

LEADER'S MESSAGE – January 2007

— By Richard L. Kiniry

To make a short story long, I was surprised recently by a personal feeling of empathy for Sylvester Stallone. I had appreciated the first Rocky movie but what with five more of them, the hateful Rambo movies, and Stallone's insistence that his statue be considered art, I thought of him as a bad joke. But there he was on National Public Radio, speaking with sincerity about his new movie in which a 60 year old Rocky makes a comeback in the ring. The plot is preposterous but he spoke of the character with such feeling that it might have been his actual story. It may not be my cup of tea but it is the dream of so many people — the little guy who makes it and is still able to remain himself. Stallone's "sincerity" may just be hype but for a moment I felt empathy for a fellow human being telling his story.

That feeling of empathy got me thinking: well, how about President Bush or Benedict XVI? How about my habit of not looking beyond my dislike of certain people? It is an accepted ethical theory that a moral sense starts with empathy, but that is an abstraction and in real life my ability to feel for others is limited by my personal prejudices. It's not just me, either. Reflecting on our present world, I notice a huge deficiency in empathy: senseless wars, cruelty and barbarism seem to be the order of the day.

Empathy is so basic. Except for the few, we all learn at least a little empathy early on, but how is it that we also learn to be so stingy with our empathy? Obviously there is war going on between our personal self interest and our connections to others. We are encouraged to think of ourselves and our needs and to relate to others from the perspective of our feelings. We remain on the surface of others. We often hear that people should take responsibility for their actions but there is little appreciation of the world of feelings and thoughts that explains their actions. The same person who puts money in the Salvation Army kettle sends their son or daughter off to kill Iraqis. Can we understand the connection?

When people speak of spirituality they usually mean a connection to a higher reality or to an invisible unity; thus they miss the actual spiritual reality in front of them, the inner life of all those other human beings. That spiritual reality is the flow of living that creates our human world. Until people arise out of their self absorption, beyond the search for happiness as an individual journey and expand their empathic feelings to include all those other people, there is little hope for the future.

If you are searching for the unique message of Ethical Humanism, one that distinguishes us from other liberal religions, it is the focus we place on the communal, relational experience. That is the arena of our ethical, spiritual lives. Although each of us is born alone and we imagine we create ourselves, we live in a web of relationships; that is where we create a life. It is in the thoughts, joys, troubles, and richness of the lives of others that we live. And empathy is the doorway into that reality.

I can feel empathy for President Bush and Benedict XVI; both of them are a little lost and unsure that they are up to their jobs. I may run in horror from the thought, but I can even feel a bit of empathy for the young men doing the killing in Iraq and Darfur. I also empathize with all the caring people who feel helpless in the presence of so much evil around the world but empathy without action is frustration. Empathy without action is sympathy and we have to do better than that.