

This I Believe

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It seems our world is a divided place, red states versus blue states; liberals here, and conservatives there. Some are Christian, some Jewish, some Muslim, some atheist. So many differences? At every turn one seems to sense a world of differences, in tension, at war, not knowing or understanding the other or even those close at hand. Is it so? Is it this way and no other? I think not. I do not mean to minimize the real and intense conflicts, but much of what we see as differences is a matter of experience, engagement, and perception. And often our vision is shaped by our attitude of the moment, our mood, a turn of the head, an air, an unexpected jolt that shifts our awareness to see something, someone, we didn't see before. When we take time to see and listen and sense the other, we are graced with a new vision, one that conveys a truth not to be denied. In the end, in our humanity, in our reaching for something beyond ourselves, we discover that our differences are not to be feared, but respected. This I believe.

There are certain encounters that have such a transforming effect that we often revisit them. Such was the case one rainy night as I was returning home from my night classes. Leaving home in the dark and returning in the dark seemed to mark autumn's arrival, that time of year given toward re-thinking and reviewing. It was 9:30 pm and I was in a hurry to get home after a long day of work and two night school classes. The course work and discussions had stimulated an enthusiasm and energy in my heart, but I was hungry for dinner. I could taste the cocktail that normally marked the end of my "work" day and the beginning of an evening not driven by "message slips", red buttons flashing on an office phone and blue prints.

As I pulled up President's Street in the center of downtown Baltimore, the light turned red again at Lombard Street. I was annoyed. I would have to wait for yet another cycle of lights to turn green. These lights always take forever, I thought. I wish ... the city would get its act together ... and ... Baltimoreans

would learn to drive in the rain. I sighed, and then acquiesced to the moment. Through the evening's mist, I could see in the distance the silhouette of what appeared to be a familiar figure walking amidst the cars. Another "panhandler", but he seemed to be drawing the attention of all the drivers in all three lanes. Drawing closer, I realized unmistakably that it was Terry whose movements were unlike any other street person, because the prostheses he had for both of his legs and his arms created a distinctive wobble from side to side. There was a scarecrow like image as one viewed the exposed prostheses beneath the hem of his shorts and beneath the sleeves of his tee shirt.

"Hey Terry!!!" I yelled, as I rolled my window down. In the car's headlights, he looked thinner than normal, but I could see a smile form across his handsome narrow light brown face. Terry wobbled back to the medium strip out of traffic's way. I knew that he was not accustomed to being called by name, at least at that corner. It wasn't long before the cars behind me started honking their horns, impatient at the delay that I now caused. In the fluster of the moment, I reluctantly moved forward, gaining speed with the north-bound traffic, quick to forget the impatience that I had felt minutes before. I frantically waved 'hello' and 'goodbye' simultaneously, as I strained to view Terry through the rear view mirror. "Damn," I muttered, "why didn't I think to pull off the side of the road?"

I drove home suspended in time, recalling my first encounter with Terry two winters ago. It was a freezing Sunday night, and he was panhandling at the corner of Conway and Light streets. It was a cold enough night that most of the homeless who slept on steam grates went to the city's emergency "code-blue" shelter. Terry accepted eagerly the sandwiches that our Mobile Feeding Van offered, but we failed to persuade him to taste our hot homemade soup. We understood why when he sheepishly whispered, "I can't hold the styrofoam cup without spilling it." I felt so stupid, as I peaked at his metal claw hand. At his request, I removed his backpack in order to put on him a much needed warm ski jacket. I recall the awkward struggling as I attempted to guide his claw hand and arm prostheses through the jacket sleeves,

not sure what pain I might be causing, concerned that I might actually sever the prostheses' connection to his upper arm.

After several encounters, including Terry's surprise appearance at St. Ignatius Church, I have been blessed to learn something of Terry's story. Any observer would quickly notice that he is very bright and extremely well spoken. He graduated from Forest Park High School, but regretfully never managed to get to college. While he wants to work, he has to work "under the table", otherwise he loses his SSI. According to Terry's high school counselor (the only person with whom he stays in touch), his determination to be "accepted" was so strong in high school that he actually made the cut for the track and field team – an incredible accomplishment. Now, in his early thirties, it is difficult and painful for Terry to negotiate the sidewalks he must walk for public transportation. The anvil that Terry carries around his neck is a crack cocaine habit that began early in his high school years. He wanted to be cool and accepted. I will never forget our car ride out to Bayview Detox one afternoon. Terry described himself as a "thalidomide" baby, one of four siblings, and the only one with birth defects. "My mother", he said, "could never handle my freakish body." After a long conversation of considerable self-introspection and self-disclosure on Terry's part, he confessed, "you know there's no excuse for my crack habit, but the real truth is that I have always HATED my body." In an instant, the depth of his pain stood before me as if I myself was standing on the edge of the abyss. "Jesus" I thought, "PAHlease, embrace him with your love." I imagined a woman embracing and stoking his body, and telling him how beautiful he was.

For a fleeting moment, I felt as if I was standing at the foot of the cross, or was it the descent into hell. It was down in the valley, where people are in pain and suffering. I thought of all of the other drug addicts, whom I often judged. "Please, LORD, don't EVER let me judge again", I prayed.

Shortly thereafter I felt a deep peace as if there was between Terry and myself a "connectedness" and "solidarity" that defied the amount of time we shared together. I was once again reminded how the poor

have so much to offer. It seems that whenever I take the time to hear another's story, to feel another's pain, I learn that what we have in common is far more important than what we don't. We all need love, a home, dignity, and nourishment.

It is said that life is the toughest teacher; first comes the test, then the lesson. Terry taught me a life's lesson in one afternoon. This I believe. When I remember not to walk away, but to walk toward another's suffering and brokenness, when I remember to listen, to share with them, create space for them, when I remember to bear the 'beams of love', I get glimpses of who I am met to be. It is then that I discover my own humanity, when I feel "eastering within me" the well of love, springing from resurrection. JESUS, please don't ever let me judge again.