

REFLECTION ON INHERENT WORTH AND DIGNITY

If someone had asked me as a young woman “What is the purpose of life?”, I’d have said, “to learn lessons”. That was later revised to “to learn to love”, and from that to: “to learn to love more perfectly.”

In my first job as a nurse, I worked in geriatric wards and was very aware of the popular book at the time called “Life After Death”. In it are accounts of near-death experiences, recounted by those returning from being clinically dead – the long tunnel, the approaching white light, the welcoming presence of familiar departed souls. Actual elderly patients discussed this imagery with me; it was not just an abstract concept.

When I subsequently went to work in Labor and Delivery, I was trained by a wonderful old battleaxe nurse named Margaret Wagner, who knew everything about Birth. She had rather eccentric ideas and gave me a book to read called “Life Before Birth”. It was based on hypnosis and recollections of past lives, and although it does sound eccentric, it presents a great analogy. It expanded the life-after-death idea into life-before-birth, and described that parents and their potential children, beings who dwell in the Light at the end of the tunnel, meet on the Astral Plane prior to birth, and agree as to what Karmic lesson they will all be working on. They then promptly forget this encounter, in order to live out the lesson.

This sense of perfect purpose is a little bit of the white light that all souls bring to life on earth. It may be hidden or unconscious during our waking lives, although some people seem to access it much more easily than others.

I think her idea was to be certain that we greeted the babies carefully, as respected old souls, and told them we were glad they are here and remind them that life here is not easy but that many people loved them and would help them. I do this to this day; the babies seem to pay attention.

Now no one knows what happens after death, or before birth, but what we think about it informs how we act in this life. I don’t pretend to know much about reincarnation, only enough to keep me comfortable with my role in life. It fits into my concept that “all are worthy, all are welcome.” It fits into my UU belief that each of us carries his/her God-self within us, as the little piece of pure white Light in our hearts that inspires us to do Good, to make the world a better place. I feel that Namaste is a spiritual calling, that we are bound to look for God in each other. The Infinite in Me Salutes the Infinite in Thee.

I now have the best job in the world. As a public health nurse, I am assigned to families who have medically fragile babies, meaning multiples, premature babies, those with complicated medical issues, or who were born very small. I offer intensive support by means of home visits every two weeks until the baby turns two. These families also have multiple (what we call) “social risk factors”,

meaning poverty most of the time, medical or mental health issues, related substance use issues, domestic violence, homelessness. They are teen moms, older moms, those who are socially isolated, immigrants. They aren't always very likeable, often times pretty defended and wary. But many of them let me into their homes, into their lives, and we play with their babies in ways to enhance their development. I, hoping to engage this distracted mother in her child's progress and personality; and she, probably wondering at first, what I want. It is such a gift when she starts to trust me, allowing me to walk with her in her life. Usually takes about a year.

There isn't really much I can DO for such folks to alter the basic facts of their lives, to make a difference. I refer the babies for further developmental therapies as needed, hook the parents up with community resources if they are agreeable, offer substance and mental health counseling by others who are trained in those areas.

Listening is what I do, listening and loving. I appreciate the unique path that the person in front of me has trod, so different from my own. It is my job to find hope and something positive in the lives of people who don't have much experience in hope. I must find the spark of God-ness, of White Light, and reflect it back. I look for the inherent worth, and I usually find it; if I don't, I feel it's my fault. In 10 years, not finding it has only happened a few times. It's hard, being present is hard, love is hard, and often heart-breaking. It is a spiritual practice. I see their pain, I see their beauty. I am honored. I am blessed.

I saw a lady on the street the other day, disheveled, dirty, a vacant look on her face. Who knows what her life is like. My thought was: this woman knows something I haven't ever needed to know. I bet I could learn a few things from her.

And I have learned a lot: about survival, about loving your children no matter what, about resilience. I strive to be respectful, to be strength-based, to be wondering. I don't think it really reflects my natural temperament to be so... but to mother these motherless moms and to love them fiercely when they don't love themselves, this is the best job in the world for me.

I no longer give money to homeless people, but I do go out of my way to make eye contact, to touch an arm or a shoulder, to say: "I see You in there, I see your God-self that you yourself may have forgotten. I'm sorry this life is hard for you. I see You."

Which reminds me of the Swahili greeting: when someone arrives, they say, "I'm here." And the other person replies, "I see you."

May we see and learn from each other. Blessed be. Namaste.