

I See You

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My aging mother is reviewing her life, as it is dealt out to her in memories by the teaspoon. The other day, out of the blue, apropos of nothing as far as I could tell, she said, “I am sorry I was such a disappointment to my mother.” I wasn’t sure if she was offering me a lesson on living up to our parents’ expectations or whether she was truly tallying up a lifetime of regrets. “Are you sorry that you disappointed her, really,” I asked? And after a pause she replied, “No, I am not. I don’t regret my life. I am sorry she didn’t understand me and who I was. She didn’t see me.”

The word “Identity” is full of hype and buzz these days. It conjures up thoughts of racial profiling, heritage, culture, ability, pride and gender. The word “Identity” invokes visions of hijab, turbans, skin color, hair type, body form, accents, and smells. The word, “Identity” provokes questions we don’t even think of asking until challenged, and most of us are not used to being challenged. Questions like: Who am I? Who are we? Who are we not? All questions that are harder to answer than one would think on first blush.

Danny Woo was in second grade, seven years old, when he was challenged, when his identity was spelled out for him as foreign and forever without the same rights as his peers, or were they his peers? I can only imagine the slow, mouldering anger that lived in his belly every day. To wake up every morning and know he would be seen only as “less than” and as “different” from “real Americans.”

I remember when Obama was candidating for the presidency the first time and I, unable to get past the man’s Identity, said, “The United States will never elect a black man, and certainly not one called Barak Hussein Obama.” And I remember when he indeed was elected, I remember hearing an old African

American woman lift up her voice in praise, saying “God bless America! God bless America!” And at that moment Danny Woo said, “I see you Mr. President.” A spark of validation, a flash of connection. Perhaps the real questions the word “Identity” provokes are, “What are you to me? What am I to you? How are we related?”

Some of you might remember Caspar Weinberger. He was the Secretary of Defense under Ronald Reagan. His tenure was the third longest in U.S. history, and spanned the final years of the Cold War. He is also known for being indicted in the Iran–Contra scandal. Now, for those of you who don’t remember that particular fiasco, the Iran-contra scandal had to do with high placed American officials selling guns to Iran, a big no-no at the time, then taking that ill-got money for the arms and sending it to rebels in Nicaragua, also a big no-no; seeing how that would be interfering with another country’s government and besides, Congress had already specifically outlawed support of those very same rebels. It was a dangerous shell game.

But it didn’t end there. Weinberger and the rest of the Whitehouse dudes justified all this naughty behavior because the Iranians, who had just received all those nice, shiny guns, promised to release seven American hostages held by radical Muslims. To top it all off, Reagan didn’t like the yucky, pinko Nicaraguan government, so supporting the alt-right contras seemed tots cool. (Is any of this sounding weirdly like “the more things change the more things stay the same?”) Well, in the end, that pesky institution we call the free press began snooping around in all this, and guess what? There was a paper trail leading right up to Caspar Weinberger’s front door. Despite all of this, despite all this wacky, unjust, blood-soaked hypocrisy, our friend Caspar was awarded not only the Presidential

Medal of Freedom in 1987, but Queen Elizabeth II felt he deserved an honorary knighthood. Really, what is a poor Holy Man to do?

Ram Dass, American spiritual leader and devotee of being here and now, of finding mystical love and unity in the cosmos, Ram Dass, sometime in the 1980s, was having a little trouble being here, now or loving when it came to Caspar Weinberger. So, I love this part, what did he do about it? What did he do about Caspar harshing his karmic vibe? He got a picture of Caspar and put that picture on his prayer table.

Have you seen a picture of Caspar Weinberger? Needless to say, he and Reagan, well they were mates, pals, buddies. Coiffed hair, pink cheeks, and smooth (again, I ask you, is this feeling strangely familiar)? That picture must have made quite an addition to the collection of Hindu saints and Gods gathered on Ram Dass' worship space with the incense wafting everywhere and garlands of marigold bedecking everything. Ram Dass got that picture of Caspar and welcomed the Secretary of Defense into his heart. When he felt his heart constrict, he began to ask questions: Wasn't Caspar just another face of God? Couldn't he oppose Caspar's actions and still keep his heart open to the man? "Wouldn't it be harder for Caspar to become free from the role he was obviously trapped in if I, with my mind, just kept reinforcing the traps by identifying him with his acts?"

Okay, the first two questions are easy enough, but that last one is a doozie, so let's go through it. Ram Dass is suggesting that we often identify people by their actions and their actions alone. Moreover, we often identify people by only the small fraction of actions we see. Or maybe we identify people by even more superficial labels than their actions. Think about the crayon's story. How can we "See" someone if we restrict their identity to only one tiny portion of the

multitudes within? How do we trap ourselves and others by refusing to open our hearts? By denying that deepest truth – that we are related, that we are soulmates. What does it mean to be a community of identity? A community that says, “I see you.” A community that asks over and over again, “How are we related?” A community that pries open our hearts to welcome the other?

To answer this we must tell one more story. A sadness has befallen our church. Yesterday we lost one we loved, one who gave herself to this congregation for fifty years so we would know love and beauty. Barbara Wagner, our Music Minister, taught us how to “See” each other and go beyond the surface of Identity.

Here’s a story, and remember, I wasn’t there. But I have heard it in so many ways and from so many of you that this part of our history has entered into myth, legend and lore. No point holding the Truth up for facts in this case.

Once upon a time, Bonnie Botsford marched up to Barbara and mentioned that the magnificent Catholic Church on the East Side, Blessed Trinity, was in need of a new roof. “Barbara,” she said, “how ‘bout you grab your choirs and hold a fundraising concert for that church over there?” Barbara thought this was a swell idea and put the plan in motion. It’s just that there were a few snags. Remember, this was a long time ago and folks were more conservative back then. Blessed Trinity and its neighborhood could barely wrap their heads around Unitarians singing in their sanctuary. But inviting the Buffalo Gay Men’s Chorus, well, that was simply beyond the pale. The Bishop, pulled Barbara aside and said “Not that I have a problem with The Gays you understand, but how ‘bout we just call them the Men’s Chorus and drop the whole Gay business?” Barbara and the priests of Blessed Trinity stood their ground. They said, “Forgive us Father, but we will not

deny the Men's Identities” And I'll tell you what, the concert drew nigh, and protesters gathered across the street, their aim: to shame and scare concert-goers. So Barbara sent the men of both choirs out to line the sidewalks, and there they stood, proudly, in their tuxedos to welcome, to protect. All the ladies who came to hear the concert remarked “How nice it was to be escorted to their seats by such handsome fellows.” The concert-goers arrived by the hundreds and filled the church to bursting. The music was glorious.

That's what it means to be a community of identity. It means to put ourselves in the way of challenges, to break out of our comfort zones, to ask and ask again, “Who are you to me? Who am I to you? And how are we related?” We ask the questions over and over again, learning teaspoon by teaspoon, who we are and who we are not. We pry our hearts open and dare to let one more in, in the spirit of Holy curiosity and righteous action, until we share that spark of validation and flash of connection. Until we can truly see one another.