

From Alienation to Communion

Sue Wilson, CSJ

If we look contemplatively we can see the steps, as they are taken, on the journey from alienation to communion:

Shortly after the attack at the Great Mosque in Quebec City, hundreds of Londoners gathered at a downtown park to show solidarity not only with the Muslim community in Quebec but also with the Muslim community in London. On that night, the compassion which bound us together was so much deeper and stronger than the death-dealing voices that tried to keep us apart.

The woman sitting beside me at an anti-human trafficking meeting told me she was a sex trade worker. She felt she could be helpful in reaching out to people who were trafficked. At one point, another person's use of the word 'prostitution' triggered a strong response in her. Later she explained: "That's the word that is used by those who have shamed us in the public." For people who choose to work in the sex trade, "it's a form a violence to not believe our words when we say we find something about sex work affirming."

As I understood her, suggestions that her personal history had left her without the freedom to truly choose this work were seen as attempts to strip away her sense of agency and identity. But she refused to be alienated from herself by the destructive power of labels and categories.

The Lummi Nation blocked the largest coal port ever to be proposed in North America. Then they sent the totem pole, which stood as a symbol of resistance against the fossil fuel industry and the many ways it threatens the wellbeing of land, water and people, on a journey to support other indigenous groups in the U.S and Canada that are engaged in similar struggles.

Opening to An-other

Opening to an-other can be a challenging thing. When we are faced with viewpoints that are at odds with our own, we need to hold a difficult tension between opening ourselves to see from another's vantage point and remaining true to our own values. Often these efforts to hold the tension can lead to transformative change in our assumptions and ideas, our choices and actions.

Opening to an-other can lead us into a new way of being and urge us into transformative action in the world. We appreciate more fully the many ways that our labels and categories contribute to shaping social, ecological and economic structures that privilege some and create barriers for others.

Opening to an-other deepens into opening to Love as we surrender to the graces found within the transformation.

Opening to Communion

It used to be so common to think of the earth as other, and the universe as an-other far beyond. Now, often guided by indigenous wisdom, many people are opening to the awareness that we are earth and earth is us. These insights are accompanied by a shift in relationship: we are not living on earth; we are one of earth's living elements.

Dualistic consciousness sees an-other person as other. In part, it's connected with inner dynamics that permit us to hide from negative aspects of ourselves while projecting these qualities onto others where they can be criticized and rejected. By contrast, contemplative consciousness, which religious orders have been nurturing in their members, roots us in an ever

deepening awareness of the underlying unity in all of our relationships – with God, earth and each other. Contemplative consciousness asks: How am I connected to what I see in this person? How am I connected to what is happening in this bio-region? How am I connected to the unjust social and economic structures that I see?

We need to transform unconscious efforts to deface and distort the other by consciously facing that which we would like to ignore. Consider the whole-making energy that has been moving within Canada after the deadly attack at the mosque. We have shifted from shock to soul-searching (shadow-searching) questions about the tenor of our public conversations and the depth of our islamophobia. It's a dialogue that is difficult and heart-wrenching, healthy and life-giving.

Participating in Communion

We often talk about how our actions, both personal and collective, need to flow from a contemplative heart, and this is surely true. But we also need to recognize how profoundly our inner life is affected and shaped by our social context. Participation in communion (the Reign of God) is rooted in the constant ebb and flow between contemplative restructuring of consciousness and action to restructure personal, social, cultural, economic and ecological relationships (systems).

Opening to an-other, particularly an-other who has been marginalized, is a key step in recognizing how unjust policies and systems have affected our inner and outer lives; it is integral to seeing how collective shadow patterns have been concretized in unjust social, political and economic structures and systems, leading to poverty, racism, classism, sexism, militarism, environmental damage and social violence.

To participate in God's communion is to make our individual and collective inner whole-making both visible and impactful in the world. And it starts by a graced opening to the other.