



While Brother Toby is working on his new book, for the next few weeks we at Starcross are revisiting reflections that resonate with current experiences and concerns. This reflection from April of 2016 seems a good place to start. As too many of us find reasons to be unhappy with our fellow travelers down this path of life, Toby reminds us that we are all connected. The adversities and the joys of any one of us belong to all, "for we are kin to each other--whether we like it or not!"



INDIVIDUALISM GONE MAD!

Stanley Gordon West is an interesting fellow of my age who wrote a lot of novels and has been a strong advocate for the protection of the aged and of children. But what he is most remembered for is probably a line from his book *Growing an Inch*:

Smile and the world smiles with you, cry and you cry alone.

Unfortunately it seems that for some of my fellow citizens that is a pretty un-American idea. My joy is mine alone and you have no right to have any part of it!

Before despairing about the epidemic of “It's all about me” let's go back a few centuries and recall some farmore subversive ideas from John Donne (1572–1631). In 1624 he wrote his famous *Meditation XVII* which later became a familiar poem. Donne had a really hard life. He and his wife had 12 children and his income was practically nil. Although Donne was a clergyman, one biographer points out he was so desperate that he had to resort to acting as a lawyer to put food on the table.



In *Meditation XVII* Donne points out that the adversities and the joys of any one of us belong to all of us because we are connected. We are, in fact kin. When a child is baptized or a person is buried “*That action concerns me: all humankind is of one author.*” And a bit later on, he writes his well known lines:

No one is an island, entire of itself; every one is a piece of the continent a part of the main.... Any person's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.



A second-generation Syrian friend living in the United States wrote me recently that there was a word in Arabic that seems to mirror John Donne's meditation. The word is “*soumoud*” and it means the steadfast kinship of people who are standing in solidarity with each other in adversity or joy and moving together through the whole cycle of life. Parents who see their children killed in Syria or starving in Yemen are dramatically aware of the kinship that binds them together.

I do not sense much of this kinship in our own country and especially not in the electoral process we are enduring. At this point in the political circus there are those doggedly driving home that the common good or trouble has absolutely nothing to do with ME. And if you think the same way VOTE FOR ME! And sometimes I fear that this attitude become the mainstream of my country. We will soon find out.

In reviewing my book *Thinking With The Heart*, a critic once wrote of me that I was well-meaning but incredibly naïve and seemed to be wanting to return to the “*make love not war fantasy of the 1970s*.” If anything that critic would think I have become even more naïve, because I am confident that somewhere there are enough people, misfits perhaps, who are trying to share the joy and the sorrow of those around us, who are trying to be kin to each other. And my hope is that group will grow.

I cry with my own grief and also with yours. I have pain for the people who cannot afford to rent a house. For single mothers living below the poverty line and attempting to raise their children in this overprivileged society. And I want to feel joy wherever love enriches our existence — when two people find each other, when a child is born, when a family is fed.

When your shy little niece with learning difficulties has found a good friend let us all rejoice. When a faithful dog who never judged you died, let us all grieve. For we are kin to each other — whether we like it or not!

When the little flowers open and the bird sings, or when the bell tolls let us smile or cry together — for we are kin.



Soumoud!

Brother Toby