

Person to Person

A Sermon Delivered on April 11, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“[A person] is a knot, a web,
a mesh into which relationships are tied.
Only those relationships matter.”
-- Saint-Exupery*

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Opening Words: by Sophia Lyons Fahs (*Singing the Living Tradition*, #439)

We gather in reverence before the wonder of life -
The wonder of this moment.
The wonder of being together, so close yet so apart -
Each hidden in our own secret chamber,
Each listening, each trying to speak -
Yet none fully understanding, none fully understood.
We gather in reverence before all intangible things -
that eyes see not, nor ears can detect -
that hands can never touch, that space cannot hold, and time cannot measure.

Meditation: by the Unitarian Universalist minister Reverend Mark DeWolfe

A person is a puzzle.
Sometimes from the inside, it feels like some pieces are missing.
 Perhaps one we love is no longer with us.
 Perhaps one talent we desire eludes us.
 Perhaps a moment that required grace found us clumsy.
Sometimes, from the inside, it feels like some pieces are missing.
A person is a puzzle. We are puzzles not only to ourselves but to each other.
A puzzle is a mystery we seek to solve --
 -- and the mystery is that we are whole even with our missing pieces.
Our missing pieces are empty spaces we might long to fill,
 empty spaces which make us who we are.
The mystery is that we are only what we are
 and what we are is enough...
Let us know that we are accepted, by god and by this company, exactly as we are.
Accepted -- missing pieces, and all.

Reading: by Theodore Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, from *Horton Hears a Who!*

On the fifteenth of May, in the Jungle of Nool,
In the heat of the day, in the cool of the pool,
He was splashing... enjoying a jungle's great joys...
When Horton the elephant heard a small noise.
So Horton stopped splashing. He looked toward the sound.
"That's funny," thought Horton. "There's no one around."
Then he heard it again! Just a very faint yelp
As if some tiny person were calling for help.
"I'll help you," said Horton. "But *who* are you? *Where?*"
He looked and he looked. He could see nothing there
But a small speck of dust blowing past through the air.
"I say!" murmured Horton. "I've never heard tell

Of a small speck of dust that is able to yell.
So you know what I think?... Why, I think that there must
Be someone on top of that small speck of dust!
Some sort of a creature of *very* small size,
Too small to be seen by an elephant's eyes...
...some poor little person who's shaking with fear
That he'll blow in the pool! He has no way to steer!
I'll just have to save him. Because, after all,
A person's a person, no matter how small."

Reading: by the African-American author Ralph Ellison from *Invisible Man* (p. 3)

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids - I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through the physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it is seldom successful.

Reading: by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, from a piece entitled "Elements of the Interhuman"

Let us now imagine two men, whose life is dominated by appearance, sitting and talking together. Call them Peter and Paul. Let us list the different configurations which are involved. First, there is Peter as he wishes to appear to Paul, and Paul as he wishes to appear to Peter. Then there is Peter as he really appears to Paul, that is, Paul's image of Peter, which in general does not in the least coincide with what Peter wished Paul to see; and similarly there is the reverse situation. Further, there is Peter as he appears to himself, and Paul as he appears to himself. Lastly, there are the bodily Peter and the

bodily Paul. Two living beings and six ghostly appearances, which mingle in many ways in the conversation between the two. Where is there room for any genuine interhuman life?

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A person's a person, no matter how small. This is Horton the elephant's recurring refrain. It is the simple truth that compels him to protect a tiny speck of dust inhabited by tiny creatures called *Whos* from a skeptical Sour Kangaroo. He is attacked by a band of monkeys, who grab the dust speck nestled on a clover, and carry it off to a black-bottomed eagle named Vlad Vlad-i-koff. The *Whos* survival depends on their ability to make themselves heard, audible even to the relatively weak ears of a kangaroo. The *Whos* create an enormous ruckus, but in the end it is the "YOPP!" of the smallest *Who* in *Who-ville*, that provides the final bit of noise, allowing the *Whos*' existence to become audible and apparent to all. The contribution of the smallest of the small saves them.

Horton Hears a Who! was one of my favorite stories when I was a child. I don't know why. Maybe it was simply the catchy rhyme, and the funny pictures. Or maybe it was because, as the youngest of four boys in my family, I identified with the smallest *Who*, named Jo-jo, who saved the day.

It is not uncommon for small children to feel invisible in an adult world. The experiences and concerns of a child can easily be belittled by grown ups. The grown ups' motto seems to be: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I gave up childish ways." The word "childish" itself speaks of someone who lacks good sense, who is not fully competent, who cannot be taken seriously.

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And yet the experience of invisibility is not limited to children. Adults can be invisible, too. This is the poignant experience that provides the point of departure and central theme for Ralph Ellison, in his novel *Invisible Man*. As a black man in this country, he is invisible. The color of his skin could be considered the cause of his invisibility. But actually it has more to do with the eyes of those around him. His invisibility is caused by the inability or the unwillingness of others to see him. He is invisible, because they are blind.

* * *

It is awfully difficult to acknowledge another person, if we don't see them, or don't hear them. Sometimes our eyes are unable to see. Sometimes our ears are too weak to hear. Sometimes other things get in the way, and cloud our perceptions.

I was reminded of this, last week, when I caught a news story about the tragic death of a Reuters news photographer in July of 2007, who was working in the streets of Baghdad at the time. The pilot of an American military helicopter mistook the photographer, and several others on the street that day, as a "hostile force" and shot them. This was old news.

The events from summer of 2007 made headlines, once again, because a website called WikiLeaks.org posted the audio and video footage taken from the American helicopter responsible for the shooting. Now, anyone interested can see what the pilots saw that day, and reach their own conclusions whether the people on the street in Baghdad indeed appear to be a hostile force. You can decide, was that an accurate perception, or rather a conclusion based on what the American pilots were trying to see?

Thanks to the miracle of the internet, I was able to simply click on a link and see for myself. What I saw was a group of people just milling around. From the safety of my study, simply watching a clip on my computer, it is hard to imagine how anyone could consider the people on that Baghdad street a threat, or how they could believe the photographer's camera was a gun. After watching the video clip, the death of the twelve people on the streets of Baghdad that day seemed not only a tragedy, but an outrage, an example of the American military's indifference to the lives of innocent Iraqi civilians. Even children were shot at.

Psychologists, however, were quick to point out that the pilots' actions are not surprising, given their training, and the pressures of a combat situation. Referring to the misidentified camera, a Cornell psychologist says, "it's perfectly understandable with what we know now about context and vision. Take the same image and put it in a bathroom, and you swear it's a hair dryer; put it in a workshop, and you swear it's a power drill." The psychologist says, we should not judge the pilots too quickly. Instead, "what another person does in that situation should stand as forewarning for what we would do ourselves." (*The New York Times*, April 7, 2010)

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Theodore Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, was quite familiar with the social and psychological dynamics of war. *Horton Hears a Who!* which was published in 1954, was informed by the events of World War II and its aftermath. And while its story and moral convey timeless humanitarian themes of multi-national, multi-ethnic equality, it was written in a very particular context.

During WW II Theodore Geisel was a prolific political cartoonist. He drew hundreds of scathing caricatures of Hitler and Mussolini. Supporting Roosevelt's war policy, he

poked fun at “isolationists,” like Charles Lindbergh. With wit and humor, he exposed the grave injustice of anti-Semitism and racism directed against Africans-Americans.

After the war, Geisel helped produce movies for American soldiers working in occupied Germany and Japan, offering introductions to these foreign cultures, and guidance on how to engage the locals. In 1947 Geisel even won an academy award for a documentary film he wrote entitled “Design for Death” which explored Japanese culture.

In 1953, when American occupation in Japan ended, Geisel visited Japan to gain a sense of the changes that had taken place since the war. He was moved by his experience of Japanese school children, and their surprisingly Western interests. The children drew 15,000 pictures of what they hoped to be when they grew up, and gave them to Geisel. He was surprised to see that Japanese children’s interests were very similar to the interests of American children. The drawings showed that they wanted to be astronauts, or pilots, or stewardesses. They had dreams remarkably similar to the children Geisel knew at home.

His experience during this visit in Japan provided the inspiration for *Horton Hears a Who!* In fact the book was dedicated to his “Great Friend, Mitsugi Nakamura of Kyoto, Japan.” Some scholars say the *Whos* represent the people of postwar Japan, taking their first tentative steps in the direction of democracy. Horton represents a benevolent United States that seeks to offer help. Writing his book in the midst of the cold war, it is no coincidence that the malicious black-bottomed eagle is called Vlad Vlad-i-koff. The atom bomb’s destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is hinted at in the destruction of *Who-ville*.

Imagining the people of Japan as worthy recipients of compassionate aid is remarkable, because during the war, Geisel had a very different attitude toward the Japanese. In his cartoons they were depicted in grossly racist stereotypes. In the book *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, the historian Richard Minear points out, “[Theodore Geisel’s] campaign for civil rights and against racism and anti-Semitism had one major blind spot: Americans of Japanese descent.”

In 1941 nearly 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent lived on the West Coast. After Pearl Harbor, the American government ordered their forced relocation and internment, and Geisel supported this effort. On February 13, 1942, just days before Roosevelt’s decision to incarcerate Japanese Americans, Geisel drew a cartoon entitled “Waiting for the Signal from Home...” The cartoon shows the West Coast and a horde of smiling, bespectacled, virtually identical Asians lining up to pick up blocks of dynamite from a warehouse labeled “Honorable 5th Column.” The multitude stretches into the distance, faces smaller and smaller, until individuals are depicted as tiny specks. A smiling, stereotypical Japanese on the roof looks through a telescope out to sea for that “signal from home.” Richard Minear writes, “It is a scurrilous cartoon. For one thing, no Japanese American on the West Coast was ever convicted of an act of sabotage. [The Roosevelt administration] could not have asked for more effective propaganda.”

After the war Geisel's perspective changed. In an interview he said, "I conceived the idea of *Horton Hears a Who* from my experiences [in Japan]... Japan was just emerging, the people were voting for the first time [since the war], running their own lives - and the theme was obvious: 'A person's a person no matter how small.' ... And of course when the little boy stands up and yells 'Yopp!' and saves the whole place, that's my statement about voting - *everyone* counts."

* * *

We all have blind spots. We all are shaped by biases we ourselves hardly realize. And each of us has at times stood in another person's blind spot. Each of us can be judged by superficial appearances or be reduced to a stereotype: as woman or man, as gay or straight, as black, brown, red, yellow or white, as young or old, as American or non-American.

If we want to engage in real relationship with one another, we need to recognize these obstacles that obstruct our vision. Like Buber's Peter and Paul, we need to dispel the many ghosts that get in the way of real connection: How we wish to appear to others. How others perceive us. How we perceive ourselves. Each of these are apparitions that may have very little to do with who we really are.

Buber says, our perceptions, in and of themselves, are always incomplete. Even if our powers of observation are incredibly precise, picking up every imaginable aspect of another person, we can still fail to grasp that person's wholeness. To engage a person as a person, means seeing more than is visible to the eye.

Each of us is more than the sum of our parts, just as a melody is more than a collection of notes, and a verse of poetry is more than an assortment of words, Buber says. Truly engaging another person, in the spirit of dialogue at its best, means speaking from one's own wholeness to the wholeness of another.

Often we see in a mirror dimly, but at our best, we see face to face. Often our knowledge is partial, but at our best, we understand fully and are fully understood. In these rare moments we are fully present to one another, and fully present to the world.

We are each puzzles to ourselves and one another. Often it seems pieces are missing. In our lives, there are truths we can't grasp, events we don't understand, experiences we can never convey. The mystery is that we are whole even with these missing pieces.

Whether seen or unseen, whether heard or unheard, a person is a person.

Mindful of the wonder of life and all intangible things,
May we do our part to help create a world
in which every voice is heard,
and every person is seen.
Amen.