



Mark Labberton

The Dangerous Act of

Loving Your Neighbor

Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus

“Gracious and incisive.” —GARY HAUGEN, International Justice Mission

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While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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The Problem of Misperceiving

M*itali's story.* For Mitali, the P.E. class started badly and got worse. Growing up as an immigrant in a professional Bengali Hindu family established a baseline for many of the issues in her life. From the high academic expectations of her parents to her status as a third daughter in a sonless South Asian family, along with the usual developmental challenges of growing up, Mitali had plenty of pressure points within her own home.

Her family's move from Queens, New York, to Pleasant Hill, California, only added to this. For one thing, it meant leaving a multihued, multinational neighborhood to settle into a kind of Whiteville in a West Coast suburb. As the only student in her school born outside the United States, Mitali's darker skin underlined the distinction. On top of all this, she was a bright reader and a very shy girl. Mitali was not an athlete.

Various forces predictably converged one day in her new school. Mitali found herself, again, the unchosen one when P.E. teams were picked. Standing alone, unvalued, Mitali heard the boy captain relent in resignation and say, as if to no one, "Fine, then, I'll take that ugly, black thing."

Crushed, cursed, Mitali felt there was really no one to whom she could turn. Her family had its own prejudices and anxieties

about skin color stemming from their culture of origin. Whether by family or foe, Mitali was misperceived, and that shaped her every day.

The layering of misperceptions in Mitali's story is part of what makes it illustrative of the problem. At the core, it is about otherness. Layers of performance, conformity, appearance and social benefit get heaped on in such a way that they obscure the actual person. This happens on an individual-by-individual basis, but also in social, racial, economic and educational groups. Fear of otherness is the problem, and, at least often, dominance over that otherness is the means of maintaining equilibrium and assurance, overcoming that fear. That phenomenon is painful. It's destructive. It's everywhere.

Susan's story. Fifteen minutes of fame washed over Susan Boyle after her appearance on *Britain's Got Talent*. When they saw that plain, gray-haired, solid-bodied, Scottish country woman, the judges and people in the audience audibly scoffed when she said she hoped to become another Elaine Paige. Unimaginable. Then she sang. The audience, aghast with surprise, rose in tears to applaud her. An overnight Internet sensation, Susan Boyle got far more than just her original fifteen minutes. Global media attention focused on the astonishing revelation that someone who seemed such a paragon of the ordinary could have such extraordinary talent. She shattered those expectations.

Was the acclaim any more valid an understanding of Susan Boyle than the dismissiveness had been? Recognizing Susan's talent was surely better than not seeing it, but the basic lens of misperception was still as distorted as it had been before the moment of her audition. Now there was talent, performance. Susan Boyle seen dismissively as an ordinary woman with a wonderful voice is only a slightly more informed superficiality than her being seen simply as an ordinary woman. We honor otherness when we enjoy the benefit, but the rules remain the same.

David's story. A slight young boy from a Nairobi slum, David happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. The consequences nearly killed him. David ran through an area of police action just as a skirmish was going on over a violent theft. Since that crime is a capital offense in Kenya, and since the culprits slipped away, David became convenient prey for the police to harass, attack and imprison in order to demonstrate their power. They could do what they wished. David could do nothing. In the end, the police fired a gun at David, hitting his wrist and hand. He survived; his hand did not. Then David was thrown in prison, indefinitely, by those whose hearts said of David, "vulnerable and dispensable." As a consequence, David was randomly changed forever.

Elisabeth's story. When Elisabeth, as a young teenager, was sold by her aunt into slavery in a brothel in Southeast Asia, it was in part an act of the heart. It's true that people in desperate circumstances do desperate things and rationalize each step along the way. It's also true that these actions emerge out of the distortions of the heart. The economic poverty of Elisabeth's aunt may have trumped family loyalty, but the trigger was not just the possibility of selling Elisabeth without impunity. It's that her aunt no longer saw her niece for who she really was; it revealed the poverty of her aunt's heart in its desperation and disintegration. Out of the heart of Elisabeth's aunt came an entirely different perception that reduced this lovely young girl, her own sister's daughter, to a commodity. Her aunt's misperception stripped Elisabeth of dignity, hope and innocence. The aunt no longer saw her as deserving the simple joys of adolescence spent in the loving safety of her parents' home. To her aunt, Elisabeth became merely a means.

I have never sold someone nor been sold. Nor have you. I don't think I have it in me to do either, though, in fact, I might be wrong. What we do carry in common is a capacity for radical misperception that involves unjustly and cruelly diminishing

others whom God sees as “fearfully and wonderfully made.” We usually do so for our sake.

HOW MISPERCEPTION SHAPES SELF-PERCEPTION

Misperception is one of our global, multigenerational nightmares. We invisibly inherit and pass along those triggers of prejudice, hatred, disgust, trivialization that come out of the hearts of our parents, family and friends. What we receive, we pass on. We come to see as those around us have seen. This can be both very good and very bad news. Racism, for example, doesn't spring forth *ex nihilo*. It comes out of a heart that has been infected by the racist heart of another. Studies of infants show very early signs of registering racial difference based simply on color contrasts. Affinity grouping seems to be a natural instinct when we are born, but the values and attitudes our parents attach to those we see as like or unlike us have a significant effect on how we see and respond to racial differences. Racial prejudice is a universal because it only takes a subhuman heart to treat someone else subhumanly for that to be the norm. History, past and present, tells us we have this proclivity in us.

For one human being to enslave another, for example, requires many layers of misperception, both of and by the slave owner, the slave and the surrounding society. The slave owners have somehow come to see themselves in terms that make the ownership of another person appropriate, desirable or tolerable. It may be driven by a profit motive in which the slave is perceived as a means to an end, or as an animate machine in their delivery system of a product to market (like bricks, rice or bidi cigarettes). The lies about slaves are, of course, closely linked to the slave owners' misperceptions of themselves as well. Slave owners see their self-interest, power and cleverness as appropriately justifying their enslavement of another person. Their capacity to do this and get away with it for enormous profit is all the ground they need to stand on.

Amid the moral distortions of these misperceptions, the slave

owners can thrive. As long as they escape consequences, and as long as the profit outweighs the cost, as long as there is social, legal or political blindness that turns away from the real horrors of enslaving others, then slave owners can pragmatically, if not smugly, justify their buying and selling other human beings. By extension, this means that the tens of thousands of slave owners around the world perceive the good, profitable and socially tenable in radically distorted ways. It may be as simple as perceiving the vulnerable as prey. Money is the heart of what matters.

The customers are likewise engaged in distorted perceptions that turn persons into pieces of erotic, disposable flesh. To perpetuate the misperception of selling young virgins, hymens may be repeatedly sewn shut in order for the pain and bleeding to sustain the customer's illusion of getting his fantasy encounter. Because sex trafficking thrives on misperception, billions of dollars are made annually on perpetuating those misperceptions. The story is the same. The names being changed doesn't protect the innocent.

Misperceptions like these are not just mistaken, they are fatal. People made in the image of God—intended to bring honor to the God of the universe, to give and receive love from others who bear that image, to have the capacity to think, dream, imagine, sing, hope—are not rightly valued. Degrees of misperception vary, but far more often than we imagine, human life itself is jeopardized, if not extinguished, by our mis-seeing, both for the victim and the victimizer. And that's not all—we don't need to be in the slave trade to have hearts that readily allow us to treat others as merely a means. We may just be choosing a teammate in a P.E. class. Rationalizing, we let ourselves off the hook with our frames of misperception and words that misname. This then contributes to the social complicity that tolerates Elisabeth's aunt doing what we say is unthinkable, even when it happens all the time.

Reflection. Consider in these next days all the varied ways you perceive the people in the world around you, near and far. What lenses are you using? Why? How do they affect others and what you see about them? When and where do you see those around you, or in other places in the world, as merely a means? Why do you do so? If the tragic headline referred to your sibling or close friend, how differently would you respond?

INJUSTICE ROLLS DOWN

By the time we read reports about injustices near and far, we have heard stories a long way down the road from their beginnings. Before a single tale of bonded slavery or human trafficking has occurred, a long string of factors has enabled the distortion of human relationships to make such horrific things imaginable and doable, maybe even normal and expected. Before a hate crime is committed, a heart has gone tragically wrong and made a world of pain and distortion. Before we emit another sigh of disengagement from a newspaper headline about poverty or AIDS, our hearts tell us that it is not our concern. The sheer ubiquity of this fact makes it both obvious to state and essential to admit. Its obviousness contributes to its invisibility. If “the only thing necessary for evil to prevail is for good [people] to do nothing” (Edmund Burke), what better way of doing nothing than to live in our invisibly socialized deception that injustice is their problem, not ours. It’s about those people, not my people; it’s about what’s *there*, not what’s *here*. It’s what it is. It’s how we casually and daily partition reality.

These baseline presuppositions explain how we can listen but not hear the cries of the suffering. We can be aware of the sexual abuse of someone we read about in our local paper, the violence of our city’s gangs, the hunger among the local working poor, and then forget all about it. We can watch a documentary on hunger

and then go out to dinner without a pause. We can wish things were better for them, but then get on with our day. We can hope that solutions can be found, circumstances improved, wrongs righted. But it all seems to lie beyond us. Meanwhile, we receive the circumstantial and accidental benefits of “social Darwinism,” glad that we are among those surviving, if not thriving. This simultaneously allows us to live with a clear conscience, believing that we are not the perpetrators of injustice while also being convinced that injustice is beyond our power to change. We think this is just the way things are. Most of us find this a tolerable stalemate most of the time. That is true for most of us on this side of things.

The consistent witness of Scripture is that each of us is, in all times and places, implicated, deeply implicated, in the problem of injustice. That problem turns out to be not only there but here, not only about them but as much (and sometimes more) about us. Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” (Mt 15:19). This suggestive list from “out of the heart” leaves the door of injustice wide open. What shows up in public is a revelation of what is first in our hearts. This makes Cornel West’s observation all the more compelling: “Justice is what love looks like in public” (from the film *Call+Response*). Turning it around, injustice is what shows up when love is absent from the heart.

To admit this, to face it in ourselves, is to tamper with the paradigm, and that is often just too threatening. We may immediately leap to self-defense or self-justification, to blame or rationalization. We want to live in some kind of internal equilibrium about this so as to avoid being overwhelmed or carrying false guilt or becoming paralyzed. These are understandable reactions, part of the apparently neutral and justifiable experience we have when we live on this side of things. Beneath all this is the foundational truth that we don’t really love God or our neighbors. Injustice is one of the consequences of our failure of heart. Out of our core comes a pro-

foundly shaping sequence of distortions: misperception, misnaming and misacting in the world. This sequence is replayed over and over again. It's what we think is simply true of life in an unjust world in which many of us generally consider ourselves to be without complicity, responsibility or power. God's heart passionately desires justice, starting with the most vulnerable. Our heart typically does not. The Lord speaks through Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you,

the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. (Is 58:6-9)

Reflection. *If justice means “to make things right,” what is one area of injustice that especially matters to you (or, alternatively, one that you think should matter to you but doesn't yet? Write down ten to fifteen things you could do in the next couple of months to enlarge your understanding and empathy for people in that circumstance. What do you think God's heart feels in response to them? What about yours?*