Opinion
Spirituality



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by Amy Morris-Young

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October 15, 2019

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> "*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts.*"

This line from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* keeps replaying in my mind as I watch the recent presidential candidate debates and news conferences.

Fact-checkers tell us how politicians from both sides of the aisle are regularly exaggerating to the point of lying, and the extreme and incendiary rhetoric seems to involve no bridge-building. It is hard to imagine our country's way forward if we all continue to be torn between these poles.

I find that I must remind myself over and over that each and every one of these leaders is a child of God, that as babies they were innocents, and that these caricatures they are presenting to us are just that: roles they have assumed, masks they have donned, costumes they wear to further their own particular agendas.

Perhaps this is my way of trying to see them as Jesus would — soul first, behavior second — to stay somehow objective, and not allow myself to become polluted by the vitriol and polarized to one side. And while much of what I perceive as hateful, bigoted, violence-inciting propaganda fills me with outrage, some of my dearest family and friends embrace those positions.

So, I suppose my real goal is to stay open and middle-minded to them, because no matter how fiercely their views may contradict mine, I still love them. And want to continue to respect and interact with them. But being yanked between the ferocious ends of our current moral and political tug-of-war seems to make that difficult in the extreme.

Because I do believe that Shakespeare hit upon a basic truth about life on this planet, and each of our soul's journey — and identity — here. In that particular speech, his character Jacques describes the "seven ages" that each of us goes through: the cycle of life from infancy and school days, through the zeal of youthful passion, then the peak of righteous ripeness, into the decline that returns us all to a baby-like needfulness before inevitable death.

It is not only the commonality of this human experience that rings true to me. It is also the concept that each of us seems to create then embrace a unique persona —

very much like an actor does in learning a role in a play — during our time here on earth. This resonates through me back to my memories of heaven that I never seemed to shed as a child, and that I revisited during my near-death experience after my son Nick was born. My recollection is that we each come into this life with a plan, some specific mission that we choose to help our soul learn and experience the maximum it can, so that we can continue to evolve towards God's perfection.

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The mysterious part, or what many may perceive as karma, is that we each may choose not to be the hero this time, but the villain, or at least a character complex enough to be quite challenging to love, the catalyst against whom others are allowed to grow. But our souls shed these roles at the end of life, reuniting in some great cosmic cast party, where we are each restored to our perfect and eternal nature, and understand and applaud each other's performance — whether good or evil or shades in between — in the context of the whole play.

For those who desire more authoritative sources for this idea than a 16th century British playwright or some lady who died for 20 minutes and went to the light, the Bible explores this concept of transitive life here but eternal existence there in both the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament's Book of Psalms, Psalm 102:26 reads: "As for the heavens and the earth, they will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away."

In the New Testament, three of the four gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — all tell us that Jesus said: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away," and the Apostle Paul (to whom the Book of Hebrews is traditionally attributed) says: "The earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; and they all will become old like a garment, and like a mantle you will roll them up; like a garment they will also be changed but you are the same." (Hebrews 1: 10-12)

So this idea of the costume we wear during life — and its accompanying part we play — being transitory and not who we really are eternally is not a new one. But just like when we watch a play or movie, and we suspend our disbelief and allow

ourselves to be swept up in the drama, it seems to be part of the process that we forget who we truly are — children of God, working separately and together towards our place in eternity — and believe that these roles define us.

I fear the ramifications of that soul-forgetting leads to an inability to see God in other humans, to thus imagine others as lesser or wrong or bad. And that feeling of Us and Them seems to be one of the cores of conflict on our planet, along with the fear that resources are finite, which results in our scrabbling over this perceived lack of abundance to ensure the longevity of our own tribe. But it seems to me that both of these ideologies are false. There is plenty if we share, and we are all the same, united in being eternal souls who have chosen to exist in mortal bodies, to learn, to suffer, to grow.

I struggle daily to remember and trust that each of us, no matter how different we may seem, is divine, perfect, beautiful, regardless of the role we play. And the soul in each one of us will never be destroyed, only transformed and purified. I truly believe that despite all my own flaws, this is how God sees and loves me. It is my job, then, to do my utmost to see and love others in the same way. But as I watch these players on today's stage, and see how their words and actions threaten the unity of our friends and family, of our nation, and world, I find that very hard.

[Amy Morris-Young graduated from and taught writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.]

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