

Seriously, Julian?

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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

Were these words not so well known as the opening of Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities, I might have been able to convince you that the times to which they refer are our own rather than the late 18th century.

Nonetheless, to many, our present political reality is indeed either the best or worst of times we have known. To say that times are tense would be an understatement akin to those words Hollywood wrote for the crew of Apollo 13, "Houston, we have a problem."

It can be hard to imagine a way out, let alone a way through, the chaos and tension of our time. The lack of clarity around what's happening is disorienting. The lack of control is maddening. And a pervading sense of doom ever risks sliding into despair.

While we can and do scroll through headlines and click on links sent by equally worried friends in search of some glimmer of hope, we might consider looking elsewhere...

"All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." These words of the English mystic Julian of Norwich, have provided solace to countless people through the centuries. Not that she doesn't have her fair share of skeptics too. Indeed, a common response to her famous words from many modern people is not an expression of relief, but more along the lines of, "Seriously, Julian?" For indeed, all is not well and it is hard to see how they might ever be.

Given the times it is easy for us to dismiss Julian's optimism, especially if we imagine her as a naive theist who believed in an anthropomorphized God who chooses to intervene or prevent some tragedies and not others and whose track record for rewarding good and punishing evil seems, at best, mixed.

But Julian lived in 14th century England, in Norwich. Students of history may recall the the city suffered a devastating outbreak of the Black Death in the mid-14th century, followed by the Peasants' Revolt, and the suppression of a proto-Protestant religious group who were followers of John Wycliffe. And Julian herself, aged 30, fell so seriously ill she thought she was on her deathbed. Whatever else 14th century England may have been, it was certainly not the best of times to be alive.

Yet in "The Revelations of Divine Love", said to be the first surviving book written by a woman in English, she is heard urging the reader to see our human vulnerability as an opportunity and occasion for hope. Suggesting all shall be well doesn't mean we shall not be perturbed, troubled, or even distressed, but rather we shall not be overcome.

A similar sentiment is echoed in these words from the Jewish tradition, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." [Words commonly attributed to the Talmud but, according to Rabbi Rami Shapiro, more accurately described as a loose translation of commentary on a portion of the Pirke Avot, which is itself a commentary on Micah 6:8].

Notice that both traditions point to eventualities we often rigidly conceptualize and then struggle with or against in our present lives. Julian says, "All shall be well...." and the commentary from the Jewish tradition suggests the completion of the work of justice, mercy, and humility without saying when. We struggle because we've not been invited to the planning meeting, been asked to take charge, or develop the timeline.

In short these proclamations and teachings frustrate because they remind us we've not been given control over life, but simply the privilege of participation. A privilege the late Joseph Campbell, noted mythologist, writer, and lecturer, urged, we embrace. "Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.", Campbell advised, adding, "We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy.

This is, in effect, what Julian and the commentary from the Jewish tradition urge as well.

The idea, of course, is not to delight in the suffering of the world, but to live from an awareness of what makes the world so lovely, even in the midst of all that is wrong.

And what makes the world so lovely?

According to the late poet and spiritual teacher Macrina Wiederkehr, it is that, "somewhere it hides a well."

Wells, as you might imagine, carry potent spiritual meaning, symbolizing everything from abundance to wisdom to life itself. In various spiritual traditions wells represent the gathering of community and connection with the divine. They remind us of life's depth and mystery and that there is more to all of us and this (life) than meets the eye.

Recall in our story for all ages after the thieves have taken all the jewelry and money they could find from the travelers, they demanded, "Anyone with more jewels, riches, or dinars, speak now!" The caravan remained silent. And then Abdul, a poor, skinny boy in homespun clothes, steps forward. "I have forty dinars.", he tells the thieves. "You?", they said laughing, "You wish you had riches!"

Of course, Abdul does have riches. And its not the forty dinars hidden in his coat. Abdul knows he has a well within from which he can draw strength and courage in the midst of a frightening ordeal.

Abdul's well is a portal to his deepest self, wherein lies his true wealth and, the story tells us, inspires in the thieves a change of heart that sets them on a new path in search of treasure within.

Each of us, like Abdul, has within us a well, a store of living water continually renewed by the current of life. This "river flowin" in our souls makes the world lovely, pointing as it does, to life's interconnectedness. For our all our individual wells share a common source, hence Mechtild of Magdeburg's insight, "The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures."

We have this wondrous, deep well within us, but we can easily, and understandably, become distracted with life above ground as it were.

And life above ground makes us thirsty. Thirst of course is a form of desire, a craving. Like many cravings we experience in this life, we tend to seek to satisfy our cravings by grasping at temporary things, mirages, if you will, constantly appearing and vanishing along life's horizon, making our attempt at fulfillment or happiness a quick fix at best and often a constant source of frustration. Like the thieves from the story, we find ourselves waiting for the next caravan to pass, taking what we find while half dreaming it will be better than the last haul and half anxious it won't be enough.

The Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg writes, "We can travel a long way and do many things, but our deepest happiness is not born from accumulating new experiences. It is born from letting go of what is unnecessary, and knowing ourselves to be always at home. True happiness may not be at all far away, but it requires a radical change of view as to where to find it."

Thus begins the spiritual quest, which requires an intentional shift in one's gaze and a patient commitment to pay attention or awaken to the life we've buried beneath the efforts and experiences accumulated in our attempt to quench our thirst. In short, we become well seekers. By this time the well within us is often well hidden, obscured by various attachments, labels, or identities we've taken or been given in an attempt to define who we are...job titles, bank balances, degrees, marital status, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, political or religious identities, and so on.

"Letting go of what is unnecessary," as Salzberg suggests, is the discipline of assessing what we believe about ourselves and asking who we really are. It is a process of self examination and discovery, clearing a path to the well hidden within.

As we commit ourselves to this process many of the self identifying, self defining labels and experiences we've held so tightly begin to loosen, taking on the feel of a soft garment worn gently on the body rather than a solid mass of flesh on bone upon which our very existence depends. This transformation begins as we learn to rest in the "isness" of being, "knowing ourselves", as Salzberg writes, "to be always at home."

En route we will recall or encounter people or experiences that point us to or mirror for us the well within, people or experiences that carry the potential to reconnect us in some way with the life-giving, life affirming source we share in common. Thus, whether they present as helpful or harmful, they are all teacher

or guides. For me such people and experiences include a middle school gym teacher who intervened when I was bullied by classmates; a vocational advisor who attempted to undermine me at a critical point in my development; an experience of profound disappointment when an all but certain job opportunity collapsed and another when taking a chance yielded unexpected joy.

Each of these people and experiences, regardless of how helpful or harmful they might have been in the moment, have, upon reflection, been people and experiences that uncovered the well within. My teacher did this by affirming, like the "river flowin in my soul", that I'm somebody. Likewise, the advisor in attempting to undermine me, led me to draw strength from with well within and focus on moving on rather than on the wrong she had done me. The experiences of disappointment and joy reacquainted me with my resiliency and capacity for spontaneity.

From each person and experience I was led and drew from a well filled as the poet writes, "with buckets and buckets of that life-giving drink." A life-giving drink in which I saw my own image reflected back at me, an image of who I really am, a multifaceted, radiant expression of the Divine, that ineffable Source for which any name or concept is but a finger pointing to the moon.

When was the last time somebody saw you...or you saw yourself, as who you really are?

The memory of those individuals and experiences continue to inform my spiritual life and actions today.

"Some experiences are like wells...People create them...they are live-giving...redeeming experiences...drink deeply of the gift within...and then maybe you'll soon discover that you've become what you've received...and then you'll become a well for others to find."

And so it cycles around and we arrive at the place where we began...the spiritual life is like that. Sure we arrive back a little older, maybe a little wiser, tapping into living waters, still occasionally thirsty, but increasingly better able to discover and recognize hidden wells and more willing to be a well for others to find. Drawing from the depths of our wells we find what we need... to do justly, now. Love mercy, now. And walk humbly, now. And so until such time when our various

interpretations of "all shall be well" arrives, let us learn to participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world, and be ourselves wells that make the world so lovely in the best and the worst of times.

May it be so

Amen and Blessed Be