

SERIOUS Joy

Sayings and stories on the way to the Kingdom.

Here are some stories that have guided Christians for centuries on their journey into the Kingdom of God. How do you know when you're in the Kingdom? How do you know when you're an authentic follower of Jesus? Jesus said, by your love. Likewise, you know you're in the Kingdom by the serious joy that flows from the expression of that love. It really is that simple - and that difficult. These sayings and stories are from men and women who have experienced that joy and that love and have left a trail for us to follow.

There is only one source of joy, love, goodness, and truth in the universe, and if we give ourselves permission, we can follow that source without fear, wherever it leads. Because where it leads, even if to places we never would have dreamt possible, it always leads deeper into itself - deeper into God himself, the Source of all. "Don't be afraid," are always the first words from God and his angels to us. Don't be afraid to turn over every rock and to ruthlessly trust God in the pursuit of that furious love He has waiting for each one of us. (Pastor DaveB)

THE WAY OF THE HEART

Henri Nouwen (excerpt)

When Abba Arsenius had asked for the second time, "Lord, lead me to the way of salvation," the voice that spoke to him not only said, "Be silent" but also, "Pray always." To pray always - this is the real purpose of the desert life. Solitude and silence can never be separated from the call to unceasing prayer... The Desert Fathers and Mothers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God. Solitude and silence are the context within which prayer is practiced.

The literal translation of the words "pray always" is "come to rest." The Greek word for rest is hesychia, and hesychasm is the term which refers to the spirituality of the desert. A hesychast is a man or a woman who seeks solitude and silence as the ways to do with the absence of conflict or pain. It is a rest in God in the midst of a very intense daily struggle. Abba Anthony even says to a fellow monk that it belongs "to the great work of a man...to expect temptations to his last breath." Hesychia, the rest which flows from unceasing prayer, needs to be sought at all costs, even when the flesh is itchy, the world alluring, and the demons noisy...

One of these demonic ruses is to make us think of prayer primarily as an activity of the mind that involves above all else our intellectual capacities. This prejudice reduces prayer to speaking with God or thinking about God.

For many of us prayer means nothing more than speaking with God. And since it usually seems to be a quite one-sided affair, prayer simply means talking to God. This idea is enough to create great frustrations. If I present a problem, I expect a solution; if I formulate a question, I expect an answer; if I ask for guidance, I expect a response. And when it seems, increasingly, that I am talking into the dark, it is not so strange that I soon begin to suspect that my dialogue with God is in fact a monologue. Then I may begin to ask myself: To whom am I really speaking, God or myself?...

But there is another viewpoint that can lead to similar frustrations. This is the viewpoint that restricts the meaning of prayer to thinking about God. Whether we call this prayer or meditation makes little difference. The basic conviction is that what is needed is to think thoughts about God and his mysteries. Prayer therefore requires hard mental work and is quite fatiguing, especially if reflective thinking is not one of our strengths. Since we already have so many other practical and pressing things on our minds, thinking about God becomes one more demanding burden. This is especially true because thinking about God is not a spontaneous event, while thinking about pressing concerns comes quite naturally.

Thinking about God makes God into a subject that needs to be scrutinized or analyzed. Successful prayer is thus prayer that leads to new intellectual discoveries about God. Just as a psychologist studies a case and seeks to gain insight by trying to find coherence in all the available data, so someone who prays well should come to understand God better by thinking deeply about all that is known about him...

(But) the crisis of our prayer life is that our minds may be filled with ideas of God while our hearts remain far from him. Real prayer comes from the heart. It is about this prayer of the heart that the Desert Fathers teach us...

We find the best formulation of the prayer of the heart in the words of the Russian Theophan the Recluse: "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you." All through the centuries, this view of prayer has been central in hesychasm. Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart; that is, at that point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one. There God's Spirit dwells and there the great encounter takes place. There heart speaks to heart, because there we stand before the face of the Lord, all-seeing, within us...

The most profound insight of the Desert Fathers is that entering into the heart is entering into the Kingdom of God. In other words, the way to God is through the heart...

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Brother Lawrence (excerpts)

- The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.

- Lord of all pots and pans and things...Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!

- (He said,) That we ought to quicken—that is, enliven—our faith. That it was lamentable we had so little; and that instead of taking *faith* for the rule of their conduct, men amused themselves with trivial devotions, which changed daily.

- That many do not advance in the Christian progress because they stick in penances and particular exercises, while they neglect the love of God, which is the *end*. That this appeared plainly by their works, and was the reason why we see so little solid virtue.

- That there needed neither art nor science for going to God, but only a heart resolutely determined to apply itself to nothing but Him, or for His sake, and to love Him only.

- He (Brother Lawrence) discussed with me frequently, and with great openness of heart, concerning his manner of *going* to God. He told me that all consists in one hearty renunciation of everything which we are sensible does not lead to God. That we might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him, with freedom and in simplicity. That we need only to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to Him every moment... That our sanctification did not depend on *changing* our works, but in doing that for God's sake which we commonly do for our own.

- That the most excellent method he had found of going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men, and (as far as capable) purely for the love of God. That it was a great delusion to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from other times; that we are as strictly obliged to adhere to God by action in the time of action as by prayer in the season of prayer. That prayer was nothing else but a sense of the presence of God... and that when the appointed times of prayer were past, he found no difference, because he still continued with God, praising and blessing Him with all his might, so that he passed his life in continual joy...

- I have quitted all forms of devotion and set prayers but those to which my state obliges me. And I make it my business only to persevere in His holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an *actual presence* of God; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God, which often causes me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes also outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them and prevent their appearance to others.

THE STORIES OF THE DESERT PRIESTS

During the early part of the Christian era, the monastery at Scete became a center where many people gathered. After renouncing everything they had, they went to live in the desert surrounding the monastery. Many of the teachings of these men have been collected and published in numerous books. (Paul Coelho)

The middle way

The monk Lucas was walking through a village accompanied by a disciple. An old man asked the man from Scete:

- Holy man, how can I come closer to God?

- Enjoy yourself. Praise the Creator with your joy – was the reply.

The two went on their way. Just then, a young man came over.

- What must I do to come closer to God?

- Enjoy yourself less - said Lucas.

When the young man left, the disciple commented:

- It seems to me that you are not sure whether or not one should enjoy oneself.

- A spiritual journey is a bridge with no railings across an abyss – replied Lucas, - If someone is too near the right hand side, I tell him 'left a bit!' If he approaches the left side, I say 'right a bit!' The extremes veer us away from the Path.

The town on the far side

A hermit from the monastery of Scete went to Abbot Theodore:

- I know precisely the objective of life. I know what God asks of man, and I know the best way of serving Him. Even so, I am incapable of doing everything I should in order to serve the Lord.

Abbot Theodore remained silent for a time. Finally, he said:

- You know that there is a city on the far side of the ocean. But you haven't yet found the ship, nor have you loaded your bags, nor crossed the sea. Why spend time commenting on what it is like, or how one should walk through its streets?

"Knowing the objective of life, or recognizing the best way of serving the Lord is not enough. Put into practice that which you think, and the way will be revealed all by itself."

Behave like others

Abbot Pastor was walking with a monk from Scete when they were invited for a meal. The host, honored by the holy men's presence, served only the finest dishes.

However, the monk was fasting; as soon as the food arrived, he took a pea and chewed it slowly. He only ate that one pea, during the whole meal.

As they left, Abbot Pastor called him:

- Brother, when you pay a visit, do not render your holiness an offense. The next time you are fasting, do not accept an invitation to dine.

The monk understood what Abbot Pastor said. From then on, whenever he was with others, he behaved as they did.

Work in the field

A young man crossed the desert and finally came to the monastery of Scete. There, he asked to hear one of the abbot's lectures – and was granted permission.

That afternoon, the abbot's discourse was about the importance of work in the field.

After the lecture, the young man said to one of the monks:

- That was amazing. I thought I would hear a fine sermon about virtues and sins, and the abbot spoke only of tomatoes, irrigation and so forth. Where I come from, all believe that God is merciful: all one must do is pray.

The monk smiled and replied:

- Here we believe that God has already done His part; now it is up to us to continue the process.

Judging my neighbor

One of the monks of Scete committed a grave error, and the wisest hermit was called upon to judge him.

The hermit refused, but they insisted so much that in the end he agreed to go. He arrived carrying on his back a bucket with holes in it, out of which poured sand.

- I have come to judge my neighbor – said the hermit to the head of the convent. – My sins are pouring out behind me, like the sand running from this bucket. But since I don't look back, and pay no attention to my own sins, I was called upon to judge my neighbor!

The monks called a halt to the punishment immediately.

The way to please the Lord

A novice went to Abbot Macarius seeking advice about the best way to please the Lord.

- Go to the cemetery and insult the dead – said Macarius.

The brother did as he was told. The following day, he returned to Macarius.

- Did they respond? – asked the abbot.

The novice said no, they didn't.

- Then go to them and praise them.

The novice obeyed. That same afternoon, he returned to the abbot, who again wished to know whether the dead had responded.

- No – said the novice.

- In order to please the Lord, behave as they do – said Macarius. - Pay no heed to the insults of men, nor to their praise; in this way, you shall forge your own path.

More Stories

(from *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Thomas Merton)

Abbot Anthony said: The prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer realizes himself or the fact that he is praying.

Abbot John used to say: We have thrown down a light burden, which is the rephending of our own selves, and we have chosen instead to bear a heavy burden, by justifying our own selves and condemning others.

Abbot Arsenius, when he was still in the King's palace, prayed to the Lord saying: Lord, lead me to salvation. And a voice came to him saying: Arsenius, flee from men and you shall be saved. Again, embracing the monastic life, he prayed in the same words. And he heard a voice saying to him: Arsenius, flee, be silent, rest in prayer: these are the roots of non-sinning.

A certain brother came to Abbot Silvanus at Mount Sinai, and seeing the hermits at work he exclaimed: Why do you work for the bread that perisheth? Mary has chosen the best part, namely to sit at the feet of the Lord without working. Then the Abbot said to his disciple Zachary: Give the brother a book and let him read, and put him in an empty cell. At the ninth hour the brother who was reading began to look out to see if the Abbot was not going to call him to dinner, and sometime after the ninth hour he went himself to the Abbot and said: Did the brethren not eat today, Father? Oh yes, certainly, said the Abbot, they just had dinner. Well, said the brother, why did you not call me? You are an aspiritual man, said the elder, you don't need this food that perisheth. We have to work, but you have chosen the best part. You read all day, and can get along without food. Hearing this the brother said: Forgive me, Father. And the elder said: Martha is necessary to Mary, for it was because Martha worked that Mary was able to be praised.

Once there was a disciple of a Greek philosopher who was commanded by his Master for three years to give money to everyone who insulted him. When this period of trial was over, the Master said to him: Now you can go to Athens and learn wisdom. When the disciple was entering Athens, he met a certain wise man who sat at the gate insulting everybody who came and went. He also insulted the disciple who immediately burst out laughing. Why do you laugh when I insult you? said the wise man. Because, said the disciple, for three years I have been paying for this kind of thing and now you give it to me for nothing. Enter the city, said the wise man, it is all yours. Abbot John used to tell the above story, saying: This is the door of God by which our fathers rejoicing in many tribulations enter into the City of Heaven.

The story is told that one of the elders lay dying in Scete, and the brethren surrounded his bed, dressed him in the shroud, and began to weep. But he opened his eyes and laughed. He laughed another time, and then a third time. When the brethren saw this, they asked him, saying: Tell us, Father, why you are laughing while we weep? He said to them: I laughed the first time because you fear death. I laughed the second time because you are not ready for death. And the third time I laughed because from the labors I go to my rest. As soon as he had said this, he closed his eyes in death.

Some elders once came to Abbot Anthony, and there was with them also Abbot Joseph. Wishing to test them, Abbot Anthony brought the conversation around to the Holy Scriptures. And he began from the youngest to ask them the meaning of this or that text. Each one replied as best he could, but Abbot Anthony said to them: You have not got it yet. After them all he asked Abbot Joseph: What about you? What do you say this text mean? Abbot Joseph replied: I know not! Then Abbot Anthony said: Truly Abbot Joseph alone has found the way, for he replies that he know not.

A brother asked one of the elders, saying: There are two brothers, of whom one remains praying in his cell, fasting six days at a time and doing a great deal of penance. The other one takes care of the sick. Which one's work is more pleasing to God? The elder replied: If that brother who fasts six days at a time were to hang himself up by the nose, he could not equal the one who takes care of the sick.

There were two elders living together in a cell, and they had never had so much as one quarrel with one another. One therefore said to the other: Come on, let us have at least one quarrel, like other men. The other said: I don't know how to start a quarrel. The first said: I will take this brick and place it here between us. Then I will say: It is mine. After that you will say: It is mine. This is what leads to a dispute and a fight. So then they placed the brick between them, one said: It is mine, and the other replied to the first: I do believe that it is mine. The first one said again: It is not yours, it is mine. So the other answered: Well then, if it is yours, take it! Thus they did not manage after all to get into a quarrel.

(from *the Way of the Heart*, Henri Nouwen)

Of Abba Ammonas, a disciple of Anthony, it is said that in his solitude he "advanced to the point where his goodness was so great that he took no notice of wickedness." Thus, having become bishop, someone brought a young girl who was pregnant to him, saying, "See what the unhappy wretch has done; give her a penance." But he, having marked the young girl's womb with the sign of the cross, commanded that six pairs of fine linen sheets should be given her, saying, "It is for fear that, when she comes to give birth, she may die, she or the child, and have nothing for the burial." But her accusers resumed, "Why did you do that? Give her a punishment." But he said to them, "Look brothers, she is near to death; what am I to do?" Then he sent her away and no old man dared to accuse anyone anymore.

Some monks came to see Abba Lucius. The old man asked them, "What is your manual work?" They said, "We do not touch manual work but as the Apostle say, we pray without ceasing." The old man asked them if they did not eat and they replied they did. So he said to them, "When you are eating, who prays for you then?" Again he asked them if they did not sleep, and they replied they did. And he said to them, "When you are asleep, who prays for you then?" They could not find any answer to give him. He said to them, "Forgive me, but you do not act as you speak. I will show you how, while doing my manual work, I pray without interruption. I sit down with God, soaking my

reeds and plaiting my ropes, and I say, 'God, have mercy on me; according to your great goodness and according to the multitude of your mercies, save me from my sins.'" So he asked them if this were not prayer and they replied that it was. Then he said to them, "So when I have spent the whole day working and praying, making thirteen pieces of money more or less, I put two pieces of money outside the door, and I pay for my food with the rest of the money. He who takes the two pieces of money prays for me when I am eating and when I am sleeping; so, by the grace of God, I fulfill the precept to pray without ceasing."

BRINGING GOD INTO DAILY LIFE

We often see spiritual life as something distant from our reality. Nothing could more wrong than this idea; God is in everything around us, and very often we only serve Him when we help our neighbor. Here are some stories about this: (Paul Coelho)

Setting an example

Dov Beer de Mezeritch was asked:

"Which example should one follow? That of pious men, who devote their lives to God? That of scholars, who seek to understand the will of the Almighty?"

"The best example is that of the child," he answered.

"A child knows nothing. It hasn't yet learned what reality is," people commented.

"You are all quite wrong, for a child possesses three qualities we should never forget," said Dov Beer. "They are always joyful without reason. They are always busy. And when they want something, they know how to demand it firmly and with determination."

Prayers and children

A protestant priest, having started a family, no longer had any peace for his prayers. One night, when he knelt down, he was disturbed by the children in the living room.

"Have the children keep quiet!" he shouted.

His startled wife obeyed. Thereafter, whenever the priest came home, they all maintained silence during prayers. But he realized that God was no longer listening.

One night, during his prayers, he asked the Lord: "what is going on? I have the necessary peace, and I cannot pray!"

An angel replied: "He hears words, but no longer hears the laughter. He notices the devotion, but can no longer see the joy."

The priest stood and shouted once again to his wife: "Have the children play! They are part of prayer!"

And his words were heard by God once again.

The book by Camus

A journalist hounded the French writer, Albert Camus, asking him to explain his work in detail. The author of *The Plague* refused: "I write, and others can make of it what they will."

But the journalist refused to give in. One afternoon, he managed to find him in a café in Paris.

"Critics say you never take on truly profound themes," said the journalist. "I ask you now: if you had to write a book about society, would you accept the challenge?"

"Of course," replied Camus. "The book would be one hundred pages long. Ninety-nine would be blank, since there is nothing to be said. At the bottom of the hundredth page, I'd write: 'man's only duty is to love.'"

In the Tokyo subway

Terry Dobson was traveling on the Tokyo subway when a drunk got on and began to insult all the passengers.

Dobson, who had studied martial arts for some years, challenged the man.

"What do you want?" asked the drunk.

Dobson got ready to attack him. Just then, an old man sitting on one of the seats shouted: "Hey!"

"I'll beat the foreigner, then I'll beat you!" said the drunk.

"I like to drink, too," said the old man. "I sit every afternoon with my wife, and we drink sake. Are you married?"

The drunk was confused, and replied: "I have no wife, I have no one. I'm just so terribly ashamed."

The old man asked the drunk to sit beside him. By the time Dobson got off, the man was in tears.

The place we desire

A friend came to wait on our table – at a café in San Diego, California. I had met Cláudia in Brazil four years previously, and tell my friends about her life in the USA: she only sleeps for three hours, since she works in the café till late, and is a babysitter throughout the day.

"I don't know how she can stand it," one of them says.

"There's a story about a turtle," replies an Argentinian woman at our table.

"It was crossing a swamp, covered in mud, when it passed a temple. There it saw the shell of a turtle – all adorned with gold and precious stones.

"I don't envy you, ancient friend," thought the turtle. "You're covered in jewels, but I'm doing what I want."

Peeling oranges

Ernest Hemingway, the author of the classic *The Old Man and the Sea*, went from moments of harsh physical activity to periods of total inactivity. Before sitting to write pages of a new novel, he'd spend hours peeling oranges and gazing into the fire.

One morning, a reporter noticed this strange habit.

"Don't you think you're wasting your time?" asked the journalist. "You're so famous, shouldn't you be doing more important things?"

"I'm preparing my soul to write, like a fisherman preparing his tackle before going out to sea," replied Hemingway. "If I don't do this, and think only the fish matter, I'll never achieve anything."

SEEKING HAPPINESS

Amazing as it might seem, many people are afraid of happiness. To such people, being at one with life would mean changing certain habits – and losing their own identity.

We often decide we are unworthy of the good things which happen to us. We do not accept miracles – for to accept them gives us the sensation that we owe God something. Furthermore, we are afraid we might "grow accustomed" to happiness.

We think: "it is better not to taste the chalice of joy, because we shall suffer so much when it is gone."

Afraid to diminish, we cease to grow. Afraid to cry, we cease to laugh. Here are a few stories about this: (Paul Coelho)

The circle of joy

Bruno Ferrero tells a story that one day, a countryman knocked hard on a monastery door. When the monk tending the gates opened up, he was given a magnificent bunch of grapes.

- Brother, these are the finest my vineyard has produced. I've come to bear them as a gift.

- Thank you! I will take them to the Abbot immediately, he'll be delighted with this offering.

- No! I brought them for you.

- For me? – the monk blushed, for he didn't think he deserved such a fine gift of nature.

- Yes! – insisted the man. – For whenever I knock on the door, it is you opens it. When I needed help because the crop was destroyed by drought, you gave me a piece of bread and a cup of wine every day. I hope this bunch of grapes will bring you a little of the sun's love, the rain's beauty and the miracle of God, for it is he made it grow so fine.

The monk held the grapes and spent the entire morning admiring it: it really was beautiful. Because of this, he decided to deliver the gift to the Abbot, who had always encouraged him with words of wisdom.

The Abbot was very pleased with the grapes, but he recalled that there was a sick brother in the monastery, and thought:

"I'll give him the grapes. Who knows, they may bring some joy to his life."

And that is what he did. But the grapes didn't stay in the sick monk's room for long, for he reflected:

"The cook has looked after me for so long, feeding me only the best meals. I'm sure he will enjoy these."

When the cook appeared at lunch, to bring him his meal, he presented him with the grapes.

- They're for you – said the sick monk. – Since you are always coming into contact with that which nature produces, you will know what to do with this work of God.

The cook was amazed at the beauty of the grapes, and showed his assistant how perfect they were. So perfect, he thought to himself, that no one would appreciate them more than the sexton; since he was responsible for the Holy Sacrament, and many at the monastery considered him a holy man, he would be best qualified to value this marvel of nature.

The sexton, in turn, gave the grapes as a gift to the youngest novice, that he might understand that the work of God is in the smallest details of Creation. When the novice received them, his heart was filled with the Glory of the Lord, for he had never seen such beautiful grapes. Just then, he remembered the first time he came to the monastery, and of the person who had opened the gates for him; it was that gesture which allowed him to be among this community of people who knew how to value the wonders of life.

And so, just before nightfall, he took the grapes to the monk at the gates.

- Eat and enjoy them – he said. – For you spend most of your time alone here, and these grapes will make you very happy.

The monk understood that the gift had been truly destined for him, and relished each of the grapes, before falling into a pleasant sleep.

Thus the circle was closed; the circle of happiness and joy, which always shines brightly around generous people.

In Moses' footsteps

Rabbi Zuya wanted to discover the mysteries of life. He therefore resolved to imitate the life of Moses.

For years, he tried to behave like the prophet – without ever achieving the results he hoped for.

One night, tired of so much study, he fell into a deep sleep.

God appeared in his dream:

- Why are you so upset, my son? – He asked.

- My days on Earth will end, and I am still so far from being like Moses - answered Zuya.

-If I needed another Moses, I'd have already created him – said God. – When you come before me for judgment, I will not ask whether you were a good Moses, but who you were. Try and be a good Zuya.

The donkey dies of exhaustion

Nasrudin decided to go in search of some new meditation techniques. He saddled his donkey, went to India, China and Mongolia, talked to the great masters, but found nothing.

He heard tell of a wise man in Nepal: he journeyed there, but as he was climbing the mountain to meet him, his donkey died of exhaustion. Nasrudin buried him there and then, and wept sadly.

Someone passed by and commented:

- You came in search of a saint, this must be his tomb and you are lamenting his death.

- No, this is the place where I buried my donkey, who died of exhaustion.

- I don't believe it – said the new arrival. – No one weeps over a dead donkey. This must be a place where miracles occur, and you want to keep them for yourself.

Although Nasrudin explained again and again, it was no use. The man went to the next village and spread the story of a great master who cured people at his tomb, and soon the pilgrims began to arrive.

Gradually, news of the discovery of the Wise Man of Silent Mourning spread throughout Nepal – and crowds rushed to the place. A wealthy man came, thought his prayers had been answered, and built an imposing monument where Nasrudin had buried his "master".

In view of everything, Nasrudin decided to leave things as they were. But he learned once and for all, that when someone wants to believe a lie, no one can convince him otherwise.

That which is funny about man

A disciple asked Hejasi:

- I want to know what is the funniest thing about human beings.

Hejasi said:

- That they always think crooked: they're in a hurry to grow, then lament their lost childhood, and soon lose the money they need to keep their health.

"They are so anxious about the future, that they neglect the present, and thus live in neither the present nor the future.

"They live as if they were never going to die, and die as if they had never lived."

Accepting that we deserve our gifts

During a lecture in Australia, a young woman comes up, "I want to tell you something," she says.

"I always believed I had a gift for curing people, but I never had the courage to use it on anyone. One day, my husband's left leg was giving him great pain; there was no one about to help, and – mortally ashamed – I decided to place my hands on his leg and ask for the pain to go away.

"I acted not believing that I'd be able to help him. Suddenly, I heard him pray: "Lord, allow my wife to be the messenger of Your light, your Power," he said. My hand began to heat up, and soon the pain had gone.

"Then I asked why he had prayed like that. He replied that he didn't remember having said anything. Today I am able to cure, because he believed it was possible."

Who still wants this bill?

Cassan Said Amer tells a story about a lecturer who began a seminar holding up a 20 dollar bill, and asking:

- Who wants this 20 dollar bill?

Several hands went up, but the lecturer said:

- Before handing it over, there's something I must do.

He furiously crushed it, and asked again:

- Who still wants this bill?

The hands continued raised.

- And what if I do this?

He threw it against the wall, letting it fall to the floor, kicked it, stamped in it and again held up the bill – all dirty and crumpled. He repeated the question, and the hands continued to be held high.

- You mustn't ever forget this scene – said the lecturer. – No matter what I do with this money, it'll still be a 20 dollar bill. Many times in our lives, we are crushed, stamped on, kicked, maltreated, offended; however, in spite of this, we are still worth the same.

Phrases about happiness

I do not try to understand why I believe in happiness; but I believe I can understand what it is to be happy. (Saint Anselmo)

A child on the farm sees a plane fly overhead and dreams of a faraway place. A traveler on the plane sees the farmhouse and thinks of home. (Carl Burns)

IN SEARCH OF THE LOST PATH

We go out into the world in search of our dreams and ideals, although we often know we put away in inaccessible places, all that which is within our reach. When we discover our mistake, we start to think we've lost too much time looking far and wide for something which was nearby; and this is why we allow ourselves to be overcome by a sense of guilt, for past mistakes, for the useless search, for the grief caused.

But that's not really true: although the treasure is buried in your home, you'll only find it when you distance yourself. If Peter hadn't experienced the pain of negation, he would never have been chosen as head of the Church. If the prodigal son hadn't abandoned everything, he would never have been joyously received by his father.

There are certain things in our lives that carry a seal which says: "you will only understand my value when you lose me – and recover me." It is no use hoping to shorten this path.

The Cistercian priest Marcos Garcia, who lives in Burgos, Spain, commented: "sometimes, God takes away a certain blessing, so the person can understand Him beyond the favors and requests. He knows how far to go in testing a soul – and never goes beyond this point.

"At such moments, we never say God has abandoned us. He never does so; it is we who at times abandon Him. If the Lord puts us to the test, he also always provides enough graces – more than enough, I'd say – to get us through it. When we feel far from His face, we should ask ourselves: are we making the most of that which He has placed along the way?"

In Japan, I was invited to Guncan-Gima, where there is a Zen-Buddhist temple. When I arrived, I was surprised: a fine structure was situated in the middle of a great forest, but had a vast waste land beside it. I asked the reason for this, and the person in charge explained:

- It is the site of the first construction. Every twenty years, we destroy this temple you see before you, and rebuild it next door.

"In this way, the monks, be they carpenters, bricklayers or architects, have the opportunity to exercise their skills, and teach their apprentices in practice. We also show that nothing in life is eternal – and that even temples are in a constant process of refinement."

If what you are following is the path of your dreams, commit yourself to it. Don't leave the back door open with excuses: "this still isn't quite what I wanted." This sentence – heard so often – contains the seed of defeat.

Embrace your path. Even if you need to take uncertain steps, constantly destroy and build, even if you know you can do better than at present. If you accept the possibilities of the present, you will certainly improve in the future.

Master Achaan Chah was given a fine piece of land so that he might build a monastery. Chah had to go away for a time and left his disciples in charge of the building work.

When he returned – five months later – nothing had been done. The disciples had already ordered several plans from local architects.

One of them asked Chah:

- Which of the projects should we go ahead with? How should we go about taking the right decision?

Chah answered:

- When one desires that which is good, the results are always good.

Free of the fear to make mistakes, the decision was taken and the result was magnificent.

Face your path with courage, do not be afraid of other people's criticism. And – above all – don't allow yourself to be paralyzed by self-criticism.

God is the God of the brave. (Paul Coelho)

SEMITIC WISDOM

Where the truth is

"Some disciples are always asking where the truth is," said Maal-EI. "So one day I decided to point in one direction, trying to show them how important it is to follow a path, and not just to think about it. Instead of looking in the direction I had pointed, the man who had asked the question started examining my finger, trying to find out where the truth was hidden.

"When people seek out a master, they should be looking for experiences which can help them avoid certain obstacles. But unfortunately, reality is different: they adopt the law of minimum effort, trying to find answers to everything."

"He who accepts, without question, the truths of his master, will never find his own path."

Knowing how to listen to insults

In a kingdom of Arabia lived a queen called Layla. Her wisdom illuminated the land like the sun, her beauty blinded men, and her wealth was greater than any of her subjects.

One morning, her chief advisor asked to see her, and said:

- Great queen Layla! You are the wisest, most beautiful and wealthiest women in the world. But I have heard unpleasant things; some people laugh at or complain about your decisions. Why, in spite of all you have done for your subjects, are they still not content?

The queen laughed and replied:

- Loyal advisor, you know how much I have done for my kingdom. Seven regions are under my control, and all of them have enjoyed peace and prosperity. In all the towns, the decisions of my court are just and inspired.

"I can do almost everything I wish. I can order the frontiers to be closed, the gates of the palace to be locked, the treasury coffers sealed indefinitely.

"But there is one thing I cannot do: make the people shut their mouths. It matters not what false things people say; the important thing is to continue to do that which I consider to be true."

Discovering true fear

A sultan decided to travel by sea with some of his favorite courtiers. They joined the ship in Dubai and sailed out into the open sea.

However, as soon as the ship moved away from land, one of his subjects – who had never seen the sea before, having spent most of his life in the mountains – began to be overcome with panic. Sitting in the ship's hold, he cried, shouted and refused to eat or sleep. Everyone tried to calm him down, saying that the journey wasn't as dangerous as all that, but although he heard their words, they had no influence on his heart. The sultan did not know what to do, and the fine journey upon calm seas and under blue skies, became a torment for the passengers and crew alike.

Two days passed without anyone being able to sleep because of the man's cries. The sultan was about to order the ship to return to port, when one of his ministers, who was known for his wisdom, came over:

- Your Highness, with your permission, I will be able to calm him.

Without a moment's hesitation, the sultan said that not only would he allow it, but that he should reward him if he succeeded in solving the problem.

The wise man asked that the man be thrown into the sea. Right away, content because their nightmare was about to end, several crew members grabbed the man struggling in the hold, and cast him into the ocean.

The courtier thrashed about, sank, swallowed plenty of seawater, returned to the surface, screamed louder than ever, sank again, and managed to surface once again. Just then, the minister ordered for him to be dragged back on board.

From then on, no one heard so much as a single complaint from the man, who spent the rest of the journey in silence, and even commented to one of the passengers that he had never seen anything so beautiful as the sky and sea touching on the horizon. The journey – which had before been a torment to all those on board the ship – became a pleasurable, peaceful experience.

A short time before they returned to port, the Sultan went to see the minister:

- How did you guess that, by throwing that poor man into the sea, he would calm down?

- Because of my marriage – replied the minister. – I was always terrified of losing my wife, and was so jealous that I never stopped shouting and screaming like that man.

"One day she could take no more, and left me – and I tasted the terrible experience of living without her. She only returned when I promised never again to torment her with my fears.

"In the same way, that man had never tasted salt water, and had never known the agony of a drowning man. When he felt that, he understood only too well how marvelous it can be to feel the planks of a ship under his feet.

- Wise counsel – commented the sultan.

- In the Bible, a holy book of the Christians, it says: "*all I most feared, came to pass.*"

"Some people can only value what they have, when they endure the experience of loss."

Work

- You have tried to make me understand that one must pay attention to life, people, and everything around us. I have the impression that all you ever do is work...

- Instead of answering your question directly I shall quote from the Indian poet Tagore: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy/ I awoke and saw that life was service/ I acted and behold, service was joy."

In fact, through my work I discover life, people, and everything which happens around us.

"The only trap I must beware not to fall into, is to think that each day is the same as the next. In fact, each morning brings with it a hidden miracle, and we must pay attention to this miracle."

- What is duty?

- A mysterious word which can have two opposite meanings: the absence of enthusiasm, or the understanding that we must share our love with more than one person. In the first case, we are always making excuses for not accepting our responsibilities; in the second case, duty becomes a form of devotion, of unrestricted love for the human condition, and we begin to fight for that which we want to happen.

"I seek to do this through my work: to share my love. Love is also a mysterious thing: the more we share it, the more it multiplies."

- But in the Bible, work is considered a type of curse which God has forced on men. When Adam commits the original sin, he hears the Almighty say: "in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread."

- At that moment, God is putting the Universe into motion. Up until that time, all is beautiful, idyllic – but nothing has evolved and, as we mentioned, Adam starts thinking that each day is like another. From then on, he loses the sense of the miracle of his own existence; then the Lord, seeing His creation, understands that he must help him again conquer this sense.

"This sentence must be read in a positive way: weariness will turn into nourishment, sweat will be the bread's seasoning. In this way, everything will converge perfectly, but first, Adam and all human beings must go down the path of mutual understanding."

- Why is it that one of man's great dreams is to one day stop having to work?

- Because he does not know what it is to spend months and years doing nothing. Either because he does not love what he does; no one wishes to be separated from the woman he loves, no one wants to stop doing that which he loves. Or it is because there is no dignity in his going about his work – he has forgotten that work was created to help man, not humiliate him.

"There is an interesting story about this in "The Thousand and One Nights": caliph Alrum Al-Rachid decided to build a palace in order to demonstrate the greatness of his kingdom. He gathered together the greatest works of art, designed gardens, personally selected the marbles and carpets. Beside the grounds which had been chosen, was a dwelling. Al-Rachid asked his minister to convince the owner – an old weaver – to sell it so that it might be demolished.

The minister tried in vain; the old man said he did not wish to part with it.

Upon hearing of the old man's decision, the Court Council suggested he be simply thrown out.

- No - responded Al-Rachid. – He will become part of my legacy to my people. When they come to the palace, they will say: he was a man who worked in order to show the beauty of our culture.

"And when they see the dwelling, they will say: he was just, for he respected the work of other men."

"The world seems threatening to cowards. They seek the false security of a life void of great challenges, and arm themselves heavily in order to defend that which they think they possess. Cowards are victims of their own egos, and in the end erect the bars of their own prison."

THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

The natural order

A very wealthy man asked a master for a text which would always remind him how happy he was with his family.

The master took some parchment and, in beautiful calligraphy, wrote:

- The father dies. The son dies. The grandson dies.
- What? – said the furious rich man. – I asked you for something to inspire me, some teaching which might be respectfully contemplated by future generations, and you give me something as depressing and gloomy as these words?
- You asked me for something which would remind you of the happiness of living together with your family. If your son dies first, everyone will be devastated by the pain. If your grandson dies, it would be an unbearable experience.
“However, if your family disappears in the order which I placed on the paper, this is the natural course of life. Thus, although we all endure moments of pain, the generations will continue, and your legacy will be long-lasting.”

Each to his own destiny

A Samurai who was known for his nobility and honesty, went to visit a Zen monk to ask advice. However, the moment he entered the temple where the master was praying, he felt inferior and concluded that, in spite of having fought for justice and peace all his life, he hadn't even come near the state of grace achieved by the man before him.

- Why do I feel so inferior? – he asked, as soon as the monk finished his prayers. – I have faced death many times, have defended those who are weak, I know I have nothing to be ashamed of. Nevertheless, upon seeing you meditating, I felt that my life had absolutely no importance whatsoever.

- Wait. Once I have attended to all those who come to see me today, I shall answer you. The samurai spent the whole day sitting in the temple gardens, watching the people go in and out in search of advice. He saw how the monk received them all with the same patience and the same illuminated smile on his face. But his enthusiasm soon began to wane, since he had been born to act, and not to wait.

At nightfall, when everyone had gone, he demanded:

- Now can you teach me?

The master invited him in and lead him to his room. The full moon shone in the sky, and the atmosphere was one of profound tranquility.

- Do you see the moon, how beautiful it is? It will cross the entire firmament, and tomorrow the sun will shine once again. But sunlight is much brighter, and can show the details of the landscape around us: trees, mountains, clouds. I have contemplated the two for years, and have never heard the moon say: why do I not shine like the sun? Is it because I am inferior?

- Of course not – answered the samurai. – The moon and the sun are different things, each has its own beauty. You cannot compare the two.

- So you know the answer. We are two different people, each fighting in his own way for that which he believes, and making it possible to make the world a better place; the rest are mere appearances.

Silence

(from the Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen)

The purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish and when the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten. The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits. When the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten. The purpose of the word is to convey ideas. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words? He is the one I would like to talk to.
(Chuang Tzu)

“I would like to talk to the man who has forgotten words.” That could have been said by one of the Desert Fathers. For them, the word is the instrument of the present world and silence is the mystery of the future world. If a word is to bear fruit, it must be spoken from the future world into the present world. The Desert Fathers therefore considered their going into the silence of the desert to be a first step into the future world. From that world their words could bear fruit, because there they could be filled with the power of God's silence.

MORE JOY FOR THE REALLY SERIOUS...

(Bibliography of books to read.)

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On the Internet

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