

"There's Always Something!"

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A friend of mine jokingly says that when she dies she wants this epitaph on her gravestone: There was always something!

And there always is! All of us appreciate her frustration. Invariably, there's always something, big or small, that casts a shadow and somehow keeps us from fully entering the present moment and appreciating its richness. There is always some anxiety, some worry about something that we should have done or should be doing, some unpaid bill, some concern about what we need to face tomorrow, some lingering heartache, some concern about our health or the health of another, some hurt that is still burning, or some longing for someone who is absent that mitigates our joy. There's always something, some loss, some hurt, some anxiety, some bitterness, some jealousy, some obsession, or some headache, that is forever draining the present moment of its joy.

Henri Nouwen once gave a very simple, poignant expression to this: "Our life," he writes. "is a time in which sadness and joy kiss each other at every moment. There is a quality of sadness that pervades all the moments of our life. It seems that there is no such thing as a clear-cut pure joy, but that even in the most happy moments of our existence we sense a tinge of sadness. In every satisfaction, there is an awareness of limitations. In every success, there is the fear of jealousy. Behind every smile, there is a tear. In every embrace, there is loneliness. In every friendship, there is distance. And in all forms of light, there is the knowledge of surrounding darkness." There's always something!

Jesus had his own way of expressing this. There is an incident recorded in the Gospels wherein Peter

approaches Jesus and asks him what reward a disciple will receive for following him. Jesus replies that anyone who gives up father, mother, spouse, children, house, or land in order to be his disciple will receive these back (mothers, spouses, children, houses, lands) one hundred times over. But then he adds a rather unwelcome clause: "though not without tribulation". There will always be something - some stress, some jealousy, some persecution - which can wipe out both the recognition and the enjoyment of the hundredfold. In effect, what Jesus is saying is that we can have everything - and enjoy nothing! Why? Because there will always be something impaling itself into the present moment that can cause us to lose perspective and thus lose the richness and joy inside of our own lives.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus specifies what that something often is, namely, jealousy. We can have everything and enjoy nothing because we are jealous of what other people have. How true. How often do we denigrate our own lives and talents, failing to see and savor their richness, because we would like to be someone else, someone rich and famous, someone set apart. Our lives are rich, but we are not content within them because we would want what someone else has.

There is a rich literature today, both within religious and secular circles, that tries to challenge us to not let our anxieties, heartaches, jealousies, and worries block us from entering fully into the present moment. Most of that literature is good since it formulates the right challenge. Sometimes, however, some of these authors give us the impression that, if you focus your attention and work hard at a few techniques, this is an easy thing to do. It's not! Entering into the present moment, truly entering it without being waylaid by our own heartaches and headaches, is one of the most difficult psychological and spiritual tasks in all of life.

Our lives are rich, and that is true for all of us, not just for the rich and famous. At the height of his fame, the poet, Rainer Marie Rilke, received a letter from a young man, complaining that he wanted to be a poet but was handicapped because he lived in a small town where nothing exciting or noteworthy ever happened. Rilke wrote back to him and telling him that if his life seemed poor to him than he probably wasn't a poet after all because he couldn't pick up the riches of his own life. Every person's experience is the stuff of poetry. There are no lives that aren't rich; but most of us are blocked from entering into the richness of our own lives and can never appreciate the hundredfold ... because there's always something.

The challenge is to be present to the richness inside of our own lives, and that means learning to celebrate the temporary, the imperfect. That means learning how to go to the great banquet that lies at the heart of life, even while our lives are not yet fully healthy and complete. And part of that means accepting too how difficult this is, enjoying the times when we do get there, forgiving ourselves for mostly falling short, and having an epitaph engraved for ourselves that reads: There was always something!

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