Voices of Sisters



(Dreamstime/Tina Gutierrez)



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I suspect you've had the experience of feeling you were dreaming while sensing you were awake. It often takes a moment to figure out which it is, yet something emerges in your brain to tell you to hold onto it — whatever the "it" is. This happened to me not too long ago.

As I hovered between the two states of consciousness, I saw myself in a hotel suite where my room was part of a larger suite. As I walked over to the doors connecting my room with the rest of the suite, they opened, and I entered the adjoining room. It was quite different from mine, with very different furnishings and filled with people. They were all talking, and I really couldn't understand them. I stood there, feeling I had entered another world, yet it was the other half of my suite. I felt I didn't belong and hurried back into my room, locking the door.

This waking dream captures what I'm feeling currently, given all that is going on in our country and the world. Values I thought were universal are becoming more relative. Assumptions I hold about leadership and how government works are being replaced and challenged. Even the Gospel mandate to love one's neighbor — within our reality of a globally interconnected world — is reduced to a more parochial love of family and tribe first.

As I grapple with this feeling of not belonging, I realize that if I had been on the opposite side of the suite and entered the room I was in, I would have found myself in a similar situation. I would have felt that I didn't belong. Neither side belonged to the other, yet we shared a connecting suite.

As I continued to reflect on this dream, I started feeling a sense of belonging in a variety of ways. For the last 50 years, I have experienced shifts in my thinking, behavior and beliefs, supported by much of what is happening in the church, society and science. Since Vatican II, the Catholic Church has understood itself as immersed in the world — its joys and sufferings — seeing the work of social justice as a constitutive dimension of the Gospel and opening up to new schools of theology beyond Scholasticism. Our culture and societal norms acknowledged respect for each person, regardless of race, gender, creed or sexual orientation, as well as the economic needs of the most vulnerable among us. The insights of evolution confirmed our common ancestry and quantum physics challenged us beyond our separateness to an understanding that all reality is interconnected.

These emerging insights were confirmed in books, music and through my experiences. I found a place to belong where religion and science could meet, where traditional faith and evolving spirituality could converse, and where people's differences became a source of creativity and new relationships.

Having entered the room of the other, I am more aware of how what people read, what they studied, whom they listened to, and how they prayed provided a different perspective on reality that created a space for them to belong.

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Now I'm faced with a choice: Do I keep the door locked and stay where I belong, or do I open those doors and venture into their space? Or are there other options? Can we find a new space where those of us from both sides of the suite can come together and begin to see what we can learn from each other for the sake of our common future?

Can I truly believe we are equal partners in our quest for the best future of our planet? That we all may have some partial insight that might amplify the others' perspectives or offer a neglected insight needed to address the issue holistically?

As I reflected on that last option, I knew that if I chose this one, I had to get in touch with what triggers my pride, anger, self-righteousness, defensiveness, security, identity and fear. It is not as if I am going into that space as a teacher to explain to them the more enlightened worldview, nor am I going in as a novice eager to learn from them where I went wrong. I have to enter with my most authentic self, truly believing that each of us is part of our emerging future and has the potential to become one with the Christ consciousness living within us.

This is real, serious, interior work that not only transforms us individually but also shapes the choices we make in responding to the injustices and inequities in our world, ultimately influencing our evolving future.

For those within the Christian tradition, the liturgical season of Lent is beginning soon, so I found myself thinking about Jesus and how he prepared for his public ministry. He spent 40 days in the desert, confronting within himself all the temptations that could distract him from his true calling. Chances are he was as confused as many of us are now about how to respond from his most authentic self

in a complicated, terribly problematic first-century Palestine.

Of course, we have the privilege of knowing how Jesus responded. He responded out of love. Even when nailed to the cross, he still forgave those who put him there. Remarkable, we might say. But no, he didn't plan to get crucified; he lived out of love and was crucified.

Living out of love, the magnetic center of our being, is Jesus' Good News to us. The world needs this more than ever. What will it look like in today's world?

That is up to us. Perhaps the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians might help:

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure."

Perhaps these words could serve as a daily examination of consciousness during Lent. After a contemplative sit to open yourself to divine love, read the phrases slowly and reflect on how you lived love that day. What behaviors or attitudes did you experience in yourself that moved you toward love of the other? What triggered you to react not out of love? What are you learning about yourself in terms of how to relate to those with whom you differ? What are you learning about how to love the other to create a new space within to meet? What is emerging in you to respond out of love to what is going on in the world?

I believe each of us will know when to act — when it is time to unlock the dividing doors to the suite and live love.