

**Inspiring Change: Treasures for the World**  
A meditation for International Women's Day 2014  
by Ruthann Knechel Johansen

***We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are.***  
--the Talmud

***What the world is, you are. What you are, the world is.***  
--attributed to a wise sage from India, *Living Zen, Loving God*, Ruben L.F. Habito

Poets and sages announce or make manifest what is not seen or recognized. From ancient times first in song and oral tales, the poets and prophets with mystical sensitivities made visible that which was hidden to most mortals. One such philosopher-poet is Chinese Lao Tzu, credited with describing the way of integrity in the *Tao te Ching*. In teaching 67 of the *Tao te Ching* we find characteristics of wise spirits capable of discerning that which is hidden:

I have three treasures,  
Held close and guarded.  
The first is love.  
The second is simplicity.  
The third is not-daring to be first beneath heaven.  
Whoever is loving can be brave;  
Whoever is simple can be generous;  
Whoever is not-daring to the first beneath heaven  
Can be a vessel of excellence.  
But to be brave without being loving,  
Generous without being simple,  
Foremost without being hindmost,  
This is to perish!

Love, simplicity, and daring not to be first do not simply open our eyes. They shape what the world is and what we are. These three virtues honored in all living religions and many cultures repeatedly turn our assumptions on their heads, encourage us to engage our greatest fears and enemies, and create a world where every place is home. On this International Women's Day, the open eyes and experience of four women—French philosopher Simone Weil, Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum, Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel, and American-Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye—inspired change in their locations and circumstances. For us today, they embody the three treasures announced as the Tao (Way) essential for cultivating poetic vision necessary to awaken to the unity of the world and ourselves.

French intellectual, teacher, and non-practicing Jew deeply attracted to Christianity, Simone Weil drew inspiration and guidance for her life from Plato, the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, and the Christian Gospels. As a selective pacifist, she expressed the three virtues of the Tao during her short thirty-four-year life in prolific journal and essay writing and in political actions for equality

and justice. Often at great risk to herself, she labored on behalf of exploited factory workers, against fascism in the Spanish Civil War, and in resistance to Hitler's advances across Europe, especially into France.

Throughout her life Weil recited George Herbert's poem "Love," which she reports she was reciting—or perhaps praying—in the chapel at Solesmes Benedictine monastery when she experienced Christ come and take possession of her.

#### Love

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here.  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I, the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My deare, then I will serve.  
You must sit down says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.

Subsequently, in one of her most important essays—"The Love of God and Affliction"—Weil writes,

Our soul is constantly clamorous with noise, but there is one point in it which is silence, and which we never hear. When the silence of God comes to the soul and penetrates it and joins the silence which is secretly present in us, from then on we have our treasure and our heart in God; and space opens before us as the opening fruit of a plant divides in two, for we are seeing the universe from a point situated outside space.

This operation can take place in only two ways, to the exclusion of all others. There are only two things piercing enough to penetrate our souls in this way; they are affliction and beauty (Eric O. Springsted, *Simone Weil: Essential Writings*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998, 70).

The evil which we see everywhere in the world in the form of affliction and crime is a sign

of the distance between us and God. But this distance is love and therefore it should be loved. This does not mean loving evil, but loving God through the evil...If we love only through what is good, then it is not God we are loving but something earthly to which we give that name (Springsted, 80).

One year before Simone Weil died, Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew in her twenties, observed the creep of Nazism into her country. A lover of poetry, particularly that of Rainer Maria Rilke, and an aspiring writer herself, Etty chronicles her outer and inner experiences leading to her deportation to Westerbork and then to Auschwitz where she died. As Nazi edicts progressively constrict and strip her life, Etty bears simple, clear witness to the evil of hatred, to her recognition of the presence of God in German soldiers she passes on the streets of Amsterdam, and to her growing capacity to love God through the evil. Her journal entries, which gradually become more deeply spiritual reflections and prayers, were published posthumously as *An Interrupted Life*. On July 12, 1942, just a few months before she was deported she penned the following prayer:

I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hope You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last.

Two decades later between 1960 and 1996 half way across the world from Europe, a brutal civil war between government forces and rebel forces in the small country of Guatemala led to the disappearance and death of many ethnic Mayans, other indigenous people, and the rural poor. Faced with the affliction of her people during that thirty year period, the poet Julia Esquivel wrote to counter despair and to open the eyes of the unseeing. Daring not to be first beneath heaven, that is without money and power, Guatemalan women and targeted peasants daily lived the Gospel hope of resurrection, graphically depicted in these words from the poet.

#### Threatened with Resurrection

They have threatened us with Resurrection  
There is something here within us  
which doesn't let us sleep, which doesn't let us rest,  
which doesn't stop the pounding deep inside.  
It is the silent, warm weeping of women without husbands  
It is the sad gaze of children fixed there beyond memory. . .

What keeps us from sleeping  
is that they have threatened us with resurrection!  
Because at each nightfall

though exhausted from the endless inventory  
of killings for years,  
we continue to love life,  
and do not accept their death!  
In this marathon of hope  
there are always others to relieve us  
in bearing the courage necessary . . .

Accompany us then on this vigil  
and you will know what it is to dream!  
You will know then how marvelous it is  
to live threatened with resurrection!  
To live while dying  
And to already know oneself resurrected.

Julia Esquivel, translated by Gloria Kinsler

Those daring to be first beneath heaven, the powerful and wealthy, submit to fear not resurrection, and defend against those living marathons of hope in the face of disappearances and genocide. The “first beneath heaven” fail to understand that the sorrows of distant lives and places inhabit and haunt all homes. What the world is, we are. What we are, the world is.

The travels of Naomi Shihab Nye have taken her to some of the world’s most prosperous cities as well as the poorest places. Some time spent in Colombia, South America, a landscape and people of great beauty also plagued by violence led her to see the pervasive presence of suffering in human life and the hunger and longing it prompts. With the three treasures and poetic insight, Shihab Nye creates a bridge between what we are and what the world is.

#### Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.  
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,

how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.  
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
it is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

The kindness Shihab Nye depicts is not self-interested politeness. It is born from long labors of love and bravery, simplicity and generosity, excellence and humility. For nearly a century—and long before that—women like Weil, Hillesum, Esquivel, Shihab Nye, and unknown farmers, grandmothers, daughters, weavers, presidents, factory workers, sisters, artists, doctors, cousins have not merely marked one day to honor women. The women represented here in their words lived in extreme circumstances with every reason to acquiesce to injustice, to give in to despair, or to turn violent. As we listen to them, we understand that what they did and said changed themselves and the world. They recognized that they and the world are not separate. With eyes and hearts attuned to the three treasures, with their choices and daily commitments they have made visible the power of love, simplicity, and humility. In doing so, they inspired change by protecting the dwelling place of the Holy in themselves and in the world. What the world is, we are. What we are, the world is.

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