

The Woman on the Beach in Guaymas

from *It's Easier Than You Think*, by Sylvia Boorstein

One of my important gurus was a woman whose name I don't know, although I have told her story dozens of times. She taught me the dramatic lesson that my view of life as perilous and hazard strewn is one particular perception, not the only perception. When I realized that she and I saw the same situation in totally opposite ways, I understood that ways of seeing are conditioned by the different lenses each of us wears over our perception. It helps me to remember how my set of lenses colors my life experience, and sometimes I think, "It could be, with someone else's lenses, that this situation would look quite different."

I met the woman on the beach in Guaymas twenty years ago. It was summer, and Guaymas, in the Sonora Desert of Mexico, was very hot. I was staying in a large, air-conditioned, modern hotel. Nearby was a caravan park, where people, including this woman, were camping in small trailers. This woman was young, and she had two young sons with her. John, the elder, was four years old, and the baby was just beginning to crawl. She explained that she didn't like to stay where she lived in Los Angeles in the summertime, so she camped in Mexico for several months, and her husband flew down to join them each weekend in his own small plane.

Everything in her story seemed worrisome to me:

- Being a woman alone on the beach in a foreign country.
- Having to watch a small baby crawling around at the edge of the water while minding a snorkeling four-year-old.
- The problems connected with getting clean drinking water or refrigerating milk and other perishables in that hot climate.
- How close the nearest doctor was—had she even thought about that?
- The danger of her husband flying down to Mexico by himself each weekend.

Indeed, every aspect of her situation provided me with material from which I could construct a catastrophe.

She seemed to be having a fine, relaxed time.

One night we had a huge rainstorm with booming thunder and flashes of lightning that filled the sky like fireworks. The rain was torrential, and I worried, as I looked out of my sixth-floor window, about the possibility of flash flooding and what it might do to the caravan park. By dawn the storm had passed, and I hurried to check up on my woman and her children. The caravan park was a mess! The rains had washed everything outside the trailers all over the beach, and people were busy sweeping up, retrieving their household goods. My woman was also sweeping, her children playing happily nearby.

"How was the storm?" I asked.

"It was great," she answered.

"Did you have any problems with the children?" I looked over at them gleefully splashing in the puddles.

"Oh no," she said. "The baby slept right through it, and John would have slept through it, too, except I woke him up so he wouldn't miss it."

I was stunned. I thought to myself, "*There is another way to do life!*"

I completely got it that she and I took the same data and saw it through different filters. I came out with a catastrophic story, and she came out with a thrilling story. I wanted to change filters with her.

It would be terrific if I could say from that moment on my insight into the filtering nature of disturbing mind states allowed me to have clear understanding of all situations. That didn't happen. It would be easy if we could just change the filters. The mind I acquired for this lifetime is equipped with its own particular set of idiosyncratic filters through which it processes experience.

Even though filters seem permanent apparatus of the mind, seeing them for what they are reduces their power. [...]

We can, with practice, begin to decondition the mind from its unconscious reactivity. Even without changing the habitual tendencies, we can be alert to them and work around them. If the

mind is clear and steady, we can recognize filters as being *just* filters and choose the most wholesome response.

The woman on the beach in Guaymas was a great teacher for me. Although I was not able to change my behavior in any way at that time, she taught me that another way of responding was possible. There arose in me a tremendous determination to do whatever I needed to do to be able to respond differently.

Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.
– Viktor E. Frankl