

Pamela Harrison, Board of Contributors~the Valley News, June, 12, 2011

"To Cultivate Empathy, Open a Good Book"

Remember this image: a young wife and mother, pregnant again and abandoned by her alcoholic husband, is walking the railroad tracks in Detroit, the pockets of her frayed woolen coat bulging with empty beer bottles.

First it was the exposé *The Smartest Guys in the Room* (sordid details of the Enron scandal). Then it was *Inside Job* (predatory lending and reckless derivative trading by huge Wall Street Banks whose greed was responsible for our Great Recession and the ruin of millions). Now we have deficit-cutting plans whose biggest targets are the elderly, the poor, the hungry, and the disabled while the "super rich" 1% of us (who now control 40% of the nation's wealth) enjoy a continuation of their comfy tax cuts.

Seems to me in this great Land of Opportunity we have done a sorry job of educating the moral imaginations of our "best and brightest." Being a poet and teacher of literature, I can't help wondering, too, if the shrinking national enrollment in college Humanities courses has contributed to these failures of empathy.

Free-market advocates revere Adam Smith's economic theory of the markets' "invisible hand" (*The Wealth of Nations, 1776: How to become a rich country*). But precious few of them ever refer to Smith's earlier and foundational treatise, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which posits that any fair-dealing among individuals ultimately depends upon the "imaginary impartial observer" within each of us who judges our own behavior. Religious, philosophical, and common men and women have, since the Middle Ages, called this interior judge a conscience.

Adam Smith believed that man's innately sociable nature, our capacity for mutual sympathy and fellow feeling, would curb our narrower animal impulses to swindle and hoard. History and medical research have proved him wrong. "Empathy erosion" can be a temporary effect of anger, ignorance, or the isolation of enclave living that can make people fearful of strangers. Political hysteria and sound-byte laziness label large and diverse populations under one disparaging epithet ("welfare single mothers"?)—a kind of coded dehumanization demagogues rely on to "rally the base."

But if human empathy is not after all an inherent reflex of our species and can in fact be eroded by polarizing partisan rhetoric and today's fragmenting identity politics, how might we encourage empathy in our hearts—for the sakes of our vulnerable young and old, and for the survival of our greater commonwealth? And where can we actually practice the work of sympathy that might move us to sacrifice our own immediate comfort to succor a stranger? Read a great book.

Of course I am not the first to propose that reading great literature might prove such a valuable exercise. The late literary critic Northrop Frye wrote almost a half century ago in *The Educated Imagination* that "one person by himself is not a complete human being." This learned man identified our imaginations as the amalgam of emotion and intellect

whose job it is “to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in.”

I believe with Frye that, starting in the deepest chambers of our individual lives, literature invites us to walk for a while in another’s shoes, to live through another’s experience of hope or pain. From this first private identification with fictional feeling, literature’s collective wisdom then moves out toward the world of the living, leading us into sympathy and understanding with expanded numbers of our fellow human beings. An educated imagination thus works against indifference, against the slyness that greedily seeks only to serve the self, against the cynicism that has no faith or trust in anything and therefore exerts no courage to stand up for principles of value.

One of the abiding benefits of learning how to read and write well, of actually learning how to think and speak for ourselves instead of merely accepting commercial or political catch-phrases, is that we become less vulnerable to the machinations of predatory salesmen, corrupt governments, and false prophets. Ernest Hemingway called this vital skill his “shit detector”. The poet Donald Revell has asserted that “Poetry is about trying to put a stop to people lying to themselves. Before a tank can run over a boy in Tiananmen Square, before someone can be tortured to death in the Gestapo basements, somebody has to lie to himself.”

Reading great literature can help to refine our sensibilities by broadening and particularizing our understanding so we are less susceptible to herd mentality, more compassionate toward the voiceless, more responsive to the ideal of loving our neighbors as ourselves. The practice of reading and studying great literature makes us aware of deep archetypal patterns of human experience extending over time and across continents; it promotes respect for the variety of human cultures and man’s inborn instinct to shape and make meaning out of the chaotic flow of experience we swim in from day to day—lasting meaning, that is, which values truth and honesty, personal honor, justice and mercy, kindness and understanding, faithfulness and endurance. These are the civilizing virtues which curb our self-centeredness, lifting us away from our baser natures toward our better angels.

In spiritual practice and great books we come to understand the essential aspirations that all human beings share, and we begin to see that anyone who tries to divide the world into “us” and “them” violates the essential brotherhood of the human family. Just as a nation divided against itself cannot stand, so a world divided against itself cannot hope to engage and correct the monumental global challenges of climate change, water shortage, and environmental degradation that have begun to threaten all our futures.

Two millennia ago, one of the world’s most revolutionary heroes summarized all his lessons in the Golden Rule: DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU. To obey this commandment, to really live it day to day, requires an enormous effort of the heart and the imagination. To follow such an ethic we must each clear a quiet space in the welter and press of our own aspirations, appetites and concerns to imagine, really imagine, the needs and experience of other human beings. As years go by, we may hope that our educated sympathies will expand, just as world literature has grown over the centuries to include histories not merely of chiefs and

kings, but both rich and poor, freemen and slaves, women and children—all the living variety of human souls who are the children of God. Because, after all, not identifying with suffering Others robs us of our own humanity.

Oh, yes. And that poor abandoned mother and wife collecting empties by the tracks in Detroit? She was my husband's mother, a saintly woman of uncommon kindness and stoical patience, who had to drop out of school at the age of eleven to raise her five motherless siblings; a single mother who could not have raised her own fatherless children without Roosevelt's Aid to Dependent Children program supplemented over the years by work cleaning houses and stuffing sausages. Her son went on to graduate from Harvard and Harvard Medical School. Her daughter became a symphony violinist.