

Repairing the World

Four years ago, my friend Tom Davis, who teaches Asian Humanities at a high school in Colorado, fulfilled a lifelong dream to go to India. An intellectual, a Buddhist and a man of great compassion, Tom also is an extremely fluent communicator and loves to talk about ideas. When he came back from India, however, he was almost literally speechless, at least about his experiences there. It took him several months to find ways to express what happened. When he did recount some of his stories to me, he mentioned especially the beggars. He said that, though it was against all he believed, he learned to not look at them, to not respond, but to move as quickly as he could through the gauntlet of beggars that appeared everywhere his tour group went. Then one day, as he emerged from the tour bus and began to move through the crowd, Tom tripped over something and fell to his hands and knees. To his horror, he found himself staring into the eyes of a beggar—a legless beggar who lay on his back on a small board with wheels under it. At first Tom was shocked and experienced an odd assortment of feelings-- shame, humiliation, embarrassment. Unwilling to meet the beggar's eyes, he couldn't avoid it. "The strangest thing happened when I looked into his eyes," Tom told me. "Something passed between us. All I saw was a human being, and he *saw me see* him. He seemed utterly delighted. He was toothless and foul-smelling, but when he smiled, his eyes were beautiful." I'll come back to this later.

Mumbai, Gaza, Darfur, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Rwanda, Iraq—places rife with human suffering. I believe we're not meant to know as much about the suffering in the world as we do; we're not equipped; our shoulders are not broad enough, our spirits not strong enough to bear it all. We each encounter suffering in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. Granted, our suffering in this safe and wealthy nation is different in kind and degree, but it is enough for

us to bear as individuals. *No one* should have to suffer as people are suffering in many places on the planet. If you are led to do more about suffering you hear of, if you are led to give time and money to a cause, to attend meetings, rallies, and demonstrations, I encourage you to follow your conscience and do so. But if you are overwhelmed with the knowledge of it, if you feel helpless and numb, if you feel guilty because you are not suffering as much, or guilty because you cannot leave your own family to go work with the American Friends Service Committee, Christian Peacemakers, or Doctors Without Borders, I encourage you to focus on being the best human being you can be, here, now, in this place, with the people around you.

I've addressed this topic before, but some things bear repeating. Dr. Wayne Dyer and other experts in mental, spiritual and emotional health advise us to take a break from the news. If we listen all the time to accounts of all the violence and suffering occurring on the planet, we become first depressed and then, in self-defense, desensitized. Anxiety about things we cannot change overwhelms our lives. To the extent it does that, we become another victim of suffering elsewhere. If you watch or listen to the news only a few times a week instead of every day, believe me, you won't miss a thing; the media repeats the same information over and over. If you do think you've missed an essential bit of information, you can always find it online.

One snippet of wisdom from the New Testament advises against pointless anxiety, even two thousand years ago, long before we had access to newspapers, television news, and the Internet to help us worry. In Matthew 6:25-27, Jesus advises his disciples against succumbing to anxiety. (Jesus Seminar scholars rate these verses pink, which means they have determined that these are probably words Jesus actually spoke.¹)

¹ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, page 151-152.

“Don’t fret about your life—what you’re going to eat and drink—or about your body—what you’re going to wear. There is more to living than food and clothing, isn’t there? . . . Can any of you add one hour to life by fretting about it?”

The passage ends with an editorial comment from the gospel writer, who adds these lines: “So don’t fret about tomorrow. Let tomorrow fret about itself. The troubles that the day brings are enough.” (You may recognize this as the sentiment expressed more poetically in the King James Version: “Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof.”)

Obviously this advice is “addressed to those who are preoccupied with day-to-day existence rather than with political or apocalyptic crises,”² but as individuals, we can no more affect events in the rest of the world today in our time than they could in their time. We still must deal with acquiring food, shelter and clothing, though as beneficiaries of life in a wealthy nation, our task may shift to *not* focusing too much of our time and energy on acquiring these things. As individuals, however, we can do only so much toward “repairing the world.”

One consequence of having so much information about so much suffering in so many different places around the world is that we become immobilized and neglect suffering near us, suffering we might actually be able to help alleviate. Here in our own city, for instance, is violence and suffering. Here, in our own city, we could perhaps do some good by getting involved in local efforts to address violence and its related causes like poverty. For instance, on Feb. 21, some other Quakers in Cincinnati are inviting anyone interested to attend a brunch at the home Linda Coppock to “explore a Quaker response to urban violence and homicides in our city.” That is the same day as the Wilmington Mini-Yearly meeting, but I am inclined to go to the brunch, and with the permission of the Meeting, I will. I hope some of you will also be able to be there—I know Dean is planning to be. Instead of fretting about international suffering, in places where we aren’t, we can do something to help alleviate local suffering.

² Ibid, page 153.

Many of us donate money and this salves our consciences, but in fact, time and attention are more valuable to us these days than money. So here's a thought: How much time do you spend each week listening or watching the news? Half an hour each day, seven days a week? So about 3 _ hours a week? What if, instead, you turned off the radio or television or computer and gave three hours of your time and attention to some sort of volunteer service?

Some people we most admire as social activists didn't set out to save the world. In fact, the great Catholic writer, activist, and organizer Dorothy Day—one of those we admire—once wrote:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.

Her reference to “each one of our thoughts, words and deeds” leads me to the concept of *tikkun olam*, which I mentioned last week when I read to you the story about “gathering the sparks.” To refresh your memory, here is a shortened version of the story from the works of the 16th century Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria:

God created the world by forming vessels of light to hold the Divine Light. But as God poured the Light into the vessels, they catastrophically shattered, tumbling down toward the realm of matter. Thus, our world consists of countless shards of the original vessels entrapping sparks of the Divine Light. Humanity's great task involves helping God by freeing and reuniting the scattered Light, raising the sparks back to Divinity and restoring the broken world.

Tikkun olam is a Hebrew phrase usually translated as “repairing or restoring the world,” currently used in the Jewish community to refer to “social, moral, or political activism of one sort or another.” According to one rabbi, “*tikkun olam* refers to our moral obligation to promote change in society for the betterment of all people and the world we live in, including protection of animals and our physical environment.” *Tikkun olam* refers to “any act that brings knowledge, wisdom, understanding, love, justice, compassion, beauty, etc. into the world.” Such

an act “fulfills the purpose of creation and contributes to the repair and restoration of both ourselves and the world.”

In a speech on the subject of *Tikkun Olam* delivered to a convention of Orthodox Jews, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi to the British Commonwealth, addressed the difference between sources of information on the matter, specifically the *Torat Kohanim*, or priestly wisdom which focuses on eternity, and *Torat Hiv'im*, which focuses on prophets and history. He said:

Tikkun Olam, perfecting the world, sounds like a big subject. It is a big subject. However, if you look at the [Torat Kohanim], you see that *tikkun olam* occupies a surprisingly limited space. There is not much there about this subject. That is because the guide to dealing with such dynamic changes must be sought not in *Torat Kohanim* but in *Torat Nivi'im*. One ought not look in the literature . . . of eternity; instead we must review . . . the literature of Jewish history seen through the eyes of faith; of Jewish reflection on the challenges of specific moments.³

Focusing on the challenge of a specific moment in a specific place and time makes for a human-sized task. Focusing on many moments in many places over long periods of time is beyond what any human can do effectively. I find *tikkun olam* compelling for two reasons—its emphasis on the spiritual significance of specific brief encounters with others and its emphasis on the significance of specific acts of each individual.

The first of these two concepts of *tikkun olam* is a mystical notion that

a person's soul exists in sympathy with the people and objects in his environment, in such a manner that each moment in a person's life presents an opportunity to "raise the sparks" that only he or she can redeem. The people and objects a man encounters in the course of his lifetime are presented to him precisely in order that he can liberate the spiritual energy within them and, in so doing, also liberate the sparks within his own soul.

³ Jonathan Sacks, “Tikkun Olam: Orthodoxy’s Responsibility to Perfect G-D’s World.” Speech delivered at the Orthodox Union West Coast Convention, December 1997. <http://www.ou.org/public/publib/tikkun.htm>, accessed 10/14/04

To return to the story I told earlier about my friend Tom and the beggar, it was a small incident, insignificant to everyone but the two of them—eye contact and recognition of a common humanity despite radical differences of ethnicity, nationality, social status, and religion. From Tom’s response, however, this seems to have been one of those “encounters in the course of a lifetime” in which he and the beggar had the occasion to “liberate the spiritual energy” within each other. “Something passed between us,” Tom said.

A second *tikkun olam* concept I find compelling is that *every act of goodness counts*. Light blossoms from each act motivated by compassion, generosity, or unselfish love; every such act adds to the universal light. In short, put enough single candles together and you can light up a very large space.

This idea speaks to my condition because I often feel overwhelmed by the sheer size and number of problems and choices facing humanity. Unless I do something huge or extreme, it’s difficult to believe that anything I do matters at all. In *tikkun olam*, smaller acts are imbued with spiritual significance which contributes to the overall “restoration of the world.” This is apparently an old idea in Jewish thought. Jesus, that good Jewish boy, praises small selfless acts throughout his teachings. For instance, when the disciples argue about which of them is the greatest friend to Jesus, he brings a child to his side and tells them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest” (Luke 9:48). Why welcoming a child? Not because children were considered precious in and of themselves (unless, of course, they belonged to someone important), but ***because they were considered expendable***—small, weak and therefore of little significance. (Individual parents, of course, did not feel this way, but society-at-large did not value children much.) To be his greatest friend, Jesus says, simply welcome this child.

In Matthew 25 Jesus describes the actions of those who will inherit the kingdom of God. Not the sweeping acts of kings and princes, but simple, **unself-conscious** actions motivated by **compassion**: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then he says “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”

Since I encountered the concept of *tikkun olam*, I’ve begun to suspect the path to higher things may indeed wind in and through events normally considered of little significance. What if everything we do in the material world manifests in a corresponding spiritual reality that surrounds us? For instance, here in this room, we experience the material world—the light from the windows, the height of the ceiling, the seat cushions beneath us, the wooden pews around us, the carpet, the nearness of other physical bodies. Imagine that around this space, in and around each object and person, is another dimension in which objects, people and actions manifest a spiritual significance. Imagine that when a person does something, that act generates light, the quantity of which corresponds to the significance of the act in the spiritual reality—the *true* value of the act. A spontaneous act of love or generosity, for instance, has more spiritual value than a routine donation of a large sum of money.

Tikkun olam places our spiritual practice at the heart of the epic, unfolding history of the universe: the evolution and spiritualization of the whole of creation. With each small act of kindness, with each moment of presence and practice, with each effort to see, cleanse, and integrate our inner life, we build the new world and serve the Divine Architect of meaning. . . . **despite our insignificant size with respect to the universe our personal inner work makes a difference to the whole.**⁴

In the way of the world, if something is small, or brief, or involves lowly and unimportant people, we tend to dismiss it. As Descartes phrased it, “We have naturally more admiration for

⁴ Exploring Practical Spirituality website.

things that are above us than for those that are at the same height or lower.”⁵ But a small event in the secular world can have a deep resonance at the spiritual level. Apparently, the Divine Creative Force focuses as much attention and detail on the microscopic and the merely tiny as it does on planets, stars and galaxies (which, after all, comprise microscopic, molecular, & quark-sized bits).

In our human limitations, we may not be world-changers, but we most assuredly can be person-changers. We may not be able to fix the world, but we can repair the part of it we live in. I leave you with the words of Edith Patterson⁶, a good Quaker woman who intuitively understood that the task of fixing the world is “too great . . . for any human hand” and that

It takes more courage sometimes to face
the monotony of the commonplace
than in the time of some great need
to do the noble, valiant deed.

Impending danger often brings
someone to do heroic things;
but many are needed who have the grace
and courage for the commonplace.

⁵ Rene Descartes (1596-1650), quoted by Richard Hamblyn in *The Invention of Clouds* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001).

⁶ Edith Patterson is the grandmother of Dick Patterson of our meeting. Her book of poetry is available in our Library.