

Coming Up for Air

It all about air, and whether it's clean enough to breathe. True for us, true for fish and forests.

I realized over the weekend that I'm running out of air, and my first reaction was: save what I can for me.

COVID-19 and the forest fires stimulated my reaction. It's one of those scarcity and abundance problems. When I perceive a scarcity of something precious, my generosity shrinks. Thinking about scarcity I get fearful, and resentful of others grabbing too much.

Besides the health and environmental threats of 2020, our political atmosphere has been similarly toxic. So much air being combusted arguing right and left, right and wrong, we're living in a cloud of mistrust, blame and hatred. Starved of good air, we lose sight of each other and our common values.

From my house this past weekend, I heard three adult males screaming at each other just outside in the street. I went out because I know all three. The fight was about who should clean up the mess washed from one driveway down the street in front of the other's house. It took two minutes to scoop up the mess at the curb and the next hour listening to each man vent and vilify. It boiled down to respect and being heard. Neither believed they were getting any, so none was offered in return. Those basics are among the first to go when the air gets fouled.

We all learn about love, tolerance, forgiveness, and generosity from our religious traditions. On the other hand, we love our moral outrage, our wagging fingers, our righteous indignation at others' failures. Those two impulses: empathy and enmity run deep in our culture, and others.

No doubt you've heard the Native American story about the tribal elder telling a young member about the two wolves living inside each of us, representing inner conflicts such as scarcity and abundance. When the youngster asks the old woman which wolf wins, she smiles and says, "The one I feed the most."

Intervening in conflicts – whether inside or out - is not new or novel, but peacemaking seems in rare supply nowadays. Initially, the neighborhood men were ready to jettison whatever respect they held for the other and close the door on further interaction. After we talked, after they were heard without judgment, they cooled down and thought about the bigger picture, the health of the neighborhood. Perhaps they also realized how much energy it takes to carry a grudge.

Renewing our air supply takes time and attention. It takes commitment and practice. Oddly enough, it is in our exposure to conflict, with courage to stand in the fire, where we get the confidence to do it again. In that way, through self-care and practice with others, we're cleaning the air we breathe. And we're nourishing that hungry inner wolf to health again.

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