

# **I Know It When I See It**

*by Karen Hering*

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### **I Know It When I See It**

Some years ago, on a rainy day of traveling, the theologian Rebecca Parker was driving the back roads of western Pennsylvania with a friend when, late that afternoon, the two of them descended into a valley and, approaching a small town, they saw blinking yellow lights ahead of them. They passed several fields covered by standing water and noticed several side roads blocked off by signs saying *Road Closed*.

Coming into the town, they crossed a bridge over a wide river swollen with fast-flowing muddy water. Sandbags lined the banks. “Looks like they’ve had a flood here,” the two travelers said to each other, adding “They must have had quite a bit of water to contend with here.”

Then, heading out of town in the other direction, they rounded a bend to find the road ahead of them covered beneath a sheet of water.

“The water was rising fast . . .” Parker recalls. “We started to turn the car around. (But) The water was rising behind us as well. Suddenly we realized the flood hadn’t happened yesterday or last week. It was happening here and now. Dry ground was disappearing fast. We hurriedly clambered out of the car and scrambled to higher ground. Soaked to the bone,” she says, “we huddled under a fir tree. The cold water of the storm poured down on us, baptizing us into the present – a present from which we had been insulated by both our car and our misjudgments about the country we were traveling through.”<sup>1</sup>

Now I have never been stuck in a flood, myself, but I used to think I would know one when I saw one. Rebecca Parker’s story, though, in her essay titled “Not Somewhere

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Ann Parker, *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 2006, 25-26.

Else but Here,” warns me that it could well be otherwise. Insulated by my own misjudgments, I might not know it when I see it until it’s finally closing in around me.

When we talk about human awareness and potential, we often focus on our human capacity to perceive and our ability to draw conclusions from what we see and hear. But our awareness is also shaped by our human capacity to turn away, our ability *not* to see and *not* to hear. And as we also now know, the human brain itself filters what we see and hear according to the frames it has and does not have for interpreting what we hear and see. So it is possible, as the biblical writers put it, to “be ever hearing but never understanding; . . . (to) be ever seeing but never perceiving.” This happens all the time.

One day during a mealtime gathering with our extended family, a much loved nephew of mine, then about 3 years old, realized for the first time that he could feign innocence by pretending not to hear. When gently but quite audibly questioned by his mother about a breach of basic rules he had just committed before the full assembly of witnesses at the table, he paused just long enough for the rest of us to notice a quiet, inner calculation occurring in his mind; and then his eyes lit up as if with a new realization of choice, and he turned to his mother and said with a carefully composed face, “What?”

We laugh when remembering this now, especially because the nephew in question has since grown into a fine young adult, conscience and integrity fully intact. But it is also a sobering reminder that our human capacity for knowledge is shaped as much by what we refuse to hear and see – or pretend that we haven’t – as it is by what we actually take in with eyes and ears open.

“You will be ever hearing but never understanding,” says Isaiah’s prophesy quoted by Jesus in the gospels, “. . . (and) ever seeing but never perceiving.” Jesus and Isaiah were talking about the condition of a hardened heart, a heart so calloused that it

does not feel, so blinded that it does not see and deaf that it does not hear. A heart that is in lock down. Which, throughout the Bible, is used to describe the condition that leads to sin. They were talking about people in Isaiah's day and in Jesus' day – and we can find them now as well – who refuse to read the signs of their own times, who fail to discern the difference between right and wrong and fail to understand – we are being asked to “turn and be healed” as Jesus put it, or in other words to change our sinful ways.

When I was 10, I sometimes think now, I knew a whole lot more about the line between right and wrong than I do today. Or at least, you could say, I was more certain about how to define what was right and what was wrong.

Ten was the age at which I was required to memorize the 10 commandments – along with the explanation of each one contained within Luther's small catechism. I could recite them all. You shall have no other gods before you. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. You shall not steal, not commit adultery, not kill, not covet. You shall honor your father and mother. And more. I knew them all.

Soon enough, of course, my own life experience taught me that defining right and wrong was in fact a much trickier balancing act than my memorization would suggest. As I learned about free will and free speech and free faith, I began to understand some part of what the Sufi poet Hafiz meant when he said, “all your ideas of right and wrong are just a child's training wheels to be laid aside when you can finally live with veracity and love.”

Training wheels laid aside, now here I am, wobbling along on the sidewalk trying to find and keep my moral balance by living with veracity and love. (What a great commandment that is – to live with veracity and love!) But I wonder, if I accept the idea that sin is not always carved in stone or spelled out in hard and fast rules of right and

wrong, can I trust that what *is* written in my heart has enough clarity that I will always “know sin when I see it”?

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart first made this phrase famous in 1964 in an opinion he wrote on an obscenity case. “I shall not today attempt further to define (obscenity), he wrote, “. . . But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved . . . is not that.” For years his measure stood, resulting in a strange practice called “movie day,” in which many of the Supreme Court justices and their clerks, with popcorn in hand, would screen movies charged with being pornographic, declaring as they did that they would “know it when they saw it.”

Really. Should we think, for a minute, about the “eye of the beholder?”

Throughout history, we find case after case of what we now regard clearly as sins and as crimes that were invisible, whether intentionally or not, to the eye of their own times – or at least to the eyes of Power in their time. We humans, it cannot be denied, have a tremendous capacity for looking the other way, when it is in our selfish interest, for choosing what we see and how we see it, for closing our eyes and our ears, for hardening our hearts.

“They taught me,” wrote Lillian Smith in her description of growing up white in the segregated south of the early 1900s, “to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition. . . . to believe in freedom, to glow when the word *democracy* was used, and to practice slavery from morning to night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one’s mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1994 paperback reissue, 29.

Innocence? There is a difference, writes Mary Daly, between ignorance and innocence. Ignorance, she points out, is derived from the Latin word “not to know.” While the Latin root of innocence means “not to hurt or injure.” We do not, she insists, begin in innocence. Rather, she says “we begin life . . . in an injured state.” In patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> And I would add, In systemic racism. In homophobic societies. In economic imperialism and inequality. In the injuries of oppression, with all its faces of pain – personal, communal and historical. Our task, Daly says, is not to regain lost innocence, as so often claimed, but rather to gain knowledge of our injured state and to learn true innocence – or noninjury – for the first time.

Are we able to learn this lesson? Are we willing? To turn, in this way, and be healed?

I’ve been thinking about Rebecca Parker’s flood story a lot lately. I’ve thought about it while reading the news accounts of our collapsing economy and while watching the rising tides of home foreclosures, layoffs and bankruptcies as they cover the fields. I’ve thought about it as the dry ground of economic security has been disappearing all around us, and as friends and neighbors have been forced to leave homes and jobs behind and scramble for higher ground. I’ve thought about it as the waters of economic and environmental distress are swelling and many of the roads on which we’ve been traveling for years are now closed or are rapidly disappearing. And as I feel my own tendency to remain locked up in the insulation of my own life, my own misjudgments, my own insistence on pretending I can keep driving through this without changing who I am and how I travel and what I’m willing to know.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 413.

I realize, when I think of the difficult times we're living in right now, that the way a heart gets hardened, the reason we sometimes close our eyes and ears to the very understanding and knowledge we most need, is fear. Fear can calcify a living heart, pull up its heavy shield, burnish its armor, close its doors tight. It can make our hearts are hard as stone.

What does this feel like? A few weeks ago, I invited members here to write what they know about hardened hearts. "I turn bitter, cold, and numb," wrote one person, "as if my whole self was frostbitten." "I picture a wall," wrote another, "like a fortress, surrounding a scared and tender heart."

Of course we close our eyes, our ears, our hearts, when we are afraid. It feels like an act of protection. But what we need, is to become *more* aware, not *less*. And what softens your heart when it's become hardened, I asked the writers. "Once I realize what is happening," wrote one person, "it's my responsibility to turn back toward love. Giving, sometimes more generously than I want, is the best way to remind myself that I have enough of everything to share."

Said another, "It is when I decide to let my heart feel the full range of life's offerings that I remember it is the deepest pain which helps me access the greatest joy."

Wrote another, "Removing the carefully-constructed shield requires authenticity, honesty, integrity, and courage. My heart and soul soften when my tears come, which they do, when my truth is admitted."

Alice Walker put it this way. "What are hearts for?" she asked. "Hearts are there to be broken . . . that seems to be just part of what happens with hearts. Mine has been broken so many times that I have lost count. But . . . (as it's) broken open more and more and more, it just gets bigger. . . my heart by now feels . . . like it has just sort of dropped

open, (the way) a big suitcase falls open. . . . so open that the wind blows through it. I think that is the way it's supposed to feel when you're in balance. And when you get out of balance, you feel like there's no wind, there's no breeze, there's just this rock.”

In Rebecca Parker’s story, you might have noticed, that when she described them getting out of the car and scrambling for dry ground, she said, “The cold water of the storm poured down on us, baptizing us into the present.” Baptizing us into the present. The same cold, wet present they had been trying to keep at a safe distance while sealed up in their car. It was “a blessed moment,” she said, “not because there is any virtue in danger but because it was a moment when (our) consciousness was restored. We became present to our environment,” she explained. “We became more than passive observers. Our whole bodies, minds and senses arrived. We entered. We left our compartment and inhabited the world. No longer tourists passing through the country, we became part of the place along with everyone else that day, in that corner of western Pennsylvania, in that storm.”<sup>4</sup>

We are living in fearful, stormy times. There is no doubt about that. The waters are rising all around us. This road we’ve been driving on for a very long time is not passable any more. It is not sustainable. Sure it’s tempting to stay locked up in our old ways. To keep trying to drive the same road we’ve been on. But it’s wrong. Are we willing to get out of the car and acknowledge that we must change our ways? Are we willing to realize we’re being invited to turn and be healed? To see and to name the injured state of our over-consumption, of our oppression, of our destruction of the earth? To learn innocence for the first time – how to live *without* injury or injuring?

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<sup>4</sup> Parker, 30.



Fear can stir many different responses. When we give in to fear, we can become “hagridden by the Future,” as Screwtape puts it. We can close our eyes and our ears, build a wall between ourselves and the reality of our times. We can close off door after door after door, until our hearts and minds and consciences are separated from one another. We can let ourselves grow bitter and cold and numb to the present and to the world around us.

Or we can hide behind shields of blame. We can blame others. We can blame those getting the big bonuses or those giving them out. We can blame ourselves. We can blame God and beyond.

Or, we can turn back toward love. We can let our hearts break open like an old suitcase. We can let love blow through them like the wind. We can let our tears soften the dry, hardened ground of our hearts.

“That Love that you are will wait,” says the poet, “until you can tell yourself the lie of denial no more. And . . . you will see just how silent Love’s embrace can be. And in that silence the truth will ring clear. Love demands everything: all of your illusions, excuses, and fears.”

Love demands everything. And then offers it back in a different and greater abundance. The moment we leave our fears behind, hearts not hardened but broken open wide, is a blessed moment.

“this is the birth day of life and of love and wings,”  
wrote e. e. cummings. “and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)  
how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any--lifted from the no  
of all nothing--human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?”

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)<sup>5</sup>

“Blessed are your eyes because they see,” Jesus said, “and your ears because they  
hear.”

Blessed be.

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<sup>5</sup> e.e. cummings, *Singing the Living Tradition*, Reading #504.