

*If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness... Isaiah 58:10*

In our busy world today, how many of us have the time and energy to pay attention to the needs of the hungry or the afflicted? We hardly have time to pay attention to our own needs, given our work schedules and family responsibilities. For so many of us, we barely have the time or energy (and sometimes, truth be told, we lack the inclination) to check in on mom and dad who are often at a distance. Our lives really become complicated when mom or dad become physically impaired or otherwise lose their ability to care for themselves.

Life can indeed be difficult in these times that seem to move so very quickly. Children require much from us, playtime, nighttime stories, being shuttled to and from daycare. As they get a little older, we become their taxi to and from sport practice, games, dance or music lessons. They need time to hang out with their friends, doing whatever it is they are doing, but parents still need to be on alert, paying attention to who they are with, where they are going and when and how they plan to get home.

All this, in addition to two parent workloads, which may or may not include out-of-town travel. But almost certainly, include projects and deadlines that extend one's workday or creep into weekend hours. In fact, time off and weekends hardly exist anymore, with your personal, employer owned laptops and cell phones.

When and how do parents get to just hang out and relax from the stresses of work, life and complications? When and how do parents get some adult time, out to dinner, a movie, dancing, bridge or a concert? It's amazing that many moms and dads are able to carve out time in their busy schedules for running, biking or time at the gym.

Give our schedules, most of us can't find the time to even notice, let alone, feed the hungry or cater to the needs of the afflicted. I suspect, many of us set up our lives in such a way that we simply don't have to come face to face with those in obvious need. For most of us, it's important to live in an environment where we and our families can feel safe. These are typically not the places where the face of need and affliction reside.

Please, don't take my assessment personally. Don't assume I'm taking a shot at those with privilege. I too want to live in a place where I feel safe and can feel comfortable that my family will be safe. This choice is available to those of us with the means to choose our surroundings. And why should we not want the best and safest for ourselves and those we love?

But our choices, our decisions, like so many decisions, often have unintended consequences. Our choices, so often leave us blind to consequences and outcomes that we don't bake into our decision making process, no matter how reasonable and well intended. When we choose A, it is often at the exclusion of B. We simply can't do all things at all times in all places. No matter how much we may want to or how hard we try.

This is simply a truth of life and living in a human body. So what are we to do? How are we to deal with these truths of life? What's the answer, is there an answer? And if there is an answer, do we really want to know?

It seems to me, the first question is whether or not there's a problem? Is there an issue here that requires our attention?

One might argue, I pay my taxes, vote for the best person, and I work hard. I keep the yard looking decent and try to be a good citizen. I do the best I can to be a good human being. I don't cheat on my partner, I don't do drugs or gamble. I've worked hard to get where I am. I've earned my position in the world.

I try to be a good spouse or partner, I try to be a good parent. I try to do what's right for my family and friends. I know I'm not perfect, but I really do try to do what's right. I'm willing to make donations to charities. I give when I can. I can't be responsible for all the ills in the world. And I can't fix them all either, even if I wanted to. It's hard to see where I'm off-track here.

Someone else might say: I too pay my taxes, vote for liberal candidates and make donations. I too try awfully hard to be a responsible human being. I work hard all week, usually more than 40 hours. I am attentive to my kids and partner. I go to church almost every Sunday. And I give of my time to committee work. I really don't have any time left to volunteer with those in need. Yet, I feel like I should. I feel like I'm living in some kind of bubble, a nice, hard-earned bubble, but a bubble non-the-less. I feel like I should be doing more somehow. I have to admit, there's a way that I feel a little guilty for having what I have, and knowing what some others are living with, or without, more to the point.

Does any of this sound familiar? Either of these voices could be the guy or gal next door. Either of these voices could be the same person, separated by only a day or two. These voices could be any one of us, on any given day.

So where does that leave us? Do we have an obligation to be a light in the darkness? Are we obligated to do super-human deeds? I think not. I don't believe most of us have the capability of being a shining star that illuminates the world. Most of us are just plain common folks, every day people; average people trying to make a life for ourselves. I have no interest in adding more guilt and stress in people's lives, in your life, or mine.

But this is where the blind spot lives. This is the stuff of unintended consequences. I fear that much too often, we make reasonable assessments about our life decisions, reasonable assessments of what we are capable of, given our current realities. And then become blind to what such assessments may mean, how they play out, their subsequent impact.

Most of us are never going to be rich. Most of us are never going to be president of the United States. And most of us will not be the next Martin Luther King. That's just the truth of it. But does that take us off the hook? Does it mean we have no responsibility for our fellow-man, our fellow-women, our fellow human beings? No, is the short answer to that question.

Cornell West, speaks all over the country. He tends to have a common theme. He talks often of the requirement we have to use the Socratic method to critically engage ourselves, to discover what is true. He asks, almost pleads, that we, with brutal honesty, look at ourselves and the world around us to understand what is true and real. His framing is not so much about right and wrong, but about what is true and real.

He says we have to look beyond what we've been told, what we've been taught, beyond the institutional trappings of our lives to see the truth. He says it's a courageous act, but necessary, that we claw our way, time and time again towards the truth. Otherwise, we get caught up in living the unexamined life, a life not worth living.

I understand West to be telling us that if we don't dig deep, and past the trappings of life, we will fail to see that we are all connected. We'll fail to see we are all brothers and sisters, members of the human family. If true, that has to mean something. It has to have an impact on what we see in the world, an impact on our relationship with the world, an impact on our behavior.

I understand West to be telling us that we need to see the truth of our connectedness. And when we do, we will be driven to behave differently. He argues that we would not go to war with members of our family, our loved ones. We would not abandon the poor and the weak, members of our family. We would not support policies that denigrated those who may appear to be different than us, based on some superficial assessment of how they look and act.

He argues, we would not abandon our cities to filth, poverty and neglect. We would not create environments where so many live without hope of ever experiencing what a prosperous nation has to offer. We would not cause psychological harm and engender depression and neuroses in those that are treated as "less than".

I'm sure West would agree, we need to recognize the truth and reality of living in segregated communities. We need to understand the impact on our sense of truth when we only listen to the right or left wing media. We need to see the truth of the result of being around only one type of person, one race, one class, people who only speak our language, who dress and act like we do.

This type of insularity, this type of isolation, cultural myopia, leads to a distortion of what is true and real. This type of living creates both a sense of superiority and a sense of inferiority, it does damage to our psyches'. It creates blind spots we don't even know exist. It's this type of self-inflicted isolation that deters us from going into downtown Poughkeepsie. This type of myopia creates an environment where a black teenage boy, carrying iced tea and candy, is seen as suspicious.

It takes conscious effort, it takes intentionality, it takes commitment and can be hard work, to get beyond our own self-inflicted limitations, self-delusions and self-constricted lifestyles. All of which lead to a sense of separateness, and the illusion of safety.

We need others to teach us, to hold us accountable for seeing more than our limited viewpoints allow. We need to be willing to step into the unknown rather than live our lives exclusively in our area of ease and comfort.

I do not believe that each of us must be the shining light on the hill, leading the way to nirvana. I do not believe that any one of us is called to go above and beyond merely being human, as best we're able.

But I do believe that if we truly saw ourselves as connected, all a part of the human family, brothers and sisters on this earth together, it would change what we see. That change in perception would in turn change how we act. I truly believe if we felt connected to one another, there would be little darkness in the world, there would be less hunger, less pain and anguish. The afflicted would know they would not be abandoned, but treated as beloved members of the family and cared for, as best we could.

No one of us is obligated to be the shining light in the darkness if we all carry but a small candle, fueled by what is already within us, and let our candle shine.

May it be so. Ashe, shalom, salaam and Amen.