

In the Eyes of a Child: *Love Spreads at Ground Level*

by Ernie Tamminga

My wife Alison and I are driving with our daughter and son-in-law across the bridge toward San Francisco. Ali and I are in the back seat, with our three-month-old granddaughter, Zoe. She's in a proper car seat, facing backward, and therefore face-to-face with us. I notice that she's looking at me, so I look back. We lock eyes, and hold each other's gaze steadily for several minutes. Occasionally, Zoe lights up in a smile that starts with her mouth, expands to her whole face, and continues expanding to involve her entire body – arms rising, back arching, legs extending. Then she relaxes again, all without ever breaking our mutual gaze.

I'm entranced. I would be, of course, as a Grandpa. But there's something here that's beyond the grandfather-granddaughter relationship. I am struck by the grace, wonder, and mystery of contact and communion. I am *beholding* and *being beheld* by another person, and because she is a baby, the beholding is innocent, unguarded, and complete. At least there is complete innocence on her side; I, a grown-up, have long since lost my primal inno-

cence and I carry many layers of life baggage. But because her innocence is so complete, my baggage, my agendas, are irrelevant in this moment, and in this moment they are suspended and I am free.

This is the innocence of pure attention, and it makes it possible to be, genuinely, in each other's presence. At this level, the Golden Rule is not even necessary, for there is not even the remotest thought of doing harm, of exploiting or taking advantage.

What if I turn from the baby, now, and what if "I" turn to face "you?"

Immediately, the innocence of pure attention is obscured in a cloud of self-protection. Even if you are someone I love, and you love me, our mutual attention is distracted by unspoken questions: What is your opinion of me? What are you expecting of me? What do you *demand* of me? And am I willing to do, to be, what you are seeking

And so on. This puts me someplace I probably don't even really want to be — I'm behind the boundaries I have learned to put up, looking "out" at you, but not truly in your presence.

Somewhere, behind those boundaries and deep below all those layers, the possibility of pure attention still lies ready. And sometimes it actually breaks through, sometimes by surprise, in a given moment. But it's delicate, easily disrupted, and all too fleeting. Holding it for more than a brief moment takes a kind of intentional focus that we are, by and large, not trained or equipped to sustain. And so agendas and expectations and anxieties flow in to fill the space between us.

This is true even between persons who love, or at least know, one another.

What if I turn from a beloved "you," now, and what if I turn to face the world at large?

I notice immediately that there is a buzzing swarm of different "you's" in my consciousness, and they all come with agendas, and they all come with demands and expectations. I am bombarded, around the clock, by messages, especially from the omnipresent media, telling me what is happening in my community, in other communities in my country, in other countries, among other peoples halfway around the world. Messages that focus mainly on disasters, on emergencies, on suffering, and especially on *threats*. Because those are the things that make "news" that sells.

The issue goes deeper: for the first time in the history of the planet, we are all in the effective presence of one another. Not the true, mutual presence of communion, not that eyes-to-eyes presence, but presence in the sense of, "I know you're there, and I can't get away from you." We encounter one another every day, without ever meeting.

Throughout history, we knew, vaguely, that there were "other" kinds of people somewhere "over there." But as long as my day-to-day experience included only my own local community, the strange people "over there" were an abstraction. I might or might not have an opinion about them and their strange ways, but they were all *over there*, and didn't affect me in my everyday going about my own business.

But today, technology has made the planet one, single place. Geographical distances don't exist in a world drenched in media and telecommunication. Today, a new kind of "you" intrudes into my everyday life. Today I'm affected in my everyday decisions and my everyday going about my own business, by "you" – you, the terrorist; you, the working person in India or Asia doing the job

that I used to do in my country; you, whose religious beliefs see the world differently from the way "my" religion sees it. And we can't simply "tolerate" each other's beliefs because our beliefs shape our behavior and your behavior now directly affects me.

So many people I don't really know at all, except through mediated stereotypes, now directly affect my life.

There's a constant storm of psychic input, most of it coming from far outside my personal reach. So resorting to simple solutions, and taking comfort in stereotypes, is as seductive and understandable as it is counterproductive. How else can we "keep up with things?"

We come at each other armed with categories for sorting each other out, rather than with tools for coming to know one another.

In a planet that's face-to-face (but not eye-to-eye) with itself, new questions arise: How can I even apply the "Golden Rule?" If I know you only through stereotypes, can I even assume that the ways I want to be treated, are the same as the ways you want? What if the way you want to be treated doesn't fit with the way I believe we ought to

treat one another?

It takes a lot of courage to say, "I don't understand you, I don't even know you, but let's at least agree that we won't kill each other, while we try to work our way through this strange time."

One of the few clear guideposts is that for any possible future, *hope* is a prerequisite – a pragmatic hope that as bad as things look, *it doesn't have to be that way*. There's nothing in the nature of the universe, or in Creation, that says we're inevitably destined to destroy ourselves. A hope, and conviction, that we're endowed with enough genius and compassion to find our way home.

The sky is full of grand schemes, and the earth is shaken with huge, competing agendas.

But here, right here at ground level, in the eyes of a child, there is a hint of the Possible.

Here, at ground level, in the eyes of a child, there is constant reminder of who we are, and how we can love.

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