

A REFLECTION ON MIRRORS AT EIGHTY

*The days of our life are 70 years, or perhaps 80, if we are strong.
They are soon gone and we fly away.*

Turning 80 is an opportunity for me to look at my life, in part through the lens of my life verse:
:

*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
We all, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord
are transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.
This is by the Lord the Spirit.*

Mirrors fascinate me—there’s one in every room in our house except one. I can’t pass by one without taking a look. There is one mirror I remember especially because it recorded an epochal change when I was thirty-seven years old. In a post-therapy session moment, coming home to my apartment, I looked into the mirror and saw a face I did not recognize—luminous, suffused with radiant energy. I felt a pulsing energy through my body as I took in the joyful realization, “I’m glad I’m a *girl!*” And I knew that it also conveyed to me the deeper song, “I’m glad I am a *woman,*” And that I could embrace my womanly self with unconditional acceptance and love. I ran to the bathroom mirror and saw a face I did not recognize—luminous, suffused with radiant energy.

I ask, “What is there not to like about *transformation?*” And if “*this comes from the Lord, the Spirit,*” and “*where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,*” I am doubly blessed, for transformation has produced freedom.

Recently, my attention was drawn to another “mirror verse” from James:

*If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer,
he is like someone who observes her natural face in a mirror;
for she observes herself and goes away and at once forgets what she was like.
But she who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres,
being not a hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, she shall be blessed in her doing.*

“What is this *natural face?*” I am reminded of a Zen saying, “Show me your original face, the face you had before your parents were born.” Is my “natural face” emblematic of my core *identity*—something deeper than my persona, my personality traits, my Enneagram number, my roles, deeper even than my senses and emotions and thought patterns?

I follow the question to a deeper level: “What is my identity when I pray?” An article on “prayer and identity” by Beatrice Bruteau suggests several answers:

--If I identify with my *body and its senses and my emotions,* I am sensitive to experiences of pleasure and pain, and my prayer is for God to increase the one and decrease the other.

--If my pain experiences persist and I shift my attention to my *mind and understanding*, I look for *meaning* as I pray. Does this suffering purify me or prepare me for some greater good? Can I identify with Christ in his suffering?

--If I am aware of myself as an active *moral agent*, wanting to please God by my actions, my prayer will lead me to the deeper level of *analyzing my motives*, where I will see my inner potential for both goodness and for evil.

--If I identify myself as one who can do nothing of myself and can only *receive*, my prayer will simply be "I am nothing; God is everything."

All four of these postures assume I am a "finite being" and differentiate me from others. I am cherishing my individuality, my unique personality, my inalienable responsibility for my own moral acts—all this and more.

How then do I pray in a way that recovers that natural face? Who am I, at the core, in relationship to God? Bruteau does a remarkable thing for me here by pointing out how Jesus identified himself in different ways at different times. It is a new way of seeing the expansive meaning of that one little word "I". Here are Jesus' words and their corresponding sense of identity:

"Why do you call me good?
No one is good but God."

"I am very different from God."

"I do nothing of myself, but the Father
dwelling in me performs his works."

"I do nothing, but God is in me doing."

"I do as the Father commands me;
I do what I see the Father doing."

*"I also do things, but only by obeying God
or by imitating what God does."*

"The Father and I are one;
whoever sees me sees the Father."

*"God and I cannot be separated that way;
it doesn't make sense to see God and me as
distinct."*

Suddenly a door opens to me. The different ways I perceive myself in relation to God is in some ways shown to me by Jesus. It is when I look out on the world as God does—in the words of James, when I "look into the perfect law of liberty" that creative freedom bursts forth in love for God and in *agape* love for others.

I would have said before that *agape* love for others is not my "natural face," not by a long shot. But I am arrested by these reflections, and challenged to see differently, even to the radical stance of saying, "*I am in you and you are in me. Take my life as your food; nourish yourselves by my energies; assimilate my very selfhood so that we may be intermingled. Whatever anyone does to you, they do to me; what they do to me, they do to you; what you do, I do; and what I do, you do.*"

This is the cup of cold water given to the thirsty one that is the same as giving it to Jesus. I catch a quick glimpse-just a glimpse-of that kind of self-giving love, a oneness with God and with others that just for a moment shows me my “natural face” in the “law of liberty” and I am free to love, because that original face is at one with God and with others.

Now the mirror is removed and God and I meet face to face where I am loved as I am. In my marriage-in its devastatingly intimate closeness-and in my work with colleagues who are in my presence day after day, I have been asked to translate that kind of love, as God loves me. To love one's spouse, one's colleagues, *as they are* is the supreme challenge of life. Even my calling-as counselor and spiritual companion-can deceive me. After all, people come wanting change in their lives. So it is a snare for me, wanting to help them change.

I go back to the image of the mirror. The image I am to see is not mine, but God's. If a person can look into that mirror (all I can do is hold the mirror), they will see what they need to see and know they are loved.

May it be so. *“This is by the Lord, the Spirit, . . .where there is freedom.”*