

Mosquito Bites

When grace enters, there is no choice - humans must dance.



W.H. Auden wrote those words and, beautiful as they sound, I wish they were true. When grace enters a room we should begin to dance but, sadly, more often than not we let some little thing, some minor mosquito bite, blind us to grace's presence.

I say this with sympathy, not cynicism. **We all know how mosquitoes can ruin a picnic.** Here's an example: You are celebrating your birthday in your back yard, having a picnic with family and friends. The weather is perfect, the sun is warm, the mood is mellow, and everything around and within you is an invitation to be joyful and grateful. This is "Sabbath" in the biblical sense: You are celebrating life, your birthday. You are healthy, surrounded by family and friends who love you, enjoying leisure, time off the wheel of work, all with good food and good drink. Grace has entered and everything is wonderful, except for one thing, mosquitoes. As dusk begins to take hold they discreetly begin to infiltrate, inflicting a bite here and a bite there until eventually most everyone loses his or her focus and is preoccupied with keeping exposed parts of their flesh under vigilance. Eventually most of the good cheer and the gratitude evaporate and irritation at the mosquitoes effectively ends any inclination to dance. The picnic is brought down by a series of little bites!

We could all recount a hundred kinds of incidences of this sort. **Given the complexity and contingency within our everyday lives, mosquitoes of some type are invariably present.** There is some rain on every parade, some irritation in virtually every situation in life, and some element challenging pure grace within almost every moment of life. Life rarely comes to us pure, free from all shadow. That's why former spiritualities said that we are "living in this valley of tears". In our lives we never experience a moment of clear-cut, pure, joy. Everything comes with a shadow, a mosquito at the

picnic.

And so it is not always easy to dance, even in the clear presence of grace. Mosquito bites can easily cause us to lose perspective, to lose the big picture, the one that would have us see and celebrate grace, even in the face of some minor irritation. A minor irritation can make us lose sight of a huge grace.

Today there is a rich spiritual and psychological literature that challenges us to try to live more fully inside the present moment and not let our heartaches about the past or our anxieties about tomorrow cheat us out of the riches of today. But, as we all know, that is easier said than done. Elements from our past - half-remembered lullabies from childhood, an almost--forgotten face, a past love, an humiliation on the playground deep in our past, a misstep that still haunts us, and thousand other things from our past - impale themselves into our present. And the future, as well, colors our present as we anxiously worry about an impending decision, the meeting we must have tomorrow, what the doctor is going to tell us at our next visit, and how will meet our next mortgage bill. The present moment never comes to us pure.

And yet the challenge remains, an important and healthy challenge: Don't let the mosquito bites within life blind you to the larger presence of grace! One of my favorite spiritual writers, David Steidl-Rast articulates this challenge very strongly, though he does it by emphasizing the positive. Here's an example from his writings: "You think this is just another day in your life. It's not just another day; it's the one day that is given to you today. It's given to you; it's a gift. It's the only gift that you have right now, and the only appropriate response is gratefulness. If you do nothing else but to cultivate that response to the great gift that this unique day is, if you learn to respond as if it were the first day of your life and very last day, then you will have spent this day very well."

But that is a grace that does not come easily, it must be fervently prayed for. Mosquitoes will inevitably make their presence known at every picnic in our lives. That's a given. The challenge is to not lose sight of the larger presence of grace because of minor irritations.

And it helps to keep one's sense of humor about this: I was trying to untie my shoe lace yesterday, a simple, rote act that I've performed blindly thousands of times. I tugged on a lace and, given how shoes are tied, it should be impossible for the laces not to open. But somehow a knot appeared instead! How can this happen? The answer lies in a simple, age-old, philosophical axiom: In the world of irritation there are no impossibilities, no limits of finitude, only infinite potentialities.

Small wonder humans don't always dance when grace enters.

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