

Our Carmelite Promise: A Personal Reflection - Part 2

This talk is a direct continuation of Part 1 ...

SHINY ROCKS – A parable inspired by John Coates

But, as Brother Lawrence teaches, this is hard work and we will fall often. The reason for this are the deficiencies and imperfections of the memory that constantly intrude on the highest desire of our heart, drawing us away from the very presence we seek. In short, our memory likes to show us all the loves of our heart; thereby revealing how divided it really is. So the spiritual asceticism that is being described is one that is directed toward the memory to remove those barriers to listening that are within our means to do so . . . St. John's active night.

It seems St. John of the Cross is saying that the faculties of our soul (intellect, will, memory) are in a state of perpetual civil war until that day they are perfected. And he clearly states memory is the prime instigator of all unpleasantness; the unruly beast that continually throws mud on the walls of our minds just hoping something will stick . . . to catch the attention of our will and draw it away from what it should really love.

A few years ago, John Coates said something remarkable in small groups that got me thinking more on just how easily this happens: how one minute we might be completely united with Christ in dialogue; the next we drift away to some other "place" entirely. He told a story of a little boy's fascination with a shiny rock. And that story opened the door to deeper meaning in my mind of the interplay between the faculties of the soul.

As John described, it's like a little boy walking to school casually kicking stones until he happens to spy an especially shiny little rock. He says to himself "Wow, look at that! I must have one of those!" So he reaches down to pick up the shiny rock and then . . .

. . . the memory says "Ah, I see now what you like. You're all mine!" Meanwhile the will, who was quietly kneeling in silent adoration before the Lord his maker, has its gaze interrupted by a barrage of little pebbles hitting him in the back of the head; like a thousand voices shouting, "Listen to me, listen to me!"

The will says "What's going on here? All I did was pick-up that shiny little rock!" And the will must stop doing what it was doing to make an about face and challenge this unexpected onslaught from the memory. Now the will is faced with a choice: it can practice virtue or vice in the face of this attack. But even if it chooses to raise its hand to block the stones the memory is throwing at it, the will soon grows weak from the continual barrage.

You see, the will is not as strong as it supposed - nor does it have the ability of the Saints to multi-task: facing its Lord in silent adoration while quietly brushing aside what should be nothing more than little flies. And deep down inside the will sees the ugly truth: it *likes* the

shiny little rocks.

So, the will grows weary and begins to fade: a heart divided against itself can not stand for long. And soon it gives up and cries uncle. And let's go its loving gaze on the Lord . . . to pick up the shiny rock. For the moment this little battle is lost . . . there's nothing more the will can do than patiently wait until this storm passes; when the memory loses interest and tires of the game. Then, and only then, can the will return its gaze to the Lord.

And memory sneaks away back to its lair in quiet satisfaction of this little victory. For now its "work" is done. So the wild beast goes back to sleep . . . and patiently waits for its next opportunity.

And then the cycle resumes again. The memory wakes from its slumber and begins its work of throwing mud against the walls of our mind again . . . waiting for something new something to stick.

Moral of the story: don't pick up shiny rocks!

When we become faithful to the practice of listening, we will most assuredly hear His voice and grow stronger. And "Shiny Rock" lapses like this will become less and less frequent. This picking ourselves up after our falls is the "determined determination" we must work for in these active nights.

Lastly, this little parable is a purposeful exaggeration to illustrate a larger point that is difficult to put into words. So it's good to keep in mind the counsels of St. Teresa: "Do not imagine that the important thing is never to be thinking of anything else or that if your mind becomes slightly distracted all is lost." Prudence must be our guide in all things. There is a big difference between thoughts we willfully entertain (Shiny Rock preoccupations) vs those that are simply a byproduct of our fallen nature (distractions). We choose the former; thus the spiritual ramification. That is not the case with the latter.

SPIRITUAL FOG

But passive understanding is also given to help us along. First, we need to recognize that self-knowledge is the fruit of our hearing – the fine tuning of our conscience. And it can be intensely painful. In cultivating an attitude of silence we will be shown through "that little voice in our conscience" all sorts of sins, faults and imperfections we were previously unaware. Perhaps what we once thought was virtue is now seen as vice. And no matter how holy we might think we are, we begin to see that a selfish streak still lies hidden; buried and imbedded deep in the roots of our very soul. Simply put, *our pain is the realization we are not who we think we are.*

Second, we learn to see that God Himself has a hand in some of our falls. Sometimes our difficulty listening is self-inflicted, as with “Shiny Rocks.” Other times, though, trials are given us by God that places our memory in a great state of “forgetfulness of all things” that resembles a spiritual fog. During these passive trials, our active efforts to *let go and tune-in* are all but useless. We are overwhelmed by the advance of the fog descending upon us; blinding us to the work He is doing in the very depth of our souls.

St. John of the Cross describes this forgetfulness so wonderfully:

these persons can neither pray vocally nor be attentive to spiritual matters, nor still less attend to temporal affairs and business. Furthermore, they frequently experience such absorption and profound forgetfulness in the memory that long periods pass without their knowing what they did or thought about, and they know not what they are doing or about to do, nor can they concentrate on the tasks at hand, even though they desire to. (Dark Night, Bk 2, Chpt 8)

There is a great paradox here. The mind is intensely occupied, but it doesn't know with what. The preoccupation that could previously be identified and easily dealt with in the active night; now goes by no name and we are powerless to stop it. The mind is completely captivated, yet we're entirely forgetful. A huge disconnect exists, so much so that the mind literally asks itself, “where am I?” And, “where is He?”

This spiritual fog is “like” being in limbo; a void that is neither here nor there. It is truly a world between worlds. And it is a dark place with no visible means of escape; at least one that can be achieved through the strength of one's own effort as in Practicing the Presence of God. So we find ourselves seemingly worthless to the needs of the world which lies below us; and unworthy of the call of the Spirit that relentlessly beckons from above. We remember the joys of the days in which we were able to listen and speak with Him in dialogue. Now that seems like an ancient memory. It is, as St. John describes while quoting a Psalm: “I was annihilated and knew not.”

What seems to be happening in these periods of spiritual fog is that God is allowing all sorts of deep seated spiritual “notions of self” (opinions, preferences, expectations, judgments) to bubble up from our subconscious -- the fruit of His purifying hand in the dark fire of contemplation. It is like the Divine Doctor lancing a boil as ego, in the form of selfish clinging, is removed from all that we hold dear . . . *the very concept of who we think we are*. The poisons are being drained from our system so that we can be healed: “He humbles so that He may exalt.”

Yet, almost miraculously, life marches on and no one around you is the wiser. No one sees any of this, not even those closest to you; except in small exterior glimpses. He keeps all of this very

hidden. So deadlines are met, obligations fulfilled, the duties of one's state are kept in good working order . . . *all for the benefit of those to whom you've been given*. But you don't know *how* any of this gets done in this state of forgetfulness. It's as if you are a tiny, little pebble buffeted about by the strong current of a stream. You bounce here . . . then there. But all the time you're moving . . . moving . . . moving ... continually downstream.

So as St. John of the Cross teaches, our only true recourse is humble submission to His purifying hand and patient endurance for as long as He wills the storm to last. The key thing to remember at these times is that ultimately He must act. And in keeping with the Gospel teaching of Jesus Calming the Sea, He will either answer our prayer and command the storm to cease; or grant us the grace of an added measure of peace – to sleep in the boat as He did – while the waves of spiritual fog continue to crash in upon us.

Then and only then, will we be freed to hear the sound of the little chirping bird from our first talk; instead of the continual drone of the jackhammer in the form of spiritual fog. And we will be able to Practice the Presence of God again; but now, remarkably, in a new and deeper way. When the fog lifts, we find ourselves one step closer to the “second nature” Brother Lawrence holds as his promise.

WHERE IS UNION?

St. John of the Cross has a way of making single statement sayings that summarize his entire teaching. One of those is this:

All it takes is one habitual imperfection to render union with God impossible

So what does he mean by that? The answer can be found through a careful parsing of his words. The first key word is *habitual*: one of those qualifiers he often adds to make sure readers don't misunderstand his intent and go to extremes trying to live his teaching.

All of us will be weighed down by imperfections from time to time. There's no way around it; it's part of the human condition: “the just man falls 7 times a day.” When we talk about the purification of our memory (in hope) and will (in love) the problem arises when, as a regular course of habit, we make our thoughts and feelings ends unto themselves. We don't lift our hearts from the thought or feeling - at its 'first movement' - to God Himself. The consequence is that we choose monologue over dialogue. And while there's probably nothing sinful about that, it's certainly an imperfection and an impediment to St. John's understanding of union. Sadly, many of us can spend our entire lives in this state. Perhaps pious and faithful in our external religious practices; but experiencing a true inner void and not even recognizing it.

The second key word in this statement is *union*: just what does he mean by that? Well part of

the problem is that St. John and St. Teresa don't provide a single concise definition. There are several 'types' of union . . . each with varying degrees. And they often shift their meaning from one type to another, depending upon what they're talking about at the time.

But here's just a few ways that hopefully show how habitual imperfections render union impossible:

First, *if we choose to live in monologue* we will never learn to listen and hear his voice as the fruit of dialogue. We choose the jackhammer over the chirping bird so all those subtle inspirations toward the good that seem to just spontaneously pop into our minds will more often than not go unnoticed. So listening has tremendous implications for the union of wills. The more we learn to hear that inner voice and the more purely we respond to it in love, the more we will grow into his likeness.

Second, *if we choose to live in monologue*, we will be less likely to hear Him through His true voice: silence. As many can attest through experience, recollection is difficult when weighed down by the cares and concerns of a willfully preoccupied mind. Thus, we don't receive the benefit of the union of our faculties; those brief, and fleeting moments in which He comes to us in contemplation. In contemplation, we don't hear His voice in our thoughts as in the inspiration just described. Rather, a profound communication takes place in true silence beyond our understanding. And in this contemplation an abundant floodgate of graces is opened up as the Divine Healer begins to scrub the rust off our souls. Or, as St. John would say: He pulls up our remaining imperfections by their very roots. And, of course, in contemplation there are degrees of union as St. Teresa's discussion of the prayers of recollection, quiet and union attest.

Thirdly, *if we choose to live in monologue* we forgo growth in the union in substance which is the most important type of all. Here the fruit of our listening and contemplation *leads to permanent and lasting change through inner transformation*. In many ways this union is just another way of saying the union of wills where the 'old man' begins to die and the 'new man' is born. What we look for here is virtue - especially love. And *growth* is the key.

So if growth is the benchmark, we probably shouldn't spend too much time looking for the destination (Transforming Union); for one day, hopefully, it will find us. Rather, we should continually focus on signs of progress in the journey itself. Am I practicing virtue better today than I was a year ago, 5 years ago, 10 years ago? If so, there's a real good chance we're doing something right. And as we might suspect, there's many, many degrees of perfection in this type of union. Even after the Transforming Union itself; growth continues.

So, then, the question was: "where is union?" If we're always growing then it would seem that union is like an elusive, moving target . . . somewhere always "out there." Or was said about St.

Therese: “no sooner would she climb one mountain peak that she’d see another larger one far off on the horizon.” So it would seem the best course of action is a simple one: enjoy the journey! Specifically in my case, to adhere more closely to St. Teresa’s teaching that “the important thing is not to think much but to love much.” At the end of the day the “figuring out of things” isn’t nearly as important as the “living of it.”

Along those lines, I’m haunted in a way by the words of another wise theologian who said those “who start out from a shattering encounter with the Lord (me) often spend the rest of their lives in a desperate attempt, as it were, to interpret the content of this experience, to count the uncountable treasures which once and for all were poured out for them like a huge pile of gold.” The warning here is explicit: the danger of intellectualism for its own sake and forgetting what (who) brought one to his knees in the first place.

Which brings this full circle; to Brother Lawrence: the Carmelite most responsible for bringing me to the Secular Order. So often I lose sight of his simple wisdom in the “desperate attempt” to find meaning in all this. But he had no use for such thoughts, although he “knew” them deep down in a way I probably never will. He didn’t need to understand . . . he just wanted to live these truths to the fullest. As such, maybe his real example to me is that of the “*anti-intellectual*.” Perhaps it is “there” that I can fully savor his simple, profound wisdom . . . like a cool glass of water on a hot day.

And maybe it’s for that drink that he brought me here in the first place!

Saints of Carmel ... pray for us that we may all drink fully from the living waters of your merciful love. Amen.