



Encountering the Other

One of the most sobering yet hopeful discoveries I have made is that the greatest impediment in my life, that keeps me from becoming all that I am created to be, is my own ego. I get in my own way. I spend far too much time thinking about myself. However, I do not think I am alone in this self-defeating exercise.

Eckhart Tolle in his insightful book, *A New Earth* (I highly recommend your reading it), writes extensively and helpfully about this issue that he labels “egoic”.

In her refreshing book, *An Altar in the World* (I highly recommend this also), Barbara Brown Taylor confronts the reader head on with this same debilitating *stumbling block*.

For whatever reason we sabotage our own lives, development, freedom, and peace by focusing so sharply and desperately on ourselves, our own lives, agendas, pleasures, plans, accomplishments, successes, failures, physical health, sickness, and problems that the closed

circle of our concern disallows the possibility of any openness to anything new, different or challenging. We are severely *root bound*.

Although we might envision ourselves as being creative, open and positive, the fact is we are stuck—stuck in whatever promises us the greatest comfort and the most immediate pleasure. Neither of these get us out of the proverbial box and into new soil where new opportunities for growth await us.

Taylor challenges us to get outside ourselves and *encounter the Other*. This, she says, is the ultimate spiritual experience. It might be an encounter directly with God which is tremendous, but often not immediately forthcoming. The most productive way to pursue this *encounter with the Other* is to seek out someone who is very different from ourselves and make it a point to become engaged at some significant level with that person or family.

This should be someone we do not know and have no desire to know—someone with different values, opposing political views, different social status, perhaps homeless, jobless or friendless.

Such a connection places us outside our own comfort zone, which is the only way we will ever grow spiritually. It requires courage, persistence and most of all openness to someone radically different from ourselves. Furthermore, this encounter should be one of total acceptance and without patronizing.

This will take *us* out of the center of our own attention, putting ourselves totally out of focus while the *Other* comes into focus. That is the goal.

Encountering the *Other* in a serious and persistent manner can overcome our own “egoic” tendency. While we might have convinced ourselves from our education in society that what we generally do for ourselves brings us joy, peace and fulfillment, the truth is, if it does so at all, it is quite fleeting. These positive gifts are not attained by focusing on ourselves, but are strictly by products of our serious commitment to losing ourselves in our encounter with the *Other*, whether it is God or some other person or cause.

This challenging way of life results in *our growing gentler toward human weakness and valuing others whose differences would otherwise offend*, even anger us, both of which are qualities the world desperately needs. This life style offers us the opportunity to recognize the Divine in human form, moving us out of ourselves long enough to engage someone radically different from ourselves, but whose fears, wants, love and needs are exactly like our own—one who is a loved, if not lovely, child of God as we are. As we engage them, losing track of ourselves, we serendipitously discover to our amazement that we are in God’s Holy and immediate Presence where there is joy and peace in abundance.

