

A LARGER VIEW

*A Commentary On How Current Events Reflect—
Or Not—Our Spiritual Search*

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Loving Their Children More

A while back NYT columnist Tom Friedman wrote a column about the Middle East where he suggested that people of the region were going to have to decide they loved their children more than they hated each other. Maybe it hasn't come to pass in a big way, but it may be beginning. A young Israeli Jew hurt by a Hamas rocket and a young Palestinian girl hurt by Israeli missile during Israel's Gaza war have made friends at Alyn Hospital in Jerusalem. Through them their families have also become friendly and as they are, they are engaging others on the floor. The boy's mother noting that at Alyn Hospital political tensions do not exist, asked, "Do we need to suffer in order to learn that there is no difference between Jews and Arabs?"

The Time To Ask

We're closer to finding out if there's life out there! We're four to five years away from it, or as Simon Worden, an astronomer who heads NASA's Ames Research Center, said, getting to the bottom of that question. That is because the Kepler telescope is making numerous new discoveries possible. Of course the question of whether or not humans are alone in the universe is important. But as we near the answer, there is a question that is even more important: What would we do should we find a planet with life—or at least what we call life? Would we as in the movie *Avatar*, start extracting its resources? Would we colonize it, use it as a penal colony, as an overflow for overpopulation? Would the idea of ownership lead to conflicts, and with whom? If the planet had inhabitants, how would we treat them, with honor for their traditions? The time to begin asking questions is not when we would be so excited about an important discovery, our emotions would likely interfere with a rational decision. The time is now, when we still have a modicum of objectivity.

Fair Trade

Every Tuesdays a full page ad in the Los Angeles Times flaunts the produce of the 99cents Only Stores, tomatoes, carrots, peppers, eggplants, berries, bananas, cauliflower, apples, and a lot more, a growing list in varying amounts for 99cents. What is striking is the discrepancy between those prices and those of any supermarket. One may during special sales and for a limited time get something for 99 cents, when one more than likely can get a pepper or a pound of apples. The low prices beg the question, how can they be possible? There's a grower, farm workers, a distributor, a grocery chain and somewhere in there a middleperson or two. Each must make a profit. For some, like the farm workers, profit is more expandable than for others. It could be that the price is too low to be fair to all those involved. In an era when we are so conscious about carbon footprints and the benefits of organic, we may need to become more conscious of one more issue, fair trade, that is to ensure that no one is exploited, that no one suffers in the process of getting food to our table. Yes, some of the people who shop at the 99cents Only Stores are on tight budgets, and that is a concern since including fair trade into the goods we consume does raise the price. And yet some would be the very people who would benefit from the increase in wages and benefits of fair trade practices. For those of us who would not directly benefit, there is the issue of conscience and of knowingly participating in what would help many others. Fair trade already matters in goods such as carpets and some coffees, but it ought to apply to across the board.

General Approbation?

Massachusetts has become the first state to require tooth brushing in pre-schools and day care centers for any child who has at least one meal there or attends more than four hours a day. The program came as a result of a 2003 state study which found that one in four

Massachusetts kindergartners have dental disease. Parents who feel strongly against can opt out. One would think such a small program dealing with health, education, prevention and young children, would have general approbation. Of course, it doesn't. There are those who believe it an intrusion of the government—though it would seem less intrusive than traffic laws—and there are those who even are concerned about the spread of germs from toothbrushes and the spitting associated with brushing—though that would be so for any tooth brushing in anyone's home. The inevitable objections may be a sign of the age we live in, where general approbation is elusive even for the most benign issue, but it does not make it constructive.

Let's Be Informed

A survey by the Public Policy Institute of California had some revealing, if disturbing findings. Californians haven't any idea where the state gets its money or how it spends it. And yet the survey shows Californians want themselves to be in charge rather than the governor or the legislature. The institute pollster Mark Baldassare found that only 6% of Californians could identify both the biggest revenue source and the biggest expenditure. "It seems to me that what you need as a starting point are some basic facts about where the money comes from and where it's going, to make sound fiscal decisions, and they don't have that base of knowledge," he said. Voting in the dark can hardly be called responsible. Thinking you know what's involved in the issues when you don't can't be the basis for anything good. And yet, it does seem that is what happens, in California as in other states, with local as with national issues. Regardless, here is a big problem that is easy to fix and without any price tag—let's be informed.

The Jaipur Foot

The Jaipur foot comes from the Blagwan Mahaveer Viklang Shayata Samiti organization, no doubt unknown to most of us. Nevertheless, it does something worthwhile, important and wonderful. It provides artificial limbs for people who have been victims of work accidents or land mines, and it provides those limbs free of charge. It's based in the western desert state of Rajasthan whose capital is Jaipur, hence the name. The person usually goes there and workers take a day or two to fashion an artificial leg or foot. It's crude, made from locally available materials but it serves its purpose and some can even learn how to run with their new foot. Since it began in 1975 it has fitted around one million people. It costs them about \$40 per prosthesis but they do not charge. Now MIT has heard of their work and is trying to adapt it and improve upon it. Problem is in the US cost becomes a major issue, a prosthesis would cost \$8,000 or \$9,000. It is hoped MIT can provide funding as well as an upgraded technology. Still, it's remarkable what can be done when profit does not determine outcome.

Website of Interest? www.mapsofwar.com/images/EMPIRE17.swf

This is a presentation more than a site, showing 5,000 years of history in a 90 second flash animation. There are no politics or controversies, just colors and shapes showing which empires and rulers covered what territory from 3000 B.C.E. to 2006. It shows patterns and helps us see major historical movements. It also gives us pause that empires, like people, come and go.

To Ponder On

"One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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