Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



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I should have known better. When I was a novice, I guess I was somewhat naïve. I thought intercessory prayer was benign. It didn't occur to me that if God gave me what I asked for, it wouldn't come in a neat, celestial, perfect package. It didn't occur to me that in order to receive the gift of patience, I would be provided experiences where patience needed to be *exercised.* It simply never registered that if I asked for courage it would come as the invitation to respond to frightful experiences. And it *really* didn't strike me that asking God to gift me with humility was just risky business all around.

Early on in my novitiate years, my formation director instructed us that this was a very special time in our religious life. She encouraged us to be very deliberate about the gift we wanted to nourish in our characters during the novitiate, and she exhorted us to ask God to bless us with that gift. Well, one fateful day after being berated by our director for some now-forgotten violation of a dishwashing rule (I might not remember what the infraction was, but boy do I remember how upset she was with our error!), one of my fellow novices looked at me and said, "I am so, so sorry." I stopped her and said, "Don't be ridiculous. It's not your fault. We all were involved." She wagged her head to and fro, and with downcast face said, "No, that's not it. It *is* my fault. I asked for humility and you just got sucked up into it."

Ah, yes. We ask for gifts from God, but we know exactly how we want them to come to us. Nicely. Neatly. Without any pain or suffering or difficulty or effort. Just a heavenly infusion, please. But that's not at all the way it works, is it?

As I progressed in the religious life, I started to be more careful about my prayer intentions, asking for grace and blessing and joy. I thought I had "mastered" the art of escaping the hard part of gaining virtue, but alas, this is not possible. Upon closer examination of grace and blessing and joy, it doesn't take long before it becomes apparent that every single one of them is a package deal.

Grace in my life has come as daybreak after long nights of dark and silent vigil (most of the time this happens figuratively, but yes, it has even happened actually). Blessing has often come, as Laura Story sings so beautifully, through raindrops and tears. And joy? Well, joy's partner, as was so insightfully demonstrated in the movie *Inside Out*, is more often than not, sadness. It's a package deal.

I might pray to God to give me joy without pain, grace without struggle, or blessing without doubt, but it just doesn't work that way. Why not, we protest? After all, God is God which means all things are possible — even unmediated happiness. So why isn't that the way of things?

Well, because joy on earth is an approximation of the joy of heaven, experienced here only in short bursts. Seeing that we don't live in heaven, those short bursts are bound to end, simply because the price tag of giving your heart away in love is leaving it vulnerable to harm.

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Grace without struggle? Nature tells us that it's the struggle that produces the beauty and finesse of grace. A butterfly that is "saved" of its struggle out of the chrysalis will never have wings strong enough to fly, I'm told. I heard a legend about the swallows of Capistrano — that they spend their summer choosing the twig that is the absolute heaviest they can manage in order to make their flight across the Pacific. Why choose the most prohibitive? Because when they are flying and get tired, they drop the branch onto the surface of the water and perch on it to rest. Anything lighter would not hold their weight. Thus, the heaviest bearable burden is the one that sustains them when they have grown weary and worn. Grace without struggle? Impossible.

Blessing without doubt? Likewise impossible. What is a blessing? For Jacob, it was the result of a night-long struggle and a wrenched hip (Genesis 32:25-32). For James and John, it was only given after they assented to following Jesus in his suffering (Matthew 20:20-28). Those aren't the kinds of experiences I am envisioning when I ask God to bless me or those I love.

Our world is filled with maxims that try to teach us this lesson:

> Every rose has its thorn.
>
> Try turning lemons into lemonade.
>
> Look for the silver lining.

> Love a dog and you'll have a friend forever, love a cat and you'll be loving a cat.

There is no Camelot without the betrayal of Lancelot and Guinevere. Is this stubborn cynicism or depressing realism? Oh no. Oh no, no, no. This is life. Life is a package deal, and unless we can take love and pain together, joy and sorrow together, blessing and doubt together, we will be doomed to living a fractured life, set up for incessant disappointment and frustration. The Christian life is a life of paradox, woven together by the Master Weaver to show us that we can and must strive to find God in all things. All. Things.

I did, indeed, get "sucked up" into the vortex of my fellow novice's intercessory prayer for the gift of humility all those years ago. Thank you, God. That lesson about true and lasting virtue coming at a cost was a lesson I did well to learn. I just wish it was a test that I could pass once and for all rather than a lesson. As a lesson, I am required to practice the learning. And I am relearning that lesson virtually every day of my life. For that I also say, "Thank you, God."

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