

Freedom with an Asterisk
Delivered March 17, 2013
By Rev. Michelle Collins

I've got a bit of a passion for children's picture books, which many of you may have realized by now. One of my favorite authors is Leo Lionni. He's a bit unique in that he only started writing and illustrating picture books when he was a grandfather, initially based on stories that he made up for his grandchildren. And he was also the first children's book illustrator to be using collages for his pictures.¹ He wrote a good number of books, and almost all of them are absolutely fantastic. Almost.

There's one that I've found to be an exception. The first time that I read it, it made me so angry that I nearly threw it across the room. It's the story of *Tico and the Golden Wings*.² The story starts out with this charming bird named Tico who for some reason starts his life with no wings. He just hops around the ground and is cared for by his fellow birds. But he wishes for wings, and one night his wish is granted, for a pair of golden wings. But to his dismay the other birds instantly reject him because he is too different from them! He finds out that he can give away the feathers from his glorious wings and they'll turn into black feathers just like the rest of the flock. So he does. In the end of the story, he joins the other birds that they happily accept him because, quote, "now you're just like us."

I want to scream at the birds for their rejection of Tico. I want to scream at Tico for giving in to the pressure to assimilate. And I want to scream at Lionni for making that the "happy ending" to the story. I just want to scream.

Now maybe it's because I want to imagine that other stories are possible, with other endings rather than this one. And those are the stories that I want to see instead of this one. I can see in Tico so many types of difference. Those who were born with disabilities of some sort, those who look different in some way, who talk differently, who act differently; looking deeply at Tico, one can see the possibility for many types of difference there. And throughout the story, Tico was never truly free, free from how he and the other birds thought that things should be.

Our lives are infused with these should's – assumptions and norms about what is expected and what is not. These are often referred to as scripts – the expected way for things to happen. Have you ever tried to do something that didn't match the usual script? Take elevators, for instance. Have you ever stood so you were not facing the doors of the elevator, when there wasn't a clear reason for doing so? When I've done this – I admit for the express purpose of

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Lionni

² Leo Lionni, *Tico and the Golden Wings*

observing the reactions of others – when I’ve done it, other people on the elevator have seemed decidedly uncomfortable. People won’t make eye contact, and look away quickly if I do manage to catch their eye. There is subtle pressure to get back in concert with the script – with everybody facing the elevator doors and not looking at one another.

Social norms are everywhere we look, defining both how one is expected to act, like on an elevator, and also the boxes around what identities are and what groups one might belong to. And therefore, they also create the idea of difference.

French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas talks about the differences among us as Otherness (with a capital O). According to theologian Mayra Rivera, Levinas’s notion of Otherness means “a relation with a reality *irreducibly different* from my own reality.”³ It’s both based on a relationship and it’s a reality that is fundamental different from one’s own. Whatever identity I have, the Other will always be different. Levinas takes this in the direction of how we relate to this person who is Other – the phrase he coined is the “allergy to the Other.” A reaction to someone who is irreducibly different, a pulling away from, a fear of. I’ve always found this idea to be compelling – an allergy is something that’s unconscious, something that’s there before I ever get the chance to think about it. An automatic reaction to difference.

When have you come face to face with someone who was definitely Other for you? What was going on for you then?

The reaction to those who are Other and the fear of them can manifest in many different ways, some of them quite violent and destructive. In the story⁴ that we heard today, the author faced Otherness and difference from the children in the neighborhood where her family moved in Japan. I’m not sure what differences they might have had: race, language, nationality, economic differences – it could have been any combination of these. But she does tell about the violence that happens to her and her siblings as a result. The children in the neighborhood surrounded them and began to yell and taunt them, and followed it closely with stones. Initially, these differences were just too much to bear.

These reactions, the unconscious reactions to differences from those around us and the norms that dictate these differences – these are what I am thinking of as the asterisk, the caveat attached to our freedom. Freedom to connect with Others is still constrained by our own reactions. Our allergy to the Other impacts our freedom to be able to relate to them.

³ Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*, page 82.

⁴ Story by Susan Shumway, <http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/404/fences>.

Earlier I shared theologian Mayra Rivera's definition of Otherness as someone whose reality is "irreducibly different" from my own. She goes further though. She implores relations "without this difference destroying this relation and without the relation destroying this difference."⁵

Otherness exists on its own, without assimilation happening and destroying the differences. In the story of Tico with his golden wings, the rest of the birds didn't allow him to remain Other. And to my dismay his Otherness was destroyed.

So here's our challenge: to have relationships and communities where this Otherness is still part of them. Our challenge is to create and nurture the freedom to connect, freedom that isn't restricted by other differences. Or at least freedom and connections that happen despite the differences.

I was swimming in a world of many differences during my time with the Faithful Fools in San Francisco. This is a community ministry, a street ministry located in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, where many of the city's most economically marginalized live. I served with the Fools as an intern minister for a year and took part in many of their activities and programs during that year. I worked one-on-one with folks; I led the weekly Bible study; and I helped to host, and to participate in, what the Fools call street retreats. These retreats held some of the more poignant experiences that I had that year.

A Faithful Fools street retreat is like a retreat that you go on, but is walking around on the streets of the Tenderloin. Folks from the surrounding area (or much farther away), often from Unitarian Universalist congregations, would come to be in the Tenderloin for a day on one of these retreats. There were retreats for adults, for students at a local college, for a local high school, and for the district's youth in their coming-of-age program (with adults shadowing the youth). All told, I think I participated in something like 17 street retreats over the course of my time with the Fools.

What do you do on a street retreat? You walk around, you sit, you stand, you bundle up against the cold or the rain like everybody else is, you eat at one of the local kitchens that serves lunches. Most importantly, you are taken outside of your comfort zone and you just see what you experience while you are there.

I admit, my few retreats, especially my first, I was terrified. Fear of what might happen, fear of the unknown, uncertainty about spending how-many-hours outside where I don't know anyone and everyone is so different from me. What if I got lost? What if it rained? What if... what if someone talked to me! My plan for my first retreat was just to keep walking the entire time so that no one would have a chance to talk with me. Well, that worked fine for a little while until I

⁵ Rivera, page 82.

had traversed the same several blocks I don't know how many times and my feet were getting tired... and lunchtime rolled around. Little did I know that the street retreat requirement of go-wait-in-a-food-line was in large part designed to counteract my little plan. While waiting in line, you are highly likely to be standing still and talking with those around you. Ditto for sitting and eating. I still remember this first retreat quite clearly. The woman I was next to in line decided to trust me enough to leave me with a suitcase containing all of her possessions while she went in search of a restroom. She didn't know me from the next person and just from our brief conversation decided to trust me with all of her stuff! Either I'm just that instantly trustworthy, or more likely, I just looked that out of place. Later we sat and ate through two lunches each and she shared all about herself. What was it that created the space for our connection? I think it's a combination of things. The retreat forced me to set aside my own reactions to our differences and not let them separate us from being in the same space together. Also, we literally had something that connected us – we both needed to eat lunch.

There's a mantra that you're taught at the start of a Fools street retreat. Here it is:
What holds us separate? What keeps us separated? As I walk the streets, what still connects us?

She and I were connected in our need to eat lunch and to be in the same space, needing to be served in order to get our food. I found other connections too, as she talked about her family and her significant relationships. Over the course of the year these connections with folks got easier. Now they didn't always happen, but they did plenty of times.

So how do we go about creating these spaces for relationships; creating the freedom to connect with others. This freedom still carries an asterisk, our own assumptions and expectations, our own reactions to difference and Otherness. I think awareness is only part of it – awareness of our own identities and differences. Certainly an important part, but really only part. The rest is more difficult. To create the freedom to connect with Others, it's not just about feeling free but it's about CREATING it. It wasn't easy to go on a street retreat; it would have been much more comfortable to just stay home, or to just skip lunch when I was there. In Susan Shumway's story, what created the change between her and the neighborhood kids was her parents' bringing out a plate of cookies for the kids to share. Her parents made it happen; they didn't let their kids run back to the safety of inside – they made them stay and engage. When we'd rather not show up, or avoid topics of difference – the challenge is to go there and find connections. Maybe it's way outside our comfort zones, or maybe it's only a little outside. The challenge is to come face-to-face with someone who is Other, and not only remain in conversation but stay in relationship with them. Noticing what holds us separate, but also finding what connects us. This not only transforms our actions and our relationships in the world, it transforms ourselves. Blessed be.