

**A HEART AS WIDE AS THE WORLD**  
**by Forrest Gilmore © 2005**

God said,  
"Say 'We'";  
But I shook my head,  
Hid my hands tight behind my back, and said,  
Stubbornly,  
"I."

God said,  
"Say 'We'";  
But I looked upon them, grisly and all awry.  
Myself in those twisted shapes? Ah, no!  
Distastefully I turned my head away,  
Persisting,  
"They."

God said,  
"Say 'We'";  
But I held my distance. I would not join.  
Carelessly and arrogantly I rejected my place  
With my people.

God said,  
"Say 'We'";  
And I,  
At last,  
Richer by a hoard  
Of years  
And tears,  
Looked into their eyes and found the heavy word  
That bent my neck and bowed my head;  
Like a shamed child then I mumbled low,  
"We,  
God."

- Karle Wilson Baker, adapted

This poem offers to us a profound truth: that the nature of our being is unity, oneness, interconnection. On this planet, in this universe, everyone is included in the circle of existence. To draw a circle with someone or something outside of it would be to

draw that circle too small. As Deepak Chopra has said, “There is no us and them. Only us.”

As I read this poem, I find myself intrigued by the poet’s journey from “I” to “We.” What changed him? What awakened his heart? All we know was that he found himself, “richer by a hoard of years and tears.” Perhaps through all those years and tears, the poet finally began to see himself in those twisted shapes, grisly and all awry. Perhaps he began to see his own life in the reflections of others.

Nasrudin is a wise yet buffoonish jester who is believed to have lived around the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Turkey. Many stories have been told of him teaching us with his humor and foolishness.

In one particular story, a philosopher, having made an appointment to dispute with Nasrudin, called at the appointed hour and found him away from home. Nasrudin had forgotten their plan and was in a teahouse playing table games and telling stories with his friends.

After waiting for some time, the philosopher grew angry. Picking up a piece of chalk, he wrote ‘Stupid Oaf’ on Nasrudin’s door, and left in a huff.

As soon as Nasrudin got home and saw this, he rushed to the philosopher’s house.

“I had completely forgotten our appointment,” he said. “I apologize for not having been home. Of course, I remembered the appointment as soon as I saw that you left your name on my door.”

In the story, Nasrudin teaches us that our projections onto the world are not far off from our own internal preoccupations... that the outside is often closely linked to the inside. In this little tale, Nasrudin lifts a mirror up before the philosopher's eyes. If the philosopher is somewhat perceptive, he might see how his own intolerances can come back to him. And if he is very perceptive, he might see how his own intolerance for others is also an intolerance for himself.

For us to be able to live the values of oneness, the awakening to our connections within the larger world must be matched by an inward journey of wholeness. It is a basic psychological understanding that what we find difficult to accept in others is what we also find difficult to accept in ourselves. Our incapacity to love certain people, whether they are poor or sick or ugly or angry or forgetful or whatever, directly connects with the aversions we have for various parts of our very own souls.

Carl Jung wrote, "That I feed the beggar, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy... all these are undoubtedly great virtues... But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all beggars, the most impudent of all offenders, yea, the very fiend himself – that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness, that I myself am the enemy who must be loved – what then?"

"Myself in those twisted shapes? Ah no!"

Religious conservatives and religious liberals have typically responded differently to these difficult parts of ourselves. The religious conservative tends to view the world and thus him or herself through the lens of good and evil. The good must be encouraged and the evil must be eliminated if possible and suppressed if not. The evil parts of oneself - anger, lust, laziness, pride - must be resisted and repressed.

The religious liberal tends to see the world and thus him or herself in terms of wholeness. Integration is sought rather than repression. Difficult feelings within oneself are to be approached through presence and compassion.

Yet, in the truth of day-to day living and regardless of our theological beliefs, we all repress aspects of ourselves. There are feelings within that can seem too big to handle and repression allows us to shut away those forces for a time. Yet, such is only a temporary reprieve. Such denied inner truths eventually find ways to assert themselves. Twisted and maligned through long-term denial, these inner expressions emerge like mutated monsters ready to pounce.

A classical example is the passive aggressive tendency: the predisposition to reject our own anger. When our anger goes unexpressed, we tend to stab people in the back while wearing a smile. Gossip, sabotage and indirect criticism are our greatest tools for such behavior.

And then there's the repression of sexuality. Countless studies have shown how abstinence only sexuality education doesn't work as well as comprehensive sexuality education for reducing sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy and even sexual activity itself. Forgive me, but despite the many great things the late Pope has done, his policies of sexual repression have fanned the flames of AIDS and clergy sexual abuse in our country and world. And irony of ironies, the divorce rate in the United States is highest in the most religiously conservative states and lowest in of all places, Massachusetts, the first state to legalize gay marriage.

Psychologist Ellen Moore writes, "It is as if our wholeness is 'stalking' us, calling to us, whispering to us to stop resisting its summons. 'The Hound of Heaven' pursues us and nothing satisfies our soul until we allow all the scattered pieces of ourselves to

reunite. To become whole, we must... descend into the fear and pain and uncertainty in order to become who we truly are.”

Nasrudin was outside on his hands and knees below a lantern when a friend walked up. “What are you doing, Nasrudin?” his friend asked. “I’m looking for my key. I’ve lost it.”

So his friend got down on his hands and knees too and they both searched for a long time in the dirt beneath the lantern. Finding nothing, his friend finally turned to him and asked, “Where exactly did you lose it?” Nasrudin replied, “I lost it in the house, but there is more light out here.”

How often do we search for the key to our lives in the light when we know it lies in the darkness?

The poem, *The Well of Grief*, by David Whyte, reads:

“Those who will not slip beneath  
the still surface on the well of grief  
turning downward through its black water  
to the place we cannot breathe  
will never know the source from which we drink,  
the secret water, cold and clear,  
nor find in the darkness glimmering  
the small round coins  
thrown by those who wished for something else.”

There are so many parts of ourselves, hated, feared, that we place within the shadow of our own psyches, in Nasrudin’s dark home, in David Whyte’s well of grief. Yet within this darkness we find the lost key. Beneath the black water, cold and clear are the glimmering round coins.

And the only way in is compassion. From the words of May Sarton: “Love opens the doors into everything, as far as I can see, including and perhaps most of all, the door into one’s own secret, and often terrible and frightening, real self.” Love is Nasrudin’s key into his dark house.

And it is through our presence and compassion to our ever so-frightening self that our fears lose their sway. Psychologist Gay Hendricks shares, “The disowned wolves of our dark inner forests are baying for recognition. Bow to them and watch their ferocity dissolve.”

The Buddhists teach us that integration comes with awareness of and compassion towards but not ownership of these difficult issues. One of my recent awarenesses came in a counseling session in response to my history of repressing anger. For years, I thought I had to get really angry to prove that my fear of anger was no longer a problem. But I recently came to the understanding that I didn’t need to do that. I only had to witness the anger within. We often do that when we’ve repressed something for years... we move to the other extreme. And yet, through simple presence and open-hearted compassion, we can move beyond that wild swing to a place of peace and equanimity.

And such a peace, such an inner integration leads to our own ability to not just love ourselves but to love others. The greater the capacity we have to be present and compassionate to the shadows within ourselves, the greater the capacity we have to widen our circles to include the full human family and ultimately perhaps all of life.

And because of that, I think Jesus was one of the most integrated people ever to live. Jesus was famous for his compassion for the marginalized. He sat and ate with beggars and prostitutes and lepers and tax collectors. I always find it humorous that tax

collectors are included in that list. But, when you know the context, it makes sense. The tax collectors of the day were actually Jews collecting taxes for Rome. They were seen not only as cheats but also as traitors.

And I believe Jesus was able to show such love, to love the sick and the weak and the ugly, because he was able to love the sick and the weak and the ugly within himself. It was not Jesus' supposed purity that made him great but his compassion for his impurity and the impurities of others.

And to such we are called: Wholeness within, Oneness without.

Will this be challenging? Yes. Will this be painful at times? Yes. Will our hearts break with the struggle of it? Yes!

Yet Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy reminds us that, "The heart that breaks open can contain the whole world."

"And I / At last, / Richer by a hoard / Of years / And tears, / Looked into their eyes and found the heavy word / That bent my neck and bowed my head; / Like a shamed child then I mumbled low, / 'We, / God.'"