



Reaching from the stars

Will Wilkinson, Saturday, December 28, 2019

"Reach for the stars" is one of many popular motivational injunctions.

"Go big or stay home" is another. And, "Shoot for the moon... if you miss, you'll end up in the stars."

In other words, think big.

All these articulate an aspirational mindset, a desire to achieve, to make something of ourselves in the world. It works. We can read books to learn formulas for success, we can watch TED talks, documentaries and heroic films to get inspired. We can listen to friends (and ourselves) tell stories of triumph over adversity.

What could be wrong with this approach to living?

There's an odd phrase in Revelation, the last book in the Bible, which acknowledges the many worthy accomplishments of various churches, then adds (note my minor edit into modern language): "But I have somewhat against you, because you have forgotten your first love."

I'm certainly not a Biblical scholar, but I do know that interpreting the meaning in Revelation has long puzzled those who are. This phrase, though, seems easy to understand.

What is "your first love?" God, any religious person would answer. Because I believe it's important to exclude no one, I'll word that differently: the source of life. Our first love is life itself, to love life, to be grateful to be alive. And, let's acknowledge an obvious fact: we do forget to do that.

Who forgets? The spurned lover who shoots his ex-girlfriend. The well connected lawyer who deceives to steer money to himself and his clients. The dictator who orders genocide and imprisons those who resist him. The priest who preys on children in private, then prays in church on Sunday. And you and me, when we attack others (most of us are well constrained by society so we use words, not bullets) for being different than we are.

Those of us who dare face our personal hypocrisy may join the legions of those on a self-improvement path. We might read those books I mentioned, join support groups, seek out counseling and therapy, intent on fixing our faults. This also works, and millions of us could gratefully confirm it.

What could be wrong with this approach?

Without judging what's clearly been successful, can we simultaneously explore this missing component, described as "your first love?" What would it mean to also be successful in this? I had a recent experience that really opened my eyes.

I attended a local one-day conference convened by the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. My role was to moderate three panels, populated by notable individuals who brought with them a wide variety of viewpoints, some of them in direct conflict with each other. But we managed to create meaningful dialogue, and I left thoroughly inspired by how we did it.

Instead of reaching for some kind of consensus, we reached from a common vantage point. Our focus was peace, increasing peace in the world — as an experience, not just a theory. As the moderator, I understood that it would be more than ironic if we did not actually have the experience while we talked about it. That involved, as it turned out, not praying for peace or negotiating 10 new commandments into a declaration for millions to sign, but simply listening to each other without judgment and weaving together a collaborative experience that relied on our differences to be whole.

It occurred to me that we weren't reaching "for" the stars with an ambitious plan to make the world a more peaceful place. We were actually reaching "from" the stars," from an elevated viewpoint where we could see how our different perspectives were not really in conflict with each other but were variations on a common theme: peace.

Connecting this experience back to that provocative comment from Revelation, I wonder what might happen if we did put loving life first? I think that's what we were doing at the conference, and it was inspirational. We left with renewed hope for the world, simply because we shared a priority: having an increased experience of peace during those hours together.

Now we can continue working vigorously in the world to make it so, but hopefully without forgetting our first love.

Will Wilkinson, Ashland Global Peace Conference moderator, co-founded the Thriving Leadership Academy, author who recently launched a unique global peace campaign, which can be found at www.noonclub.org.