

## My Place in the Current

*Melissa Rooney, Durham News (Raleigh News and Observer), January 2014*

I met my husband when I started graduate school in 1993 and, within two years, my apartment became no more than an enormous, \$300/month post-office box. My mother, who is Polish-Catholic like every member of her family before her, was the only reason I kept up the façade. So, while decorating the tree one Christmas, I told Mom that Mike and I were thinking about moving in together. “I’ll have to talk to God about that,” Mom said. My spine tightened. “Well, tell God that if he wants us to pretend that we’re not living together, he’s going to have to fork over a monthly check for \$300,” I retorted.

Now, perhaps my mother was just saying that she needed ‘to pray about it’, which is, at the very least, the religious way of letting something sink in before talking/acting on it. But the Catholic guilt invoked by the name of God, Himself, was intentional. It was something I’d experienced throughout my childhood.

When my grandmother caught me actually looking through a Playboy magazine I’d found somewhere, she told me, in no uncertain terms, that I “was going to hell.” Same thing happened when I disagreed with her persistently.

My grandfather didn’t verbally damn me to hell, but let’s just say I went to church every Sunday where he was concerned. That is, until I was around 22 years old, when I stayed home one Sunday while the rest of the family trudged to church in gloomy weather. The disappointment and shame on his face made it clear that he no longer expected to spend eternity with me either.

Experiences like these may explain why I don’t deal well with guilt. Although it generally has its intended effect eventually, I am not predisposed to quietly acquiesce when guilt comes into play. In fact, I can’t help but get my dukes up. If someone (including me) tries to make me feel guilty for something I did without bad intentions, my first thought is to damn *them* to hell. After the anger passes – usually not without me saying or doing something I regret – I feel sad....really sad. Why is it so difficult to do something that makes practical sense and/or is doing no worldly harm to anyone? My adult activism has rephrased the question: Why is it so difficult to altruistically (it seems) change establishments and institutions that either 1) don’t make practical sense any more or 2) were unbalanced from the get-go?

Recently, after a particularly heart-shaking experience, a friend and mentor said to me, “I need you to accept your part in this.” I just shook my head. The world required a paralyzing web of social and political mores from which I was destined to never break free, regardless of how I tried. That wasn’t *my* fault.

Another new friend accused me of having a victim mentality. It’s the first time I’d heard that one, as I’m usually accused of being uncompromisingly and sometimes egotistically individualistic (which, incidentally, also makes me defensive).

I refused to feel guilty for trying to bring about a good change that may never happen without a self-sacrificing, do-it-yourself volunteer like me who isn't afraid to push through the bureaucracy and nay-sayers. I was defeated, and it was all I could think about.

'Victim Mentality.' 'Break Free from.' Those two phrases permeated my mind. While I over-examine my actions for good intentions, I have difficulty scrutinizing their own practicality, particularly given the world in which I live and over which I have little, if any, control. I also tend to ignore my own egocentrism in 1) assuming that I can define what's good and right and/or 2) lacking the patience required to see what may actually be good and right come to be.

God works in mysterious ways. Amen, brother.

Regardless of any personal definition of 'The Powers that Be', it's hard not to feel that I am being pulled by a current, whether or not I play any part in creating that current and whether or not I choose to ride the current or paddle against it.

My mother's current often leads her to terminally ill or dying persons. My current leads me to socially and politically controversial and adversarial situations that frustrate my life on every level (not to mention all other lives involved). Many of my personal experiences have appeared fruitless in every aspect except the anxiety they produced --unsuccessful fights of my own fancy, which should have driven me to apathy by now. But one after another, I find myself in another fight for something I believe will better my world.

In hindsight, these experiences provide me with the most meaningful education and character-development. They are the means by which I learn my limitations and my strengths and through which I've met the people who have most influenced my life and my outlook, many of whom are lifelong friends and mentors.

Who am I to determine what God/Fate/Nature wants or in what direction my current is taking me? I am certainly not in a position to dictate to others in this regard, whether or not a holy text appears to support me and certainly not when no obvious and/or intentional harm results.

I'm not saying I should make hasty decisions or take my choices lightly. But, if I am to live my life to its full potential, I must take the time to truly reflect and accept which direction my current is flowing, whether or not I know where it is going. It's not always the path of least resistance. I must learn patience if I am to avoid wearing myself out from paddling against or, sometimes, even with the current. Everything happens within its own due time.

Patience. That's my word for the year.