

POLITICAL PARALYSIS

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It was September 1998,

in Bloomington, Indiana. As part of a conference on “Spirituality and Ecology: No Separation,” a group of concerned citizens were gathered in the basement of Saint Paul Catholic Center. They were talking about living their ideals. Some had planted trees in Africa. Some described ways that they honor the indigenous spirit of a place, and their own ancestors. Elderly nuns and young feminists recounted their part in the women’s struggle. One frustrated woman voiced the nagging worry of many. “I want to do something, but what can I do? I’m just one person, an average person. I can’t have an impact. The world is so screwed up, and I have so little power. I feel so *paralyzed*.”

I practically exploded.

Years before I had been stricken by a debilitating illness. Perilymph fistula’s symptoms are like those of multiple sclerosis. On some days I was functional. On others — and I could never predict when these days would strike — I was literally paralyzed. I couldn’t leave the house; I could barely stand up.

I had moved to Bloomington for graduate school. I knew no one in town. I couldn’t get healthcare because I hadn’t enough money, and the Social Security Administration, against the advice of its own physician and vocational advisors, had denied my claim.

That’s why, when the conference participant claimed that just one person, one average person, can’t do anything significant to make the world a better place, I raised my hand and spoke. “I have an illness that causes intermittent bouts of paralysis,” I explained. “And that paralysis has taught me something. It has taught me that my protestations of my own powerlessness are bogus. Yes, some days I can’t move or see. But you know what? Some days I can move. Some days I can see. And the difference between being able to walk across the room and not being able to walk across the room is epic.”

I told them how I commuted to campus by foot along a railroad track. In spring I came across turtles who had gotten stuck. The track was littered with the hollowing shells of turtles that hadn’t been able to escape the rails. So I bent over, and I picked up the still-living trapped turtles that I did find. I carried them to a wooded area and let them go. I had that

much power. For those turtles, it was enough.

“I’m just like those turtles,” I said. “When I have been sick and housebound for days, I wish someone — anyone — would talk to me. To hear a human voice say my name; to be touched: that would mean the world to me.”

I told the group a story: One day an attack hit me while I was walking home from campus. It was a snowy day. There was snow on the ground, and more snow was falling from the sky. I struggled with each step, wobbled and wove across the road. I must have looked like a drunk. One of my neighbors, whom I had never met, stopped and asked if I was OK. He drove me home.

He didn’t hand me the thousands of dollars I needed for surgery. He didn’t take me in and empty my puke bucket. He just gave me one ride, one day. I am still grateful to him and touched by his gesture.

“I’ve lived in the neighborhood for years,” I said, “and so far he has been the only one to stop. The problem is not that we have so little power. The problem is that we don’t use the power that we have.”

Why do we deny that power?

Why do we not honor what we can do?

Part of the reason is that virtue is often defined as something exclusive, like a Porsche or a perfect figure, to which only the rich and famous have access. I remember when the Dalai Lama came to Bloomington in 1999. The words *virtue* and *celebrity* became synonymous. Suddenly even our barbershop scuttlebutt featured more movie stars than an article from *People* magazine. “Did you see Steven Seagal on Kirkwood Avenue? Richard Gere gets in tomorrow.” Virtue becomes something farther and farther out of the reach of the common person.

I was once a Peace Corps volunteer. I also volunteered for the Sisters of Charity, the order begun by Mother Teresa. When people learn of this, they sometimes act impressed. I am understood to be a virtuous person.

I did go far away, and I did wear foreign garb. But I don’t know that I was virtuous. I tried to be, but I was an immature, inadequately trained girl in foreign countries with obscenely unjust regimes and few avenues for progress. My impact was limited.

To put myself through college, I worked as a nurse’s aide. I earned minimum wage. I wore a pink polyester uniform and dealt with the elderly and the dying, people who went years

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— Ed.



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without seeing a loved one, who died alone. When I speak of this job, I never impress anyone. I am not understood to be a virtuous person. Rather, I am understood to be working-class.

I loved this difficult, low-paid work, but not out of any masochistic sense of personal elevation through suffering. I loved it because I physically and emotionally touched people every day, all day long: I made them comfortable; I made them laugh; I challenged them; they rose to meet the challenges. In return, patients shared with me the most precious commodity: their humanity.

This is not a protest against

selfishness, which, well done, can be beautiful. There is nothing I envy, and appreciate, so much as a life led with genuinely unconscious, uncomplicated self-absorption. It's a sort of karmic performance art. Isn't that why some people so love

observing cats? And I do not begrudge anyone's enthusiasm for glamour; there's nothing I like more. The right dress worn by the right starlet on Oscar night probably does as much to feed the soul as a perfect haiku.

Rather, I'm protesting the fallacy that to be virtuous one must be on TV, or one must be off to a meeting on how to be a better person, or one must have just come from a meeting on how to be a better person (while passing up every opportunity to actually *be* a better person).

It's sad how "virtue celebrities" sometimes intimidate us with their virtue résumés. We think, *Gee, I'll never travel to Malaysia and close a sweatshop; I'm not brave enough* (or organized enough, or articulate enough) *to champion a cause. I have to go to work every day, and I just don't have the time or the gifts to be a virtuous person.*

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