

what it is to be human

Humans are strange beings is the thought that goes through my head as I am closing up for the day. We're so rich in qualities and abilities that can make us wonderful, warm, loving, accepting — and we busy ourselves with the most stupid ideas and actions, and do the most terrible things. We make wars, kill innocent people who we name enemy or terrorist. Is it because we make ourselves reach way over our heads, and so make life miserable for ourselves and others? I really think it is because we **want**. How can we be happy, or even just content, when we cannot stop wanting more, better, bigger, newer... Wanting what we don't have and in many cases don't even need. And so we have made a world where a few of the most aggressive wanters have accumulated wealth that is not of this world and more amid billions of their fellow men who starve to death. In *any* kind of morality or even reason there is no meaning to that.

The rain on my tin roof is so loud that it is drowning out the evening song of the frogs and other beings; I must go to bed and read a bit before sleep I badly need. This has been a painful day, physically and emotionally.

I know and have known beautiful wonderful people. Of course, we all have. And I've known people glowing with contentment; living lives that seemed easy and smooth from the outside. One person I often think of is... I'll call her Z. She was probably in her fifties when I knew her; I was a few years younger. I thought her serene, a soft smile etched in her face. She did not hide her graying hair, it was still lush and soft for very curly, almost kinky hair. She was beautiful although perhaps not photogenic. But it was the radiance I saw in her that made her beautiful. Calm, unruffled. She was a widow, her husband had died some years ago. She had five children, three survived. Two were in the same village, she did not know where the boy was. At the time my work required much traveling in that land, but each time I came to that village I sought her out, to relax, be comfortable — comforted perhaps. I met her daughters, both of them married, not very happily I had the impression, but normal for that time and place. The daughters were busy raising an unruly bunch of small children. Z herself worked a small plot of land not far from her house, where she grew vegetables, had some chickens, sold the eggs. When I got to know her better I learned, of course, that she had lived a life of hardship. An abusive husband; she showed me the scars. No, she was not lonely any more, she laughed. Her life was extremely simple, she did not own much if anything. Her two or three wraps were the clothes she had, a few pans, a small house, always

neat and smelling of newly cooked food. Now (without the abusive husband) she was healthy, she said, and that helps being content. Eventually I learned she did know where her son was: in prison. From her I learned that *happy* is not the right word. Content perhaps, accepting. But something else too. Just being, riding the roller coaster, knowing up and down, the fearful fall and times of coasting. Just holding on, taking what comes with equanimity.

For a long time she was my model, I tried to live as I thought she had lived. Taking good and bad without being too carried away. It is not my nature, but at times I can live that way. Trusting, accepting ups and downs as the natural flow of life on this planet.

Until I get *involved*, as I think of it. Like now, when I feel (too much feeling, perhaps) involved in the troubles of a few who are dear to me, and feeling anxious about something that may be in the near future of my own life here. It keeps me from sleeping well, and I can tell you that sleep deprivation is torture. It is also very bad for one's health. Now I am trying to regain the equilibrium that is essential to living a relatively content life. Not easy because it requires distancing myself, letting go of fears and anxiety. I know the words: let go fear, let go anxiety, accept that I am but an atom in the whole of my world. I don't need — I don't want — to be in charge. I really do not have to solve other people's problems. To be honest, I can't of course. Other people's problems are theirs, not mine.

Let me introduce you to some others who are, or were, friends I admire(d).

K I have known for many, many years. He is younger than I but I don't know how much; not more than ten years, I think. He's always on the move — yeah, so am I. So, our paths have wildly circled around, crossed every few years, all over the world. He grew up in a small town that he describes as a border town between the North and the South in this United States. Not quite Jim Crow, as I understand it, but nevertheless sort of segregated. After I had known him for at least a dozen years he told me that his single mother had confessed that all four of her children were from three different fathers, none of them married to her and that his father was dark. Not very dark, he hastened to assure me, but not white either. I had imagined a darker mix not because of his olive skin tone but because of his build and his hair that was more than curly. I envied him his hair; the hair on my head did not last much longer than the first 25 years of my life. He is a city person; I cannot survive in the noise and confusion of too much civilization, too many people. He knows how to work the System. He dances through crowds, charming women of all ages and all males are buddies. Somehow I doubt — but I

don't know — that he ever had very intense relationships, certainly not lasting ones. He avoids closeness. The first few days when on rare occasions we meet and spend time together are always exciting, exhilarating, boasting about the exotic places we have been, the wonderful people we have met, the adventures we barely survived. But by the fourth or fifth day it is clear that he must be off again. He is a chameleon. I've seen him in Malaysia, wearing a sarong and a long shirt: he is local. I've seen him in African attire and he fits. And in a three piece suit with tie and plastic-smooth pale blue shirt, he fits in that world. I have lost track of all the things he has done to earn the money for his wanderings, but in that he is not that different from me. We are great friends, and will always be. We know each other very well, and accept each other entirely as we are. His roller coaster spans the globe and, actually, so does mine. Maybe his ups and down are sideways; I don't know. I sometimes wish I had more of his infectious joie de vivre, the pure joy of being alive and being who he is. He is a bright point, a shining sun.

C was a woman I knew, long ago. In her thirties I was in my teens. She was cheerful, very much alive. I imagined her life as an always new adventure; always willing to try something new and different. A new dress color — and hilarious laughter when it looked completely *wrong*. She had what I imagined was the perfect marriage. A man somewhat older, who had a staid and solid feel, and a very good position as we said then. There was money. Her husband was a devout Muslim, she was obviously less devout; I suspect he secretly admired her for her free spirit. It was an arranged marriage of course; I think she might have been a distant cousin. I did not see her again for at least twenty years: a war, many moves, horrendously changed circumstances. My life had turned upside down as I thought of it. Her life had fallen apart. Her perfect marriage ended when he was killed in the war. She had a small pension, lived in Europe now, had made few friends, was not trained for any kind of work but occasionally did some sewing and other small jobs she could do in her tiny cottage. Gray but still with a remnant of that sense of adventure. She managed to save enough on her small pension to travel once a year to always a new country. In Europe everyone travels in summer. And some years, she told me, she would meet a man for a brief but sometimes warm relationship. When I told her I admired how she managed to maintain that equanimity on life's roller coaster, she objected, *I get dizzy and nauseous on the down, and the highs require much effort. But maybe you are right, the ups are less up and the downs less down*. C died a few years ago after a two year down with an ugly cancer. I spent time with her a

month before she died. She was resigned, tried to smile when she said, *The roller coaster now is all down — but it was a good ride.*

I have also known people, friends, loved ones, who could not manage the roller coaster — I'm not talking about the many who were thrown off, killed, but some who had to give up; the ride was too rough.

There are two women I have known I might have had an interesting life with. The first was killed when she was 18, and I was 19. The other I met when any closeness was out of the question. In fact, when I think back over my long life there are many people who stand out, special in one way or another. They remain snapshots, might have been but weren't in my life.

Now, when I look at people, I try to recognize that quality I admire: a certain equanimity that might grow into serenity, combined with always ready, looking forward to unknown adventures ahead. One of the essentials of riding the coaster, I think, is learning early on how to immediately stand up again after a bop on the head. I did not do that — could not do that — after the five war years. And it took me too long to recover from another (almost lethal) happening. I would have, should have, recovered with less pain, effort, less fuss, if I had learned earlier to stand up again quicker and better.

One man I know physically tires himself out on his mountain bike, riding hard for an hour or a day. Another goes sailing, alone with the vastness of ocean horizons. A woman I know takes long, hot baths; scented. Personal and unique rituals to lift oneself quickly out of the inevitable pitfalls. My own ritual now is to go outside, rain or shine, take deep breaths of what to me is green air. Maybe stand my back against a favorite tree. I talk to plants, to animals and I assure you they talk to me. The Wild heals me.

But hatred, wars, killing, I just don't understand. How can we sink so low...

robert wolff, 8 april 2010