

STARING BACK

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My friend Sue has a son with autism who is now 19 years old. When Adam was younger (8-13) and when they would go to the grocery store, he would inevitably make a scene because he would want his parents to buy something he couldn't have. This would be no ordinary scene of power play and wielding parental authority -the one that you're possibly remembering that your own kids made. Invariably the scene would involve Adam's loud, inappropriate protests occasional hitting, and bystanders' palpable uneasiness too. What my friend Sue remembers most about those times were the stares she would receive from other parents. They would stare at her as if to say, "What's the matter with you?" Can't you control your own kid? You must be a bad parent."

Staring at odd things. I'd like to begin to name and analyze this most natural of behaviors, so that we might be more aware of its dynamics and of its effects on others.

Naming comes first. Naming something gives us common language and common ground. When we name an experience, we can take the fear, the shame or anxiety—the bogeymen, if you will, out of the closet. In naming an awkward phenomenon, we can all breathe, a big cleansing sigh of relief.

Naming can be like opening a window in a room that's been closed up for a long time. You know the smell - musty, stuffy, with just the slightest hint of mildew. When we name reality, we let in fresh air, fresh insight, fresh directions for right and holy living. Fresh insight and fresh direction for right living emerge as we expose ourselves to the light of truth-telling. Truth telling can be like oxygen to us - truth enlivens us

According to Webster, to stare is to gaze or look steadily with eyes wide open as in fear, admiration or wonder.

Staring at things, staring at people has been part of the human experience for as long as we humans have been around! We stare for hours at little

babies, babies who become toddlers, at oceans or lakes, at flickering firelight or mountaintop vistas. We stare at roadside accidents as we drive by, trying to incorporate the threat of accident into our reality. We stare endlessly at animals, a favorite pet or a deer in the wild, for they are unself-conscious- their lack of awareness gives us license to stare all we want, for as long as we want. So how far does this license extend? Does it extend to persons with severe mental impairments who are likely unaware of our gazing. Should we stare at my friend Sue's son, Adam, just because we assume he's not attentive to his surroundings?

Children are honest, forthright in their staring. They watch very carefully. They wonder aloud. They point. Staring is a natural way that children and even adults learn about the world. It always hurts me when little ones are admonished to look away, to not pay attention. Parents or other significant others, out of their own embarrassment, ignorance or good intentions give powerful messages that run counter to the natural behavior of gazing long and hard at something or someone different. These messages reinforce the strongly held notion that being different is somehow shameful, that being different is some how at odds with universal human experience.

So when does a child's natural curiosity become an adult's fearful or excessive gaze? Or is this an artificial transition? Do we ever stop staring? When do we learn that staring is inappropriate? Is the amount of "staring time" culturally bound? Do other cultures have taboos about gazing inordinately? When does staring cross over the line to gawking? Is it somehow ok to stare at unself conscious beings, to learn at their expense, while it is not appropriate to gawk at people who know they are being watched?

As adults we stare at bodies, how bodies look, how bodies move and bend or don't, what size bodies are, how they get around obstacles, and how bodies are shaped.

We who live in a milieu

where most of us are narcissistically obsessed with how our bodies look,

We who have bought wholesale the myth of the perfect body. The body without any hint of blemish,

We who spend an obscene amount of money on pampering the body,
disguising the marks of the aging body, and extending the body's life through
extraordinary means. We stare at bodies

We are the ones who stare at strange, deformed bodies out of fear, wonder,
our own ingrained, unexamined stereotypes.

We are the ones who fixate on white canes, service dogs, and wheelchairs
before we would look into the person's eyes.

So what is the better way?

The way of holy living....

The way of wholesome living.

The way that leads to wholeness and right relation.

The way of humane treatment.

As Unitarian Universalists we hold dear the inherent worth and dignity of
every person. Does staring enhance or tear down that dignity?

One of the answers to the question of appropriate or inappropriate staring, I
would propose is dialogue. To be sure, silence and avoidance is fertile

breeding ground for shame and denial. The admonition heard in too many grocery aisles, “Don’t stare....its impolite” sounds like a hushing up - which leads to deeper fear of anything or anyone who is different.

Dialogue is healthy and stimulating and it gets us back to the truth telling I mentioned earlier. But dialogue can also lead us into some complex territory. Intellectually, I affirm that staring is natural, ought to be encouraged in children, coupled with age appropriate explanations.

However, as a woman with cerebral palsy who’s been the object of more staring than I care to remember or know, it should come as no surprise to you that I have some strong, visceral reactions to being viewed as an oddity.

There are 3 visceral reactions that I can name.

First, I find some staring intrusive. I can’t tell you when it crosses the line, but I can tell you I feel my privacy is constantly invaded. So privacy, and even anonymity for me, has become a precious commodity.

Listen to the words of Eli Clare, poet and activist, who helps me give voice to my own experience.

“Gawking, gaping, staring: I can’t say when it first happened. When first a pair of eyes caught me, held me in their vice grip, tore skin from muscle, muscle from bone. Those eyes always shouted, “freak, retard, cripple,” demanding an answer for trembling hands, a tomboy’s bold and unsteady gait . It started young, wherever I encountered humans. Gawking, gaping, staring seeped into my bones, became the marrow. I spent thirty years, shutting it out, slamming the door. Thirty years, and now I am looking for lovers and teachers to hold all my complexities and contradictions gently, honestly, appreciatively.”

Second, I am, at times, oblivious to the gaze of others. As a coping mechanism, I have become numb. Friends, but especially family, have been with me many times in public places. They report being offended, caught off guard, even appalled at the amount of gawking that other people do. They know a contrast, a reality of not being stared at, while I go about whatever we’re doing unaware because staring is just part of the fabric of my life.

Third, one place where I have staring as an extreme violation of my privacy has been in teaching hospitals where I frequented as a child. Doctors and their entourage of attending students would walk into my room and without asking, expose the part of my body just operated upon. This practice is now called by some “public stripping.” Eli Clare in her book, Exile and Pride defines public stripping as the

“medical practice of stripping disabled children to their underwear and examining them in front of large groups of doctors, medical students, physical therapists, and rehabilitation specialists. They have the child walk back and forth. They squeeze her muscles. They watch his gait, muscle tension, footfall, and back curvature. They take notes and talk among themselves about what surgeries and therapies they might recommend. They justify public stripping by saying it is a training tool for students, a way for a team of professionals to pool knowledge.”

This happened to me countless times as a child. However useful it might have been, I now see the practice as wrong, even harmful, and sadly, as a form of staring.

So, when was the last time you were stared at? If you are a woman, when have you been the object of an unwanted sexual gaze? What did you imagine people were thinking when they stared at you? How did you feel when you knew someone was gawking at you? Conversely, what were you gawking at yesterday? Or when was the last time you stared at something or

someone long and hard? What was it about him or her or it that was so irresistible that you couldn't take your eyes off it -not even for a minute!

We all gawk at each other. Staring is one of our proclivities. Its natural and organic and some of us become regular targets of it. Staring is complex- it is normal but its also annoying, sometimes harmful.

I don't have any prescriptions for us. I want to hold this question of staring to the scrutinizing light of our principle of the worth and dignity of all human beings. I want us to be aware of our intent and motives when we stare. I want us to examine and analyze our gawking for a bit, and encourage dialogue about this.

May the spirit of wisdom and sensitivity be upon us as we gaze at each other.

Let it be so.