence in this world, seeing and confessing your guilt in perpetrating it or benefitting from it, seeing those who are suffering from it and caring for them, and seeing what you can do to help stop it.

Let us pray that Christ may give us sight where we are now blind. And in doing so, help us grow up and live out more fully our God-given identity. Help us embody our own spiritual force and beauty.