

Living the Illusion: Ira or Abby

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Reading: Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
 Who made the swan, and the black bear?
 Who made the grasshopper?
 This grasshopper, I mean-
 the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
 the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
 who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
 who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
 Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
 Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
 I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
 which is what I have been doing all day.
 Tell me, what else should I have done?
 Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
 Tell me, what is it you plan to do
 with your one wild and precious life?

Some time ago, I saw the movie Ira and Abby. The movie shows us two people, one (Ira) living with his attention on the pain and difficulty of life caught in a neurotic pattern of focusing on what doesn't work, and the other (Abby) believing blindly in everything, committing to and loving everyone. Married to each other they live similar lives that they see differently. She believes her parents are passionately in love and he believes his parents dislike and distrust each other. As it happens, both sets of parents are in similar relationships, but, the belief rather than the reality is what defined their children's sense of the world.

I left the theater wondering if believing is better than knowing. Will we live more graciously, more peacefully if we don't know? The film makes the argument that we have a choice. We can be Ira, skeptical, cynical, protected and profoundly alone or Abby, optimistic, trusting, open and befriended.

Because these questions were on my mind, I decided to rent the Music Man. I'm sure you all know the classic story of this town transformed by the illusion heralded by Professor Hill of a band in which all their boys will play. There is, of course, going to be no band; the salesman is a con man who intends to run away with the money they're spending on this illusion. But, the belief in the band is the inspiration the town needs. In the end, they create the band they believed could exist. The reality of the con isn't a match for the belief.

Is there a benefit in knowing what's real? Is it helpful to know the pain that might befall us? Would it have been better for the citizens of the fictional town River City, Iowa to have stopped Professor Hill at the door? What if, while singing his opening song building on the fears

of the townspeople and promising them hope in the form of a band, the people shouted back- you're a liar and a thief! And drove him out of town? Aside from there being no story, there would be no band.

In the film, Abby and Ira are on a subway when it gets robbed. Ira, head down, wants to be safe. Abby, gets up, talks to the thief and ultimately gets the passengers to give this man the \$200 he needs. Her friendliness literally disarms the thief and he leaves the train having taken only a little bit of money from each person to cover whatever it was he needed. Her trust was rewarded and transformed an act of violence into an act of generosity.

But, that's not real. Armed robbers in NYC subways don't accept the negotiations of wide-eyed optimists who want to take up small collections.

I'm left with the question of whether or not we create our own realities based on what we believe to be true. Can I live a peaceful and fulfilled life if I restructure my mind to perceive the good in the world? A common UU sermon theme is gratitude for the little things or ways to pay attention to the happy details. Mary Oliver's famous Summer Day Poem that we read earlier, is a favorite, calling us to pay attention, to fall into the grass, to be idle and blessed. I admit to loving that poem and recognize its place as well as its beauty. But, in all this effort to pay attention to the splendor of the world, to train our minds to recognize the glass half full, I'm left with a nagging sense of the privileged location from which I have such a choice.

Of course, there's great power in positive thinking. After all, the town of River City did get their band. Many people behave well, caring for the sick and poor and otherwise marginalized because they believe that God will reward or punish them accordingly. Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge because with our imaginations we can embrace all that can be rather than just what already is.

I've had now several conversations about whether or not we can chose to focus on the positive and live happier lives. It didn't take long, though for me to locate a larger question: why is there an expectation for such joy? Is the goal of human existence to be in a perpetual state of happiness? I mean, what if it's true. What if we have the power to see the world through rose colored glasses? Should we? Are we being called to live blissfully? Should we spend our afternoon feeding sugar to the grasshopper, being idle and blessed?

I'm not looking to derail decades of insight or popular philosophies. I spent plenty of time introducing my students to Joseph Campbell who told them to follow their bliss and I spent an equal amount of time applauding them when they did.

Nonetheless, as I consider seriously the goal of viewing the world in its best light, I know that the reason people were left on their rooftops in New Orleans, the reason our prisons are over-crowded, disease and violence infested hell-holes, the reason there's a genocide in Darfur regardless of the "not on our watch" cries is that... we aren't really watching. Barbara Bush, when asked about the men returning in body bags from the war said that she doesn't watch so as not to bother her "beautiful mind with such things." And as offensive as that line is to me, I wonder how much I really watch. Is it not true that I'd rather pay attention to the grasshopper who has flung herself out of the grass in Oliver's poem than to the mothers flinging their children into wells in hopes that they'll be safer there as the rape gangs pass through.

In the case of one small life I can see why living in an illusion might be of some benefit, but, as a human being on a planet of billions of others, the illusion is of no use to any of us. More importantly, my desire to be happy, to live in the midst of an illusory joy might just be the problem. Rather than seeking joy as the final goal, maybe I need to let go of joy and seek service as the end game.

So, while it might be true that the illusion served Abby, I don't think it serves me, or, dare I suggest, us. At the same time, I'm not interested in Ira's cynicism either. The neurotic contemplation on people's failures and shortcomings leads to stagnation. To focus on what's wrong with everything drains any chances of hope and therefore change. I've had, and I'm sure you've had, plenty of conversations with people who only see the problems. I honor and respect their clarity, but I am unwilling to allow suspicion to be my only lens.

I find Buddhism's interest in illusion something of a sticking point. The Buddhists are suggesting that what we perceive is illusory. That because of constant change, lack of infinite stability of the self, that nothing is real. If that's true, then the mindfulness the Buddhist coaxes, the attention to the immediate is all that makes sense. Nothing else is reliable. While I appreciate the Buddhist intention to end suffering with this right concentration which brings us to a detachment from desire, I'm not actually convinced it's a worthwhile endeavor. I say this very carefully and with great admiration for those people who have chosen to engage in this project, recognizing first that I am often wrong and second that there are many different ways to understand the same truths. Nonetheless, I will continue.

It makes sense to me to actively pursue the end of suffering if you live in a place where you know what that means, where suffering is a real and tangible part of the world in which you live, but from a middle-class 1st World life, it has the potential for self-indulgence or even a hint of absurdity. I know several Buddhists. They are all middle class white people in the northeast or in California. Several own beautiful homes sometimes in coveted neighborhoods, have well educated, well fed children in good schools, have time each day for meditation, some in dedicated rooms, and have jobs that keep them in right relationship with the world while paying for an American life. The idea that these friends, many of whom I like very much, should and will pursue the end of their suffering ironically has a whiff of hedonism. This is not to say that we don't all suffer regardless of our social location, but it is to say that the pursuit of the end of personal suffering has a different level of urgency at best.

The same can be said of Christians and the pursuit of a heavenly hope that will liberate us from this corrupted material world or for any affluent group that aspires to a life unfettered by our daily constraints without recognition of our privileged location. My point has less to do with which group and more do to with the insatiable desire for happiness that becomes a justification for denial.

I'm also not suggesting that we let go of the pursuit of happiness, but that we embrace a wider audience for this ambition. My singular bliss can't be at the expense of someone else's safety and the fact that those who suffer aren't right before me doesn't justify inaction. The challenge is to question and confront the illusion created by distance or invisibility. If we don't see the body bags, it doesn't mean men and women aren't being killed in battle.

It's also true that we won't collapse without our illusions. Confrontation with reality isn't synonymous with a life driven by rage or depression. In fact, I believe when we strip ourselves of illusion, we find, along with a recognition of deep pain and suffering, an element of hope we may not have otherwise been able to appreciate.

Since it was made famous, the painting Jeremiah Wright describes in his sermon "Audacity to Hope" has stayed with me. It's a picture of a woman sitting on top of a poverty and war torn planet. She's bleeding and ragged and holding a harp with only one string left. But with that string, she plays her music. She plays and plays because it's what she has left and because along with our brokenness, we also have hope. We have an indestructible sense of something better coming, of something to celebrate, of a reason to sing. But those notes of praise and love,

endurance and expectation, of trust and optimism are all the more powerful in the face of their competitors. Imagine, for instance, the depth of character Abby could have demonstrated if she knew about her parent's infidelity to each other and was still wildly optimistic and faithful to her vision of peace and cooperation.

I opened today with a few words lifted out of Patrick Henry's famous Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death speech which he delivered to the Virginia Convention in 1775. He was speaking most directly to those who were preaching patience with the British, asking that we not raise an army and engage in armed conflict, a wise intention Henry agreed, if the British navy wasn't already on our shores and their soldiers in our homes. At what point, he asked, will we be ready to fight back? And, when that time comes, when we finally realize that these are not our friends but our captors, will it be too late? Some words are worthy of repetition and so I will again read them to you:

It is natural to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that syren till she transforms us into beasts. Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it.

He goes on to beg his colleagues to see the truth, to know that no matter how much we may want it not to be real, war is upon us and not to prepare is to die. He ends his speech declaring that he is willing to die only in quest for something real, in this case, liberty.

I would suggest a passionate holding on to all that's real. I don't want to be Abby or the people of Professor Hill's River City Iowa, in all their naiveté, even if their illusions serve them well, nor do I want to be Ira, plagued by anxiety because of his acute sense of the potential horrors of human existence. I want to be willing to confront the evils of the world and to embrace them for what they are. I don't want to seek refuge from my suffering, but to allow it to propel me forward, to energize a quest for justice. I want to love deeply and feel the pain of its absence. I want to stand to attention as the men in body bags pass me by. Like Mary Oliver I want to fall into the grass, to be idle and blessed, but also like her, I want to confront the reality that everything dies at last and too soon. I hope not to be someone who seeks joy at the expense of what's real, at the expense of those for whom joy is not an option. I hope not to drown in despair or to shrink my life to a tiny, manageable pursuit of my own bliss but to live wide-eyed, conscious and aware and present to all of what is real.

I want to sit on top of the world, battered and bruised, playing my one-stringed harp and singing with all I have left.