

Shared Breath
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There is a disturbing trend in the suburbs. Teenage girls want to copy a certain movie star's nose or to acquire the same lips as their favorite fashion model. There is an increasingly narrow vision of what is held to be attractive in our culture, a circumscribed homogeneity that negates the beauty of our individuality as people. The media bombards us with messages that you must look a certain way, buy particular products and live a certain kind of life in order to be happy. Differences are feared, and we feel thwarted by our imperfections. Even the world of art is dominated by mechanical reproduction. And now cloning looms on the horizon.

No wonder people feel diminished, alienated within themselves, distrustful of others. We reward super models for looking good on the outside, while artists and writers, people who radiate from the inside are barely compensated for the riches they create. We are not encouraged to find our individual voices, to be proud of who we are with all our unique idiosyncrasies and strengths. Our world is torn apart by racism and intolerance, leading to bitterness, violence and war — glaring reminders of our inability to accept our apparent differences, whether racial, religious or cultural.

What is terribly wrong in this picture is that our survival as a human race is dependent on the diversity of our population, just as our ecosystem's health relies on the multiplicity of life forms on earth. I'm reminded of Walt Whitman's passionate celebration of the individual voice: "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear...each singing what belongs to him or her and to no one else...singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs" ("I Hear America Singing," *Leaves of Grass*). A chorus couldn't make beautiful music without the blending of individual voices. The building of a family or an organization or a society is contingent on the shared input of its individual members.

Buddhism encourages us to develop our true identities, instead of hiding who we are behind superficial walls. Working together in the SGI peace movement with people who are different from us helps us to transcend stereotypes, opening us to the most profound realization of all: that in our hearts we are the same. The more we uncover our true selves through human revolution, the more likely it is we will find the place of compassion that binds us together. There, we can begin to feel another's pain as our own.

I've thought a lot about the Heaven's Gate cult, whose members believed taking their own lives would open their identities to a "higher" realm. For me, their philosophy mirrors the spiritual crisis we face as a species. They believed giving up their individuality would join them with a larger whole, that they would attain enlightenment through relinquishing their physical bodies.

This belief system saddens me. The expression of who we are in our daily lives in this world is itself what allows us to attain Buddhahood. It is a lifelong process of manifesting our potential, not a mystical conclusion to a devalued life. Our uniqueness is displayed in small and beautiful ways in everything we do, from how we greet our children to the favorite music we like to dance to when no one is watching. To be yourself means to be willing to pursue your dreams. You cannot become a Buddha unless you feel it is important for you to be here, on the earth, at this time. After all, there is only one of you who will ever exist, throughout eternity.

The paradox of people wanting to look or act like someone else, or of people or nations fearing someone who seems different, is that we are really so alike. We all want to live lives of dignity and value; we all want to love and be loved, to live in peace. All of us

deserve these things. Scientists have discovered that when we breathe out, we share lung and heart cells. We are actually taking in parts of each other, so we are really not so separate after all. This would have pleased Whitman immensely, who believed our individuality, our diversity, is what connects us to each other. I wonder if he knew his metaphor would resonate as a literal truth: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" ("Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*).

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