

unconditional respect

I have a need to tell a 'heart' story. Personal. If that bothers you, don't read this. You may think that I am a typical western intellectual; only a smallish part of me is. A more important part of me is a native, indigenous person of no particular culture. All indigenous cultures I know share this way of being. I can only talk about this part of me by telling little stories.

As you may know, I grew up in Indonesia, in a then very small town. My father, a doctor, worked in public health we would say now; then it was called hygiene. Often I went with him and a native doctor to outlying villages where the two doctors would treat wounds and fevers but always also talked about boiling water for drinking, washing hands, keep wounds clean, safe waste disposal. Today those may be small things but then the little things often had big effects. My mother, daughter of a Mennonite minister, had a college education. In a way both my parents were fairly typical European intellectuals. We had a thousand books in the house, western magazines. My father could have been a concert pianist, we had a 'tropicalized' grand piano in the house. I know my parents were good people. The people of the town as well as the people of the villages all around knew, or knew of, my father. It was only years later that I understood that, particularly my mother, was concerned that I was getting too 'native.' Most of the kids I went to school with were Malay, or Chinese, or mixed; very few white kids.

We had 'servants'. I have always put that word in quotes; I hate what it means, prefer not to use it at all. I know that my parents were good to them, they had vacations, they were paid well I think, their health needs were taken care of, they shared our food and we shared their kind of food. I remember few changes: for fifteen years we had mostly the same group of people living in the back, families with children I played with. I still think of them as my other family.

My mother frequently said things like, "if you do so and so I will love you," or, "mother won't love you any more if you do that." The idea that 'love' was something that could be given or withheld, depending on what I did, or thought, or said, confused me. Particularly because I learned as a very young child that I could go to he back and there would be a lap I could sit in, a shoulder to cry on. Nobody would make demands on me, nor withhold the comfort of a warm human touch. Even as a child I knew it was given naturally, freely; human to human.

When I was eight I ran away from home. The day before, back from school I went to the river behind our house, sometimes 15 feet or more (5 meters) below the ground, and in the monsoon season sometimes it rose so high that water flowed into our garden and under the house (carrying interesting animals!). But that day the river was low, low enough for the neighbor's elephants to be brought over to wash and play in the water. There was a path on the edge of the river, and it happened that behind our house was the steep, stepped, path down to the river. I had seen the elephants before, of course, and knew the mahout, the young man (he was 14 at the time) who sat just behind the head of the lead elephant (the oldest female), guiding them. Elephants love water, and the depth was just right so that the two young elephants could swim and now and then rest with their trunks above the water. The large adults were very careful to keep an eye on the baby. The mahout and I had talked about 'his' elephants, how they love water, what they eat, how much he cared for them and they for him. He told me about the river, and what a wonderful cook his mother was, she made a certain kind of curry that I had tasted once. At our house we cooked Indonesian or western food. Later he got the elephants to come out of the water, shake themselves more or less dry. They all headed for home.

I walked back to our house, deep in thought. The river, elephants, curry, the animals that washed up when the river was exceptionally high, weather — many thoughts. As I walked up the steps into our house (no doors) my mother, who I had not noticed, spoke up and said in a harsh tone, “what did you do, what is going on?” Do? I didn’t ‘do’ anything except watch elephants and talk to the mahout. But I did not say that. I was not sure how to say all the things that were in my head, I was still trying to put it all together. My mother seemed to get upset, “You can tell me: what did you do, what are you thinking?”

When you are eight years old that kind of question is not answerable. I kept saying “nothing, I did not do anything, I am just thinking...”

Mother sent me to my room “until you tell me what you did.”

Later my father came to my room, asking the same question. What did I do? By that time I was even more confused. My father told me to stay in my room without supper. I vaguely remember that someone snuck into my room and gave me some soup and water — not my parents or my sister.

Maybe I did not sleep much that night. The next morning, very early, before the sun was up, I walked away. Our house was fairly far from the main road to town. Unpaved, dusty road, with no houses. I got to the ‘big road’, turned to town. I’m sure I had no plan where I was going to go, I just walked away. Then I heard our car behind me. I knew the sound of our car, and at that time of day there was no other traffic. I looked back, saw that our driver was driving the car. His name was Udin. He stopped, turned the engine off, got out of the car, and hunkered down on the grass with his arms wide.

I ran to him, he held me. What is writ large in my memory is that *he did not say anything*. He did not ask what I had done, he had no accusing tone of voice. He said nothing, but he held me close. At that moment I understood something important. I realized that all I needed was the comfort of his human warmth. To be accepted exactly as I was, no questions asked.

Later, I learned to call that unconditional love.

We in the west have all kinds of meanings for the word ‘love’. Being in love, loving something or someone — or not loving something or someone. That is not what I mean with unconditional love. To me that is total, unconditional, acceptance of another just as he or she is. Has little to do with liking. An acceptance of a common humanity perhaps, although I can also unconditionally love an animal or a plant. It means no judgement, no preconceived idea, no prejudice. Westerners have lost that way of being, I think. We have loaded the word love with so many conditions that it has become fairly meaningless.

The other day I heard a short lecture by Karen Armstrong, a famous woman who studied ‘religion’, all religions. She has written a number of excellent, often scholarly books about many of the world’s religions but in this talk she pleads with an appealing urgency for the recovery of what has been called The Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would to be done by.” There are endless variations of that concept. She stresses that every single religion has that idea at its core. I believe that also. In fact, I feel as strongly as she that this is the only thing that can save us, our species. We must learn again what Man has always known, that to live with each other we must accept each other, unconditionally.

Her talk is worth watching; 21 minutes —-

<http://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_let_s_revive_the_golden_rule.html>

I know that I have been blessed to learn this so early in life. It has always worked for me. I have found it everywhere — no, that is not true. I have found it everywhere where people were poor, simple, indigenous, aboriginal, of an ancient culture; not in board rooms or among the rich or the super educated.

There was a time when I traveled all over the world. Once I had a fairly long stop-over in Calcutta, now Kolkata. That city was known to have very poor people. Yes, I always sought out people who lived at the bottom of the heap. Took a bus to town, walked around. Yes, beggars, lepers, obviously poor people thronging the streets. I followed my nose that had discovered a delicious smell. An old woman was selling some pastries that looked and smelled wonderful. I did not have any local money, at the airport I had been able to pay for a bus pass with dollars. Now, on the street, I reached into my pocket, found a dollar bill, held it out to the woman. She pushed my hand away, did not accept the dollar, but not before closing my hand around one of those curried breads, then bent over and touched my hand with her forehead. A man gently touched me on the shoulder. “That means she is giving you a blessing,” he said softly. I asked him, “how can I give her a blessing?” He smiled, “eat the bread.” Both the woman and the man watched me as I slowly savored every last bite of a truly fragrant, crisp little roll. Neither the woman nor the man would accept my dollar but I knew that what we had shared cannot be bought with dollars.

A Persian man taught me that accepting a gift graciously can be as good as, or better than giving.

In the war I had a girl friend whose parents had what she called ‘an old-fashioned Jewish household’. I asked what that meant. She laughed, “we always set the table with one more plate than there are people; for the unexpected guest.” I have been in Muslim households where they did the same.

When I finished high school I wanted to study medicine in Indonesia — the only country I really knew. There was a very good university, but my mother insisted that I must go to Europe ‘to get culture’ by which she meant concerts, musea, books. In short, Civilization. It never quite worked that way. I found out soon enough that what culture I had felt a lot warmer and more comfortable than the rich but somehow artificial art and music that I was supposed to make my own. I do not relate well to art that is so huge that it can only be admired in a public building or a museum. I like art that can be outside, that blends with the plants and trees. I like music that comes from the heart rather than the brain. I can appreciate the virtuoso in art or music, but it does not speak to me. I entered university, studied medicine. My parents and my sister were still in Indonesia. My father sent me a generous amount of money each month. The war started officially two weeks after I arrived in the Netherlands. It was seven months later that the country was invaded, overrun, occupied. For a few years my monthly support check arrived. Until the early days of 1942 when the Japanese occupied Indonesia. From one day to the next my source of income dried up, I had to find a way to support myself. I had no skills, no experience. My first thought was that whatever it was I could find to do had to be something with plants or animals. I went to the poorest part of the city. Walked into a florist. In the Netherlands everyone has flowers in the house, a blooming plant in winter, and cut flowers the rest of the year. This was a very small shop, catering to poor people. The owner, a rail thin man of perhaps 40, asked me what he could do for me. I need a job, I told him, briefly explained my situation. Okay, he said, I’ll teach you, and pay you enough to live on and go to school,. That was my first job. I

learned enormously from him, about plants, flowers, but also about how to live a good life without much money. He invited me for dinner that first day. I met his wife and three children. Wonderful, warm friends — total strangers only an hour earlier.

Many years later. In an open boat a six hour trip to a small island, population fifteen souls, as we say. An old man, an older woman, a few children of many ages, adults. What grew on that atoll was palm trees and some sweet potato; the ground pure sand. The four of us that came in the boat were feasted with a party on the beach. We had brought large water melons, they provided I have forgotten how many different kinds of fish, crabs, shrimp, sea cucumber (a rubbery taste, salty), and of course coconut milk, coconut water, shredded and crisped coconut meat. When we were all full to bursting I asked the people of the island what they were going to eat tomorrow. They burst out in loud laughter that turned into singing and then dancing. It got too late for us to return, so we made ourselves comfortable in the soft sand (NOT under a coconut tree, of course!). The next morning, we all bathed in the lagoon (salt water) and drank coconut water. I asked again, “and what will you eat the rest of the day?” Again they laughed, and said they would fish, as usual. But having guests was such a treat that they would be content to eat nothing for a week for having guests like us. “Come back, come back,” they called after us, when we left.

And another story, Manuia is on my web site

Now almost fifty years ago we moved to Hawai'i. I had a new job — a 'position' — professor of Public Health. We lived on the other side of the island, I commuted on the most beautiful road in the world, in long curves up a steep mountain, through a short tunnel, down to Honolulu and the University. At first it took 20 minutes, now it probably takes double that. I often gave a ride to hitchhikers. One of them a young man who told me the short version of why he was now at one of the military bases on the island. He had volunteered for the army when he was barely old enough, to escape from an abusive father who used to slam him against the walls of their 'trailer' when he was drunk. The boy was sent to VietNam. He described himself as 'neutral' but he did what he was told to do. Until one day he had come across a little girl with a bleeding forehead, a shrapnel wound. He had taken her to the army doctor, but had been rudely shooed away: they only treated soldiers, not civilians. He told me he had thought about that for days, nights. Finally he had gone to his commanding officer and handed him his rifle. “Here, you can have it, I'm not going to shoot any more.” The officer tried to argue, got very mad. The officer asked what craziness had fallen on this soldier who did not want to be a soldier any more. The boy said he had thought about it deeply and decided that killing or shooting at unarmed children was obscene. The officer jumped out of his chair and yelled “f..cking is obscene.” The boy said in a flat voice, “I just walked away. Now they are going to court martial me.”

Last night had two dreams that I felt were 'important'. They were not pleasant dreams because they seemed to put a mirror in front of my face, stories to illustrate that I am not practicing what I preach. The first dream began with a work project that I was doing — I don't remember what it was we were doing, but it was hard work. There were four of us, silently lifting and moving things. Two of them were perhaps two of my sons, the other a young man my sons' age group. After we finished whatever it was we were doing we silently dispersed, but not before the 'other

young man' had softly asked me to help him with a clean-up job he had to do yet. I agreed, and we walked over to the restaurant he had to clean. It was now after midnight in the dream, a generous moon, but dark. The restaurant, it turned out, was a cave high in a sheer cliff. I recognized the place because in a dream long ago I had done the rock climbing that was required to reach the restaurant on foot. The cliff was almost vertical, with a path fairly well marked but minimal in places, with copper-colored hooks to hold on while a foot would search for a slight hump to stand on. There was another entrance to the cave, of course, a tunnel for cars, but to reach the tunnel we would have to walk quite a distance on top of the cliff. To my own surprise I said very firmly that I refused to walk the difficult path. I knew I had done it once before, that I had made it, but that in places it was difficult and felt dangerous. The young man did not argue, but set out by himself across the cliff face. I woke up, dismayed, confused. Why had I refused to help the young man who had helped us? An inner voice whispered excuses, at my age, it is too late in the night, you are tired. Yes, but still I felt ashamed.

Fell asleep again and very early morning had another vivid dream. I was in a room with quite a few others, working on computers. We were all busy doing our own thing. There was a haze in the room, a sort of cloud that got thicker as we worked. Occasionally we would talk a few words, but the work was interesting. We knew each other well, had worked together for a while. The cloud got thicker and smelled. No, I did not 'smell' anything in the dream, but I knew—perhaps someone had said it—that it was pollution. One man, perhaps the boss, turned a fan on and did something on his computer that moved the cloud away. We asked him what he had programmed, we all joined to talk, talked about what had been done to control the fan and perhaps did other things to remove the cloud. When we went back to work, the fan softly purring, a voice came from a far corner that sounded like a kind of droning at first and then I recognized as a prayer. I did not hear the words but perhaps, probably, vaguely recognized the religion in which such droning prayers fitted. Then a man's voice closer by carried on with another long prayer that I could identify — again, not by the words so much as by the repetition of certain phrases. The voice was not strong, tentative, hesitant almost. It irritated me. For some reason I felt it was 'inappropriate' to say a prayer of thanks when a computer and a fan had removed a bad cloud. I woke up, ashamed of my reaction. My first thought was, two dreams, one after the other, to tell me that I should be ashamed of myself.

All day the dreams and my feelings about myself went through my head. What was it the dreams said to me? How could, or should, I change my attitude?

Slowly, gradually, late afternoon, some other thoughts came into my head. With a flash the memory of running away from home came back, and Udin's arms around me. Not saying a word. The old woman in Kolkata, a gesture but not a word. And I thought, as I do frequently, of the Sng'oi, the aboriginal people I got to know in Malaysia. The first time I met them we had no words, no common language, but something communicated. In my book I write "I fell in love with these people." Very awkward choice of words. Ten years later came across a book, *The Tree Where Man was Born* by Peter Matthiessen, famed travel writer. In a few paragraphs he tells of an encounter with five 'pygmies' (aboriginal people) in East Central Africa. The five hunters, "much smaller than their bows" smile. Matthiessen writes "my smile seems to travel right around my head. The encounter in the sunny wood is much too simple, too beautiful to be real, yet it is more real than anything i have known in a long time. I feel a warm flood of relief, as if I had been away all my life and had come home again." That is what I felt when I first met the Sng'oi. We had no words, but I had come home again. I accepted them totally as they were, and they accepted me. We talked in smiles, later in touch, and of course I learned a bit of their language.

Much later we had some words, a few words of Malay that they understood and a few words of their language I learned. But always the real compassion — literally feeling with — is wordless. Often when I asked a question (westerners are full of them) after a long pause one person would answer, with one word. But almost always that one word opened a whole new way of thinking, understanding, to me.

Now I understand the dreams differently. It was all right for me to not make that difficult crossing to help the young man who had helped us. He did not express any disappointment. He accepted without a word; went on his way. And I have the right to be tired, to be cautious, to be who I am. As others have the right to express their gratitude in prayers if that is who they are. I did not sense a real commitment in the man who went on and on repeating names of God perhaps. But who am I to judge another's sincerity. That was his way; I have other ways.

For me words are often a barrier. Touch, a look, communicate better for me than words. Others may feel more comfortable expressing feelings in words, or in prayer, even the frequent use of an automatic phrase, like Inshallah, although, I must admit, that often it is quite clear whether it is meant as a casual God willing, as we might say, or a deeply devout 'if it is the Will of God'.

Of course I know that people from other cultures have other customs. Our western world has become a mishmash of cultures, thickly overlaid with the culture of entertainment and a culture of the Media that has decided that 'news' must be given in tiny bytes, dressed in personality, tightly packed between advertising that has become propaganda.

The language of words gets in the way. We have forgotten other ways to communicate.

Probably that is also why I find our modern way to communicate strange and difficult: through little gadgets that are telephone and camera and computer, or through 'social networks' where we can write to a million strangers in 140 abbreviated words.

I need to see, to touch, to feel something beyond words — or before words. My age of course; I don't belong in this artificial, wordy world...

Too many words to communicate such a simple basic human quality!

Accept as you would want to be accepted

Respect as you would want to be respected

Love as you would want to be loved.

robert wolff, 21 february 2010