

A young high school student recently reflected about her life and how she makes sense of her reality. She was responding to a prompt that began the World Religions course that she was taking. Of all the possible aphorisms and moralisms that she might have drawn on--believe in yourself, keep your nose to the grindstone, the sky is the limit if you just believe, etc.--she decided to reflect on the serendipity of her situation. Paraphrasing her work, she commented that she lives in southwestern Connecticut, yet she realizes how accidental this is. What are the odds? How many billions of people are there in the world? And how does the randomness of their birth impact them? She could just as easily have been born in any other country in the world and experience an entirely different reality from the one that she knows. Pretty insightful and brave for a teenager.

Indeed, while she occupies a stage in our human development when individuation makes it so easy to turn in on ourselves and fixate on our identity, losing perspective of the larger world and others, she sat with what can be an uneasy reality for any of us. The randomness of life--or the birth lottery--challenges our sense of agency and power. Of course we have control over various aspects of life, but the fickleness of who we were born to and where controls so much of what ultimately happens to us or our potentiality in the world. Again, for a teenager to hold this reality in her mind, turn it around, and reflect upon it is pretty amazing.

Such a posture expresses the curiosity and openness that is so fundamental to living in the world and living well in the world. We don't run from the truth or the discomfort that it may elicit. Rather, we need to acknowledge the reality of this life and wrestle with the implications which can be manifold. In the "For further reflection" section, Bryan Stevenson gives voice to the implications of not facing reality or being honest and open about it. He says, "Fear and anger are the essential ingredients of injustice." And we can see this truism played out throughout time and throughout our world: the legacy of slavery, the treatment of refugees and migrants, the anti-Semitism that still rears its head, the blame projected on those who are poor, and so many other issues.

Interestingly, part of Stevenson's counsel to address the fear and anger, move through it, and come to a place that allows for the sustainability of life for self and other is to be proximate. To be close to those whom we serve, but also, perhaps, to be close to those whom we fear. To gain an understanding of their reality, their challenges, their hopes, their issues, their gifts by being close enough to get to know them, hear their story, and recognize their sacred reality. The encounter with the other in the flesh makes it harder to demonize or dismiss them, particularly if we become aware of the matrix of things that have combined to bring them to where they reside. The other thing that we recognize in the process is the randomness that also played out to find them where they are. If we are honest with ourselves, we could be in a similar situation were it not for any number of things beyond our control.

This truth is not meant to burden us. Rather, it hopefully liberates us. Indeed, as long as we live in fear and anger, we are never truly free, and our actions, as Stevenson points out, will inevitably tend to binding or confining the liberty of another. The hope is that we glimpse the gift that is our life, we recognize the humanity of the one we may not know but we get proximate with, and in the process we discover a bit more of our shared humanity and connection. As with the teenage student, doing so is insightful and it is brave.