

A Larger Place

Paradox

So far, we've reflected on the miracle of life, its purpose, and how God has put in place, all that we need for growth. Shall we look at what can inhibit this growth? The very gift of life comes with a strong instinct for survival that functions as the human ego, and its tool is fear. The primal survival instinct serves us well in our early years of growth. The child needs to build a good healthy ego, and fear protects the child from danger. But in adult journey, we are confronted with the need to reverse these trends. We enter with Jesus, on the road to paradox which was once described by a 15th C monk whose name is not known. But this is what he wrote:

“Know thyself; tis half the path to God: then lose thyself and the rest of the way is trod.”

To someone who is not ready for this paradox, losing oneself can sound like literal loss of identity. As a child I was bewildered by the sayings of Jesus that seemed to be full of doom and gloom. He who loves his life will lose it. Take up your cross and follow me. Except a grain of wheat dies it remain a single grain. It is only at the appropriate time that we understand these sayings to be the invitation to a freedom in Christ that is much greater than the small prison of self. The me-first instinct that served us well when we were young is shaken off like the too-tight shell of a growing crab. If we can't do that, what was once good for us, can become evil. My definition of evil is the distortion of the instinct for survival. We see in the animal kingdom, the brutish aspects of humankind, murder, torture, greed, lust for power and territory, the killing of the newborn. I have heard people say that abortion is unnatural. It isn't. While animals don't have the facility for abortion, they can and will, eat their newborn young, or they can simply walk away and leave them to die. Those who have worked with animals know that in the animal kingdom all of these “evils” are all linked to the survival instinct. I believe that is true also for humans. Since negative actions create negative energy, we can call that energy a presence of evil. But for me it's important that I don't project evil on some mythic being. I must own that potential in myself as part of my basic human nature.

When Mother Teresa was asked why she worked for the destitute and dying, she shocked the interviewer with the answer, *“I do this to combat the Hitler in me.”*

Mahatma Ghandi was speaking about much the same thing when he said, *“When I see a man doing*

good, I seek to be like that man. When I see a man doing evil, I look to my own heart.”

Wise words. Unless we know and own, our own potential for evil, we are working with a grave handicap, for in the mystery of paradox, what is shadow in our lives, is the point of potential growth. Darkness is light unborn. Winter is preparation for Spring. Fear is always ready to be sacrificed to love. That is at the heart of the mystery that took Jesus to the cross and through to the resurrection.

It's probably true that the poetry of metaphor and parable can make journey seem complex. I love story “sign posts” because I'm a writer, a dreamer. But the reality of our journey with Jesus is very simple. The tool of journey is love. The inhibitor is fear. The writer of the first letter of John put it succinctly. *There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out all fear.*

We know fear but as our capacity for love increases, so does the fear diminish. I find it useful to gauge my own actions and reactions with that measure. Does this come from love? Or does it come from fear? It's a simple test and it usually works.

Here is an old Hassidic story about fear, which is a personal favourite. Some of you may have heard it before, but it is worth repeating. I find it very powerful.

There was once a holy man who went on a long journey. Unfortunately, he left his house open and while he was away a band of monsters moved in and made themselves at home. The man came back. He opened the front door and at once the monsters rushed at him. Quickly, he slammed the door shut. He prayed to God, took a deep breath and opened the door again. Once more the monsters came at him. As they did so, he bowed and acknowledged their presence. When he did that, half the monsters disappeared but the half that was left were the biggest. They snarled, showed their teeth and pounced on the man. He offered them hospitality, asked if he could get them food and drink. At that, all the monsters disappeared except the chief. Now this monster was huge, with enormous jaws and great sharp teeth. Moreover, it was not going to be put off. It lunged at the man, its mouth open wide. As it came close, the man put his head in the monster's mouth. The chief of the monsters also vanished, and the man had his house back.

From time to time I sit with that story in order to find my chief fear and put my head in its mouth. It's an ongoing exercise.

There is no perfection for us in life school. Thank God for that. Perfection has very little room for growth. We claim our errors and try to learn from them and our frailty, far from being a source of concern, is reason for gratitude. It is our God-given growing space.

We can summarise the stages of the personal journey more or less like this:

1. *In early stages we can experience chaos as we are called to step into a larger space.*
2. *We can feel aloneness, vulnerability.*
3. *We become aware of remarkable God incidence, teachers, guidance, learning patterns, everything is there at the time when we need it.*
4. *We enter into the mystery of paradox.*
5. *We become aware that God's word is all around us. We discover the parables of nature.*
6. *We have an overwhelming sense of the interconnectedness of everything.*
7. *There us a peace that comes with simplicity, a freedom, a lightness and enhanced sense of humour.*
8. *We have a knowing without words.*
9. *There is awareness that the foundation of the universe, is love.*
10. *We know that separation from God is an illusion.*

The journey into paradox is one of true freedom and rejoicing. It is well expressed in this verse by American poet Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

Joy Cowley