

20 SEPT 2020

Dear Sister Battista,

W.H. Auden wrote: "What all schoolchildren learn, those to whom evil is done, do evil in return. It is simply an observation, not any excuse for one's behavior. Yet, it describes many of us human beings in our primitive emotional states as children. It is a fact that some abuse (physical, emotional, and/or sexual) can stunt emotional growth so that such children are relatively unchanged as adults. Contrary to Carl Gustav Jung, we feel that we are what happened to us, that we cannot be that which we desire to become. And we lash out in anger, in frustration because of our impotence to effect change, in revenge for the wrongs we have suffered. "And we were vain and ignorant nor knew," as Dante Alighieri wrote so long ago, "that when we stabbed thy heart, it was our own real hearts we slew." Without carefully considering the consequences of our actions, we did things that we were unable to take back, harmed another human being, ourselves, and so many who loved us and who loved that other human being, too, even as far as harming all of society in the process (A rock thrown into a world pool in anger, the unexpected waves & ripples leaping against the shoreline.)

Queen Elizabeth I said, "The past cannot be cured." There are no time machines, no take-backs, no do-overs, no sincere apologies to erase what has been done. "Those we dislike can do nothing to please us," says Samuel Richardson. Everything is scrutinized through the lens of demonization — we are the worst, most evil beings, therefore everything we do or do not do must be nefarious, misdeeds, or evil, lies. And then we are given labels. As Søren Kierkegaard said, "Once you label me you negate me." He's a murderer, nothing more, so why listen to anything he has to say? Oh, he has nothing to say, no apology to offer? That's because he's an unrepentant murderer. Labeled, negated, demonized, there cannot be any action deemed acceptable by those who hate us. This we understand. They have sought and found their enemy, and are comforted to know that the evil is out there, manifest as a person, an object of ridicule & hate that can be punished and destroyed. So, we remain silent — let them ridicule us, hate us, emasculate us, attack us, or do whatever is necessary to project that part of themselves they hate onto us, expressing their anger and contempt, until they are able to be free of their pain, feel peace, and love themselves and others once again. Kahlil Gibran gives us an essential truth: "But I say that even as the Holy and the righteous cannot rise beyond the highest which is in each of you, so the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower than the lowest which is in you also." Or as Shakespeare put it, "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and evil together." No one is completely good and no one is completely evil; we are all simply human beings moving between the two.

Piet Hiem said, "The road to wisdom? Well, it's plain and simple to express: err, and err and err and err again, but less and less and less." We are continually learning, continually becoming someone better or worse — we do not remain static, but are dynamic creatures. As Oscar Wilde pointed out, "The only thing one really knows about human nature is that it changes." Long-held habits take time to change through the process is intensive and often frustrating. Of the change, Aristotle remarked, "Never discourage anyone who continually makes progress, no matter how slow." We come into contact with spiritual teachers along the way who provide us with truth

and force us to contemplate our lives. As Penn Christion tells us, "It's painful to face how we harm others, and it takes a while. It's a journey that happens because of our commitment to gentleness and honesty, our commitment to staying awake, to being mindful." Thomas Merton was one of my spiritual teachers. He said, "Not to be foolish and multiply words, I'll simply say that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the gospels, and the gospels are breathing with it... If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation... There are times when one has to cut right through all the knots, and the Zen view of things is a good clean blade... How I pray is breathe. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!" I am still learning to be human, still becoming a better human being every day, but I will remain a beginner because I am human. Yet, it is Zen, Buddhism, that I, like Merton, find so fitting for our lives. Because of Merton, I also exclaim, "I love everybody! I am awakening from the dream of separateness." And we strive in our spiritual efforts to attain a level of personal development by which morality (Buddhism's 5 precepts, Christianity's love God and love your neighbor as yourself) is natural. Or as Arnold Desjardins put it: "The law commands us to do what we would do naturally if we only had love. The Way consists of finding that love, which becomes the law." That is our goal, our final destination. And although we are not there yet, we continue walking in that direction, slowly, methodically, with purpose, mindfully, unafraid of the future for we live in the present moment with love and compassion.

Sister Burkholder, please also thank all of the volunteers & protesters for their efforts and commitment to ending capital punishment. We appreciate their dedication. The above text serves as my final words. Please see that they are conveyed at least to my mom and dad. Thanks, too, for your kindness in attending the execution. My mom was comforted to know you would anoint my body with oil in the moments after my passing. Well, I'll see you Tuesday sometime. Till then...

Sincerely,

William LeRoy, Jr.