

A Crack in our pitcher



There's a much-quoted line from Leonard Cohen that suggests that the place where we are broken is also the place where our redemption starts: There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

That's true, a major wound is often the place where wisdom flows into our lives and a weakness that habitually overpowers us can keep us aware of our need for grace. But that's half of the equation. A fault, while keeping us humble, can also keep us in mediocrity and joylessness. John of the Cross offers us this image by way of an explanation:

If one small crack in a pitcher goes unrepaired, the damage will be enough to cause all the liquid to leak out. ... Accordingly, one imperfection leads to another, and these to still more. You will scarcely ever find a person negligent in the conquering of one appetite who will not have many others flowing from the identical weakness and imperfection caused by this one appetite. Such persons, consequently,

are ever faltering along the road. We have witnessed many persons, whom God was favoring with much progress in detachment and freedom, fall from happiness and stability in their spiritual exercises and end up losing everything merely because they began to indulge in some slight attachment to conversation and friendship under the appearance of good. For by this attachment they gradually emptied themselves of holy solitude and the spirit and joy of God. All this happened because they did not put a stop to their initial satisfaction and sensitive pleasure, and preserve themselves for God in solitude. (Ascent to Mount Carmel, Book I, Chapter 11).

Although this passage was written more specifically for contemplative monks and nuns and a warning against "attachment to conversation and friendship" will sound strange and unhealthy to us, there's part of us that understands exactly what he is saying: Our addictions, our infidelities, and our various falls from grace invariably start at that exact spot to which he points his finger, namely, in a certain initial satisfaction and pleasure, a certain flirting and playing with fire, which, while not sinful in itself, eventually leads us into an emotional and moral quagmire that robs us of peace and happiness and, most damaging of all, forces us to hide things, to lie, and to be less than healthily transparent.

And even when the fault is not big, it still serves to block us from deeper growth and deeper happiness. John has an axiom that says it doesn't matter in the end whether a bird is attached to the ground by a heavy chain or a light string - it can't fly in either case. Hence, he cautions us strongly against being comfortable with any of our faults or addictions by rationalizing that this or that fault is not so serious and that we are fundamentally good persons, despite our weakness. Whether we are held by a heavy chain or a thin thread, we still can't fly.

If we grow comfortable with an addiction or fault inside us, we will find ourselves impoverished too in another way: it will rob us of real happiness. French philosopher, Leon Bloy, suggests that ultimately there is only one, true, human sadness, that of not being a saint! That may sound like over-pious moralizing, but, just as with the quote from John of the Cross cited above, there's a part of us that understands exactly what Bloy is saying. Our addictions, our infidelities, and our less-than-healthy indulgences might well bring us some pleasure (though, soon enough, that pleasure turns into a compulsion) but these never bring us joy. They bring sadness. Joy is not the same as pleasure and, indeed, we speak of sad pleasures. There can be a lot of pleasure in our lives even as our hearts are sad and our consciences are heavy.

True joy is something beyond pleasure and can co-exist with renunciation and pain. It is dependent rather on honesty, transparency, and gratitude, the real hallmarks of sanctity. When we are honest in examining our experience we know this truth. If any of us ask ourselves: When have I been most truly happy in my life? The honest answer invariably will be: I have been happiest and most at peace at those times when I have been faithful, honest, fully transparent, when all the goods were on the table,

and I had nothing to hide, even if I was less than perfect.

Nobody is perfect, but we must never grow comfortable with our faults and rationalize them because they are not grievous or because we can keep them hidden. If one small crack in a pitcher goes unrepaired, the damage will be enough to cause all the liquid to leak out. The net result will not be that we become bad persons. No. We will remain as we are, good and solid in our mediocrity. But greatness will escape us and we will carry with us always the adult sadness of not being a saint.

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