TO SEE OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US – April 2007

— By Richard L. Kiniry

Old truisms ought to be reconsidered occasionally. Case in point: I have always assumed that everyone or almost everyone knows that they aren't perfect, known that they can be aggravating, overbearing, passive aggressive, strange, judgmental, mean (even cruel), self-destructive, childish (even ignorant), and selfish at times. I assumed that because I have noticed so much imperfect behavior in other people. It has been said before but I ask again, why are other people's faults so easy to notice?

Most of us are good at noticing the undesirable characteristics of other people, the ones that make life difficult both for themselves and the rest of us. I stand back in wonderment when people put their foot in their mouth in the same way for the thousandth time. I hear some people excuse themselves countless times and face others who are never able to admit they are wrong. Another truism: if they could only see themselves as others see them. Which makes me wonder, what are people not telling me about myself?

Without denying that some people are especially difficult, much of our trouble with other people's behavior is a natural clash of personalities. We all have a history that makes us unique and we see life from our individual perspectives. From inside our private world we have an open view of others' behavior, but from that vantage point it is difficult to see ourselves.

Ethical values are easy to apply to the great issues of the day, but every day issues are harder. We Ethical Humanists have the central ethical proposition that everyone has Intrinsic Worth, meaning that everyone deserves respect not because of how useful they are but because they are valuable in and of themselves. That is easy to apply to the immorality of the Iraq War but we tend to forget about the Intrinsic Worth of annoying people. Intrinsic Worth is not merely an ethical theory. It can be a way of living and of relating to others. In that sense it becomes a more intense way of connecting to others. Imagine actually caring about others enough to say how we feel about them and in reverse wanting to know how they feel about us.

We miss out on some of the best information about ourselves because of the social conspiracy of "don't rock the boat." We seem to believe that if we all started telling the truth civilization might go down the tubes. We avoid confrontations, even friendly ones.

Where did we get the idea that people aren't supposed to annoy us? Actually, what's more annoying than someone who consistently finds other people annoying? Life is full of weird stuff and that includes people, but they are who they are. That's life. Imperfection is the stuff of life. Why run away from it? Life could get a lot better if we all found nice (caring, not cruel) ways of being more honest with each other. If we aren't going to honestly engage life in all its variety, can we claim to be living our best? We live in a web of relationships and, dare I suggest that we be true to our fellow spiders.