

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
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Point of Grace, Seeds of Awareness

by Donne Hayden

When I was a child, my dad would occasionally see someone and say with deep feeling, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Said *feelingly* as Dad said it, this phrase reflects a powerful seed of awareness, a seed that makes us grateful and humble when we recognize how *little* we actually have to do with who and what we are, and how easily, that could have been me. I don’t want to detract from our free will; we have that. But our free will operates within the life we are born into; the gifts and liabilities we are born with and the circumstances we are born into—all affect and limit the choices we make.

Said feelingly, “There but for the grace of God go I” means I recognize it could have been *me* in that car wreck; it could have been me born in that tarpaper shack or Brazilian *favela* or Mumbai slum; it could have been me blown to bits by an IED in Iraq; it could have been me addicted to drugs and lying homeless on a sidewalk; it could have been me wasting away with AIDS in an African village. By some lucky accident of birth I was born in this time and place; by some grace that I have done nothing to deserve, I have lived a disease-free life of plenty, undisturbed by falling bombs or raging tsunamis. When I consider the odds against the grace-filled life I have led, I am humbled and awed.

One advantage of living as long as I have is that I can look back over my life and see that I was no angel—I made all the wrong choices I possibly could, given the situation, gifts and

liabilities I was born with. But I can also see points of grace when seeds of awareness were planted in me.

One such seed of awareness was planted when I was a young English teacher in a little town called Cuba, New Mexico; Cuba was located 85 miles northwest of Albuquerque on the eastern edge of the Navajo Reservation. I was one of two Anglos in the school system—everyone else from the Superintendent to the janitors were Hispanic, their families descended from recipients of Land Grants given to the first Spanish explorers by the King of Spain. Our students were about 60% Navajo, 35% Hispanic and a smattering of Anglo missionaries' kids. In northwestern New Mexico in those days, leaders of the Chicano movement resisted the loss of their traditionally held land that was being chewed away, eaten away, flat-out stolen in some cases by the machinations of Anglo politicians and developers. Two years before I went to Cuba, Reis Lopez Tijerina led an armed raid on the Tierra Amarilla courthouse to free prisoners arrested simply for meeting to discuss the problems; during the raid one sheriff's deputy was killed and another wounded. Tijerina became a local hero, though he spent some time in jail. All this is just to let you know how unpopular blond-haired, blue-eyed people were in Cuba, New Mexico in the late 60s & early 70s.

Although people in Cuba were generally quite pleasant to me, I was anxious to please, to be accepted, and I felt uncomfortable being so obviously different, so obviously Anglo. In an attempt to fit in, I dyed my hair dark brown. Of course I could do nothing about my blue eyes. I remember standing at the butcher counter in the local grocery store one day, realizing, "This man behind the counter hates me hates me for my blue eyes." A seed was planted in my awareness—I was hated for something I had nothing to do with. I was hated as representative

of others like me (some of whom *had* done something to be hated for, I acknowledge that). It didn't matter what I did, it didn't matter how kind I was, or how open-minded I was, some people in Northern New Mexico would hate me for my blue eyes. I could not change my genetic inheritance. That was a point of grace in my life when I learned first-hand how it felt to be one of a despised minority. Granted, I could go back to the larger Anglo world and be accepted in a way some people would *never* be accepted. My experience reflected back to me the experience of every black person or Hispanic person or Navajo person who found him/herself in a sea of Anglos. This seed of awareness grew into compassion and empathy for those who are targets of racial and ethnic hatred.

Points of grace; seeds of awareness.

I've been reading a book titled *Fire in the Soul: A New Psychology of Spiritual Optimism*. In it, Dr. Joan Borysenko counsels the reader on how to see the possibility for growth in crisis, how to see suffering as a blessing in disguise, a pathway to growth. She writes, "Psychologists classify people as optimists or pessimists based on how they answer the question 'Why me?'" A pessimist typically responds with "It's all my fault, it's the story of my life, and I mess up everything I do." An optimist, on the other hand, responds with "'I don't know why these bad things happened,' coupled with the faith that the pain . . . will someday be revealed as part of a larger wholeness."¹ An optimist doesn't seek to assign blame but has the attitude "I don't know why; I know there's a reason; I'll make it through; what am I learning?"

I seem to be naturally an optimist, but not through anything I have done on my own. I was apparently born this way, just as I was born with blue eyes and a birthmark on the back of

¹ Joan Borysenko, *Fire in the Soul: A New Psychology of Spiritual Optimism* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1993), pages 26-27.

my calf. In the same way, a person who is pessimistic must have been born that way. People with clinical depression caused by chemical imbalances in the brain—they were born that way. I look at a beloved family member who has, all her life, endured various illnesses, struggling with depression and negative self-concepts. She, like others who inherited or learned negativity from those who brought them into the world, must deal with whatever life throws at them without that cushion of optimism. It is easy to say “Be optimistic,” just as it is easy to say, “Have blue eyes” or “Be skinny.” Much more difficult to make it happen, especially if one’s brain chemistry or natural inclination leans toward pessimism. This understanding led to this seed of awareness: I can take no credit for being a fairly well-adjusted optimist—it comes from nothing I have done—innate optimism is a gift of grace. I am humbled and grateful for that gift.

Points of grace; seeds of awareness.

Yesterday at the meeting of what we decided to call the Southwest Ohio Fellowship of Friends, we discussed the theological gap between conservatives and liberals in Wilmington Yearly Meeting, Friends United Meeting and elsewhere. Later, in preparing this message, I was reminded of studies that came out last year on a link between genes political views. I remember reading several articles on the subject, like this one by Howie Klein in *The Huffington Post* from February 2008:

*A fascinating new study from the British weekly scientific magazine, New Scientist brings up the question on its front cover, "Two Tribes: Are Your Genes Liberal or Conservative?" It delves into the serious scientific research on the formation of political opinions."*²

² Howie Klein, “The Liberal Mind vs the Conservative Mind -- Genetic?” *The Huffington Post* website, February 10, 2008. Accessed 14 Nov 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/howie-klein/the-liberal-mind-vs-the-c_b_85898.html

A quote from that study gives “a rather unflattering view of conservatives,” who are “portrayed as dogmatic, routine-loving individuals, while liberals come across as free-spirited and open-minded folk.” Klein then cites an earlier study conducted in 2003 by John Jost, a psychologist at New York University. Jost and his colleagues

surveyed 88 studies, involving more than 20,000 people in 12 countries, that looked for a correlation between personality traits and political orientation (American Psychologist, vol 61, p 651). . . . People who scored highly on a scale measuring fear of death, for example, were almost four times more likely to hold conservative views. Dogmatic types were also more conservative, while those who expressed interest in new experiences tended to be liberals. . . .

...A much stronger link exists between political orientation and openness, which psychologists define as including traits such as an ability to accept new ideas, a tolerance for ambiguity and an interest in different cultures. When these traits are combined, people with high openness scores turn out to be almost twice as likely to be liberals.³

Here is the most telling part of the article for me, and one that planted a seed of awareness in me about discussing politics OR religion with anyone:

The story suggests that it's probably pointless to try to change most people's minds about politics. According to an emerging idea, political positions are substantially determined by biology and can be stubbornly resistant to reason. “These views are deep-seated and built into our brains. Trying to persuade someone not to be liberal is like trying to persuade someone not to have brown eyes”⁴

³ Klein.

⁴ Klein.

I assume one runs into the same difficulty trying to persuade someone not to be conservative or dogmatic.

Another researcher, James Fowler, a political science professor at UC San Diego, said *“the study added to the growing research suggesting that over millions of years, humans have developed two cognitive styles—conservative and liberal. Cautious conservatives prevented societies from taking undue risks, while more flexible liberals fostered cooperation.”* Fowler added, *“For the species to survive, you need both.”*⁵ Perhaps the same is true of faith and religion. Perhaps we need each other.

Apparently liberalism is a recessive gene in my family since I’m the only liberal we’ve got; guess I’m a genetic throwback. I don’t want to discredit the role that nurture and opportunity play, things that allow us to grow beyond our genetic tendencies, but I would like to think that even if I had stayed in Clovis, New Mexico and become a telephone operator, I would have been different from the majority of people there, the political and theological conservatives who predominate where I grew up. I would like to think that I would have experienced certain points of grace when seeds of awareness were planted that led to the opening of my eyes, my mind, and my heart.

One such seed was a direct encounter with the Divine, which occurred not in any way I could have anticipated—I was unchurched and far from organized religion—but it happened in such a way that I could never again doubt that someone in a very high place knew and cared about what I was doing. Not judging, just watching and caring, noticing. That seed, planted in

⁵ “Are You a Born Conservative (or Liberal)? *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 2008. *Los Angeles Times* website, articles.latimes.com/2008/sep/19/science/sci-politics19 Sunday, September 28, 2008

me when I was about 28, has continued to mature over the span of my life—it was a good seed, giving me strength during difficult times.

From that one seed, many insights have sprouted, such as awareness that, at some level, we are not separate from each other but part of each other. One day about ten years ago, I was walking down a city sidewalk in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Approaching me were three young black men. The one in the center captured my attention—something in the way he moved, a loose, casual, confident, jaunty, athleticism. Deep in the throes of middle-age myself, I wondered, “What would it be like to be that young man, to be so sure of one’s body?”

Suddenly, in a way I cannot explain, I **was** the young man. I suddenly found myself inside his head, looking out his eyes. I saw the white-haired woman walking toward me, but I was more conscious of the two young men on either side of me, conscious that I must not let them know I was afraid, conscious that I must keep up my guard and my pretense of cool. Inside that young man’s skin, for that brief moment, the overwhelming feeling was fear and uncertainty. And then suddenly, I was me again, passing the young men on the sidewalk.

Two understandings came from this encounter: first absolute certainty that appearances can be deceiving; and second, the dawning acceptance that there is no true separation between me and anyone or anything else in creation—we are all **one** in the great Unity of Creativity, the Source of Life and Love.

It *is* me⁶ in that car wreck; it *is* me born in that tarpaper shack or Brazilian *favela* or Mumbai slum; it *is* me blown to bits in Iraq; it *is* me addicted to drugs and lying homeless on a sidewalk; it *is* me wasting away with AIDS in an African village. It *is* me, too, insisting that war is

⁶ As a former English teacher, I must offer this disclaimer: I know that to be grammatically correct, I should say “It is I,” but when spoken aloud, that sounds awkward and pretentious to me.

necessary, that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, and that Jesus died for our sins. Perhaps, however,—and I hope this is true—all those other “aspects” or “forms” of me share, at some deep, deep level, my awareness of being surrounded by endless grace we’ve done nothing to deserve and being held by the boundless Love that permeates Creation.