



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Appliance Violence

I first learned about appliance violence years ago, while reading *The Holton Recorder*, the newspaper of Holton, Kansas. The headline read: *Hunter bags fridge*. The story was about a rural Whiting woman whose refrigerator stopped running:

...a repairman found the cause. A bullet had passed through a refrigerator wall at a critical point. The slug, from a high powered rifle was found in a drawer at the bottom of the refrigerator. Not only had the bullet struck the refrigerator, it had passed through two walls (including an outside wall) of the house and two pieces of stuffed furniture.

[The local sheriff said] “*the shot that killed the woman’s refrigerator was not a criminal act,*” but warned, “*People need to realize that some of those high powers (bullets) go three miles.*”

I saw the article as a cautionary tale for people who live in rural areas and

hunters. I laughed over the clever headline and relished another piece of fine writing by my friend, Leslie, who was the paper’s editor.

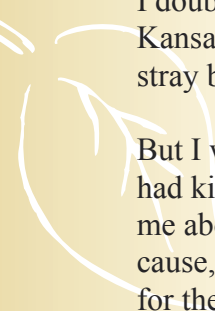


Then Sam told me about the darker side of appliance violence.

When I met him at the door, I liked Sam right away. Tall and lanky in his neat uniform, toolbox at his

side, he impressed me as a young man who was on his way up.

I led him down the basement stairs and introduced him to my dryer. He was here on a routine maintenance call. In a weak moment I had purchased a protection plan from a persuasive salesman. This was against my principles. I believe manufacturers should make things that won’t break. I resent writing out



a big check, while the clerk is telling me that what I am buying is likely to fall apart in a year or too, so I really ought to pay more money now to fix their rickety machine in the future. I doubt if the woman in Whiting, Kansas had a protection plan with a stray bullet clause for her fridge.

But I was weak. The salesman had kids to feed. And after he told me about the horrible fires dryers cause, I caved. Since I had paid for the darn plan, I figured I ought to take advantage of the annual maintenance check.

Sam laid out his tools, pried up the top of the dryer and set to work. When I returned half an hour later he said, “I have never in four years of servicing appliances ever seen a dryer as clean as yours. There was not any lint. I even lifted off the bottom plate to check under there – spotless.”

I demurred, “Well there is just me and I don’t do big washes.”

“Oh no!” he assured me. “I have been in homes with single people whose dryers are dirty within six months. This one has not been checked for two years.”

“No dog hairs?” I asked. “Spiders,

crickets? I had a lizard down here last summer and mice this fall.”

“Nope,” shaking his head. “I have never seen anything like this.”

I need tell you this made my day. One has to grab for any accolades that are offered in this life. A clean dryer award from a repair man is all that I need to smile for the rest of the week.

“You must see a lot of things in your job, coming into people’s houses, their basements, moving out their refrigerators...” I asked, feeling a little superior now.

“Oh yes. It’s awful. People threaten me. They are so mad their appliance is broken. They are mean. I have had people pull guns on me. One woman shot at me. Hit my truck. Put a hole in the side, as I was walking around to come up to her house. Sometimes I have to leave and go drive around the block out of sight and call the police. I even put in to work in customer satisfaction, but it was just as bad there. And they don’t pay as much.”

I wanted to be sure I had heard him correctly. “People draw guns on you over their appliances?”

“Yes. All the time. They get so mad. I am not going to do this work anymore. It’s not safe. My fiancé wants me to quit.” He went on to tell me of the two job offers he had.

I live in Topeka, Kansas, where some people still have a Wild West swagger and hold fiercely to their right to bear arms and protect their property. Okay. Kansas is Kansas.

However, what I cannot understand is how someone could feel so threatened, or so powerless, that he or she would feel a right to draw a gun on the appliance repair man.

I have been thinking about the people who shoot at repairmen or repairwomen, those who take aim at the random person in the mall, or shoot to kill the guy stealing their TV. Sometimes such people may be mentally ill. Sometimes they rightfully feel threatened. Sometimes they are just really pissed off.

Here are questions the current gun debate in our country poses for me:

- What do I do, if I do not get what I want or need?
- What do I do, if I get so mad I can’t stand it and want to kill someone?
- What do I do, if I feel so afraid and

powerless that I want an arsenal of weapons to protect myself?

- What do I do, if I suffer grief, frustration, oppression, or injustice?

I am not saying weapons never have a place. I am not against weapons, but I am for people having a wide range of options for handling conflict, frustration, fear, and pain. It is certainly not always the case, but when my only response is to threaten someone’s life with a gun, I have reached a radical impoverishment of intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual resources. My freedom and dignity as a human being, as well as that of the one I perceive as my enemy, are deeply compromised.

There appears to me, to be in some people, a gaping lack of the personal resources to handle strong emotions, manage anger, frustration, disappointment, fear, and threat without resorting to hostility or violence. There are often good reasons for this lack – PTSD, extreme stress, illness, and other experiences that chew at people’s souls.

I am thinking about the guy out on Croco Road sitting in his cold house with his gun across his lap, waiting for the furnace repair truck to drive up. I am thinking about the woman who walks into the Quick Stop and shoots

the clerk to get fifty dollars. What sort of despair, sense of powerlessness, and desperation breed these acts? I am thinking about the gang member required to shoot someone to establish his credibility.

We watch the brutal personal attacks on prominent entertainers, sports figures, politicians and other leaders, the cruel “gotcha” tweets and Facebook rants. Children and adults are bullied into despair or suicide.

I am thinking of the terrorist, the mentally ill person, the victims of injustice and oppression, who find no other option than to take up a weapon or set off a bomb to get reparation for the suffering and loss they feel.

There is a time to take up weapons, but also a time to lay them down. It appears to me that many people do not know how to tell time, how to thoughtfully, rationally discern how best to get their needs met. For me weapons are not as much an issue as why we want them so much to even scores, maintain a sense of power and control, and manage our anxiety and fear.

Seeking a More Excellent Way
I believe a sign of the maturity and

social development of a culture is not the size of its arsenals and fire power or access to weapons, but the depth of its restraint and the richness of its citizens’ internal and external resources for coping with the inevitable frustrations and sorrows of being human.

Through our faith traditions, science, medicine, psychology, community resources, art, education, and our open hearts, we as a culture have a treasure trove of resources to help us deal with the agonies of being human. There is more help available than ever before.

There is a more excellent way. We have great arsenals for peacemaking stockpiled in the teachings of our spiritual leaders, saints, and the faiths of the world. We know how to teach our brains to be more compassionate and lower our blood pressure. We know how to help those among us who are mentally ill. We know how to be there for one another in tough times. We understand what breeds desperation, poverty, and despair. We can recognize and respond to injustice.

Right Relationship More Important than Being Right

In a recent Facebook post, writer Parker J. Palmer referring to a poem by the Rumi, commented:

I'm a great fan of thinking clearly, grounded in the most reliable facts I can find. I love sound ideas! But when I see how conflicting ideas of "what is" and "what ought to be" are leading us to dismiss, demonize, even destroy one another at home and abroad, I yearn for the "field" Rumi points to in this well-known poem.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense.

Melena Jelaluddin Rumi
13th century

I'm not making the case for an anti-intellectualism that disdains facts and reason. That path, too, leads to ruin. I'm making the case that it's more important to be in right relationship than to be right! Only when we are in right relationship can we hang in with one another long enough to explore complex questions of "what is" and "what ought to be" and come to a deeper understanding of them.

Parker J. Palmer
(Facebook page, July 26, 2015)

One of the tasks of deepening spiritual maturity and wisdom is to let go of our need to be right and to clobber someone whose views differ from ours. Such letting go requires a kind of crucifixion of our ego and intellect.

Sometimes we may hang more fiercely to our opinions and beliefs, than to our possessions, power, or status. It is the nature of the mind to seek meaning for its pain, which may lead us into finding someone to blame, or convert to our way of seeing things.

The practices of faith offer us ways to take responsibility for our pain and anger rather than inflicting them on others. Our faith in God, our communities, and Christ living within us hold us accountable for our actions. We become more awake and aware of our inner lives and how they affect our outward behavior.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

Romans 12: 17-21 Message

What Does this Self-Awareness Look Like?

One of my clients sits down. We exchange a few words of welcome. Silence falls upon us. After a few moments, she blurts out, “I am so vain! I can’t believe how many times a day I look at myself in the mirror.” She makes a face, leans back in the chair, smiles sheepishly.

Well there it is, a profound and unpleasant awareness thrown out into the open. She is frustrated, embarrassed, and relieved to have spoken aloud this truth about herself. She is not self-pitying or putting herself down, she has just discovered a truth that is going to set her free.

I see this repeated over and over:
I am so critical and judgmental. I have this river of resentment. I feel so jealous. I can’t let go of what she did to me. I get so angry that I yell at the kids. I want to learn how to be more loving. I can’t stand this person in my church. I think I am drinking too much. I might be addicted to Facebook.

Such insight and awareness often come as an Oh, My gosh! aha moment. A person may ask, “What can I do to stop this?” When I hear this kind of authenticity, I know that most of the hard work has already been accomplished at this point. When an internal reality is brought into the light

of conscious awareness, change has already begun. The desire for a change and the vision of the possibility of being less critical or angry or resentful opens a way for the Spirit to work within us.

Such awareness often comes with the consistent practice of prayer which listens more, than talks to God. Around 1977 I began taking time to sit in silence before a Celtic cross in the cemetery across the street from my home in Kalamazoo, Michigan. One day in the spring of 1978 I dashed off letter to my friend Christy who lived in Ann Arbor.

I am so sick and tired of how critical I am, how I constantly seek people’s approval, how I am always trying to be better and smarter than everyone else. It just wears me out.

The letter was a long confession of things I had discovered about myself I didn’t like. The list all came to me in a rush as I wrote to my friend. After I mailed the letter, I felt a great relief, a burden lifted. Within 24 hours I heard a call from God to become a minister, a profession I had never considered before.

Another time walking toward my car after spending a day at the hermitage I found myself saying out loud, “I have

been a spiritual prick!” Yes, that was the word that was given. I suddenly saw how pompous and superior and arrogant I had been behaving. I didn’t feel hurt or shame, just a great relief and freedom. It was like shedding a stinky, heavy old scaly skin I had been weighed down with. I laughed all the way home.

My friend Sam is headed for a better, safer job. No one has a right to bear arms over his broken dishwasher. And no one ought ever to have to feel so unable to get her needs met that she must have a gun in order to do that. Of course there are exceptions: hunters, ranchers, farmers, collectors, and shooting sports. I am writing about the misuse of guns to impose my will on other persons, when my life or other lives are not in danger. No one should have to carry so much pain or anger inside she can’t stand it.

We can do better than this.
We are better than this.

Loretta F. Ross

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The river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Revelation 22: 2-3

FOR REFLECTION

A warlord stormed with his troops into a Buddhist monastery and came before the abbot waving his sword. The abbot stood firm and calm. “Don’t you know I can run you through with this sword without batting an eye?” the warlord thundered at the abbot.

The abbot replied, “Don’t you know I can be run through without batting an eye?” At those words, the warlord put down his sword, bowed before the Abbot and left with his troops.

Jesus allowed himself to be crucified and run through with a sword, rather than take arms against

his persecutors. He told his disciples to follow him and do the same.

- What would it mean for you to discover that deep inner well of courage, peace, and quiet trust in God that allows a person to stand before evil and sin without batting an eye?
- Are there warlords in your life bullying, brandishing weapons, abusing power, terrorizing? Have you discovered inner resources and options for responding without becoming enmeshed in battle yourself?



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