Columns
Social Justice



(Dreamstime/Tibor Ďuriš)



by Nancy Sylvester

Contributor

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https://iccdinstitute.org/

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> The human heart can go the lengths of God ...
>
> Dark and cold we may be, but this
>
> Is no winter now. The frozen misery
>
> Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
>
> The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
>
> The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
>
> Thank God our time is now when wrong
>
> Comes up to face us everywhere,
>
> Never to leave us till we take
>
> The longest stride of soul we ever took.
>
> Affairs are now soul size.
>
> The enterprise
>
> Is exploration into God.
>
> Where are you making for? It takes
>
> So many thousand years to wake,
>
> But will you wake for pity's sake!
>
> —*Christopher Fry, from "A Sleep of Prisoners"*

I was thinking about how these stanzas from Christopher Fry's verse play capture our time in evolution: *The frozen misery of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move*

... a time when wrong comes up to face us everywhere.

We are at a breaking point. The misery of the abuses in our political, economic, societal and religious systems are more visible today than centuries ago. Western civilization has given us some important gifts, but the unhealthy aspects of the dominant white, Christian, male culture are being felt. We are becoming conscious of the racism, sexism and classism that has influenced and shaped the various structures within which we live.

Unacknowledged for too long, these systemic abuses have influenced and shaped our minds and our hearts.

Now these wrongs are coming up to face us at a time when the United States is grappling with becoming a pluralistic democracy. The flood has started. Yet, I believe we have work to do if it is to be truly an "upstart Spring."

Perhaps, one place to begin is to reflect about how we frame critical issues. Most issues are framed in an either/or approach. You have to be for or against. The possibility of a both/and solution is not even entertained. Nor are you encouraged to see the partial insight, feedback or new learning of the opposite position.

This binary thinking exists on almost every issue facing us. We are being forced into an either/or vision of reality. It makes things simple but that approach dismisses the complexity of any proposed solution, which involves multiple perspectives, often with differing values and beliefs.

Take the issue of life. From the beginning of the debate decades ago, you were either pro-life or pro-choice. Yet, most people knew that the issue was much more complex than this framing of it. However, the sides got solidified and each became a political force.

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The rhetoric is too often divisive and escalates the emotions around success or failure.

We see this with the recent Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*. There is the victorious gloating of those who have diligently worked to overturn *Roe* v.

Wade as they pledge to keep on fighting to achieve even more restrictions. We also see it in the anger and rage of those for whom the reversal of *Roe* v. *Wade* disregards women and their right to determine what happens to their bodies; these people pledge to wage war in every state.

People on both sides believe very strongly and deeply that their position — save life, or save women's empowerment over their bodies — is the right one. It is unfortunate that ongoing blame and shame, rather than authentic dialogue, characterizes the conflict. We lose the ability to respect those who differ, the ability to to understand another point of view, or the opportunity to explore new approaches to these critical issues.

The United States is coping with being an increasingly pluralistic democratic society. If we are going to be successful, we cannot continue with an either/or approach to the issues facing us. We will have to find ways of respecting each other and explore together the complexity of the issues that we want to enshrine in public life.

Where do we begin? Fry suggests: "Affairs are now soul size. / The enterprise / Is exploration into God."

What is important here is *exploration into God*. It is not necessarily invoking one's image of God. We know that our concepts of God have also been influenced by the abuses of our systems. Too often, a God made in our own image and likeness is invoked to justify positions that do not reflect the liberating message of love that permeates most religious traditions.

If this is an upstart Spring and the thunder of the floes are beginning to move, then I believe that contemplation can prepare us for this new work.

Contemplation is a willingness to encounter God, divine mystery within, and over time to do the hard and difficult work of facing into one's shadow, one's assumptions and biases. To see how we have been victim and perpetrator, to acknowledge the blindness that comes from "my one right way" of looking at things, to be in touch with what triggers one's reactions to people and issues and the reasons why. This transformation is radical and life-changing.

Such transformation helps us respond from love to people in our lives and the issues of our time. It allows for a passionate response and advocacy work around a specific issue while authentically respecting and loving the people who differ.

Over time, a contemplative heart strengthens the capacity of understanding another's values and being willing to explore with others new possibilities. It might invite a change of language or strategy. The upstart Spring may take some time but we have to start.

Let Fry's words move us forward: "Where are you making for? It takes / So many thousand years to wake, / But will you wake for pity's sake!"