

"Sadness"

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It's a privilege to speak to a group of people who, from your first hand experience in the field of healthcare, most likely know much more about the topic of sadness than I do. In my remarks this evening I will speak as a Christian but more out of my Roman Catholic tradition as I think it might be helpful to the context of sadness.

My most recent book is on the rather universal phenomenon of male initiation. Found in every known culture, it's the oldest system of spiritual instruction and precedes every temple, synagogue, mosque, and church established religion. What historic peoples had was a system that we have given the word initiation to, a system of spiritual training for the male of the species. Maybe the women in the audience will smile at this, but man didn't seem to "get it" as naturally as woman. He had to be taught ... and as Rogers and Hammerstein might say, he "had to be carefully taught"! There is not a single continent or primal culture that didn't have a form of male initiation and there are amazing patterns of uniformity. One author said that you would think there was some central casting office or choreographer somewhere in New York sending out the instructions to the various cultures. In every culture I studied, whether it was African, old Celtic, Native American, Aboriginal, there was one universal element in historic initiation---grief work. The young male had to be taught somehow the way of tears. He had to be taught how to cry. In fact, if I were to sum up this whole spirituality of initiation in a one liner, it would be this; **the young man who cannot cry is a savage, the old man who cannot laugh is a fool**. The way you got to the second stage of life was to be able to laugh...I'm 61 now, so I guess I should be there now where I can smile at things. The ego isn't so invested in everything if you've done your spiritual work. The assumption was that the only way man can get to that point of smiling in the last third of life, was to be taught to cry in the first third of life. What they meant by that, as best I can understand, was that the male had to be instructed toward a kind of cosmic sympathy for things; a solidarity and identification with the tears of things, as the Latins called it. If he didn't have that cosmic sympathy, if it was not cultivated, the male was frankly sort of toxic. I don't even know if that takes a lot of proof, it would be rather dangerous for culture because all the male would seek was his own advancement, his own achievement, his own promotion, his own ego identity and that kind of male was no good at building community, at building family, at building a non-violent society. He could only build a violent society.

I'm a Franciscan priest; I'm fortunate to find two other Franciscan brothers here in the room tonight. You might not know a lot about our tradition. I'm called what is referred to as a "lifer" and we don't produce them anymore! Talk about toxic, it's even more dangerous when you put all your eggs in that one basket, but in my generation that's what we did! I joined the Franciscan order when I was 19 and really remember my year of novitiate, now, for those of you unfamiliar with that term, the novitiate in religious life is like boot camp, as least it was like that back in 1961, it's not so much anymore. We had all kinds of rules and requirements, things we could do and couldn't do, for instance, our heads were shaved, (when I had hair, it was shaved!) and our reading list consisted of the many books written on the life of St. Francis. You might not know this, but the longest single bibliography of anybody known on this planet is Francis of Assisi. There

is no one even close, not even Jesus, who has had so many books written on his life and the list gets longer every year. We were required to read a new one every month, a different one each month to get a different perspective. After finishing about the sixth one I went into my novice master, and I said, "I don't know if I want to follow this guy!" "Why?" the novice master asked and I answered, "Francis was always crying." Now I was a nineteen year-old German/American male filled with hormones and on my rising star... and you know, tears slow you down. Tears aren't what it's about. I wasn't initiated. I wasn't taught the way of tears. Francis and Claire, his female counterpart, St. Claire, as we call her, would spend whole weekends in tears. They would go off and cry together and that just didn't make any sense to a nineteen year old, "What are they crying about?" My very holy and wise novice master said to me, "Richard, you don't understand now, just trust me one day it will make sense". Well, as I mentioned before, I'm 61 now, and it does make sense.

Francis proactively moved into pain so it didn't become an enemy, so he didn't become surprised at it. He is probably most identified with his love of poverty, his love of the poor, his love of the simple life, and his identification with lepers. He didn't let pain come to him as a surprise or as a shock or as a disappointment. He went into it actively and let it teach him and that's probably a very difficult thing to teach in contemporary Western society. I think I see in this an example of what I called at the beginning of my talk, an initiated man: a man who understood the necessity of tears. His empathy is the integral part of Franciscan spirituality that I hold as representative of the Christian tradition, of the wisdom tradition of Christianity. The way of tears is different than the weeping mode and different than the fixing mode. Now regardless of what denomination, religion or tradition you are from, we as Americans, are trained into fixing (and thank God we have some good fixers like many of you in this room). I think the wisdom traditions would consider the fixing mode almost dangerous, spiritually speaking, if it isn't at least accompanied, not necessarily preceded by, but accompanied by the weeping mode when there is some moving into identification with the tears of things, with the brokenness of things, the necessary loss and death of things, with what we call in Catholic mythology, the Pascal mystery. Again, that is not an American way of thinking anymore. In the Christian tradition, we learn that from Jesus' death on the cross. This image of the cross has certainly been misused and misunderstood and has spawned all kind of horrible theology but it still represents for Christians the ultimate transformative icon. In fact Carl Jung, who was no great lover of Christianity because of his rather stern, retentive Swiss reformed father, said that for good or for ill the image of the naked bleeding man on a cross is the deepest image in the western psyche; for good or for ill it's just there. I think that at a subliminal level, at a level of appeal, at a level of transformation and ideally not of abuse, the cross is somehow saying to the Christian who will gaze upon this mystery that there is meaning to suffering, it's just that simple.

Christians have taken that all kinds of different directions in this respect. People like the Irish and some French almost gave a marveled fascination to suffering; you just weren't a good Catholic if you didn't beat on yourself quite a bit. You were expected to suffer and anybody who didn't suffer wasn't a good follower of Jesus. That has certainly been a subtext inside of Christianity, again for good or for ill. It could lead to the transformative experience where one doesn't stay weeping for the sake of weeping, sad for the sake of sadness, but it can lead one into what I've been calling a liminal space. "Liminal" in Latin means "threshold" and I've been saying for some years now that I believe transformation almost always happens when you're inside of liminal space, when you're on the threshold. The job of a good spiritual director, in my opinion, is to lead you

to your threshold, to encourage you not to be afraid of it; then to keep you there, holding the pain until you've learned its lessons; and eventually lead you out of it as well.

Being in liminal space doesn't mean identifying with this victim theology that we have so much of today. Almost getting some kind of power by proving that I've been beaten up more than you've been beaten up or I've been punished or victimized more than you've been victimized. The job description of a good Christian spiritual director is to gracefully lead you into the sadness if you will and then encourage you, "Don't be afraid of the sadness, it's a good teacher." There is meaning there precisely because at that point you can't fix it and therefore, the ego has to give up control...that's liminal space... and that's when God can get at you. As long as the ego is in control, as long as you're into the fixing mode of thinking you can explain it. All of our Christian mystics say that the great teacher is darkness not light.

I think that what led to this nadir of fundamentalism that we're experiencing in all the major religions today is this overemphasis of what I would call a theology of light. In other words, needing answers, certitude, explanations, clarity, order, structure, even if it isn't true or sound. The ego wants light, which lends a certain kind of superficial clarity. Ego wants it so bad that it seems to me it settles for satisfying untruth. Ego wants satisfaction. That's the nature of the ego, it wants satisfaction and therefore, it will choose immediately satisfying untruth instead of what is always unsatisfying truth. Now unsatisfying truth is what I would call the theology of darkness.

The mystics call it the apophatic tradition, the tradition that has to accompany the cataphatic tradition. The spiritual life has a way of light and a way of darkness. The cataphatic is the way of light. The apophatic is the way of darkness. Since the Enlightenment period, most Western Christians have not been trained much in the apophatic tradition. But the tradition of darkness is the greater teacher, the necessary teacher, really the teacher that breaks a person down through and into this realm that our biblical tradition, our Judeo-Christian tradition calls faith. At its depths, our tradition acknowledges the primacy of darkness as the greater teacher, as the greater expander of the soul, as the greater opener-up of the eyes. This seems to be the wisdom that we should be bringing to the West today, but that certainly hasn't been where most Catholic Christian theology has been for the last 300 years. We've wanted answers, we've wanted clarity, we want closure, we want solutions which tells me we've been far more influenced by the ascendant western civilization than what I will call as a Christian, the decent language of Jesus or Job or the Jewish prophets who are talking much more about this way of tears, this way about going into the shadow, into the pain, into the dark side if you will and that being where we would find wisdom. I think we are at a very difficult position in terms of western spirituality because it often feels, in many established church groups that I talk to, that we're on a course that needs to be turned around 180 degrees. We will never find wisdom in this search for closure, answers, certitude, fixing and explanation. It simply isn't the path of wisdom.

The Pascal mystery might not be a phrase that is familiar to all of you; it is a phrase that was coined by Augustine as he was trying to describe the Christ mystery. The mystery is that life and death, loss and renewal are the two sides of everything and you dare not separate them. If you do, you have reality falsely defined. If you have reality unfairly defined, it will not lead to enlightenment, it will not lead to truth. For Christians the Christ mystery of "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again" is a mythic

acclamation that describes that transformative movement from death to resurrection. I hope I'm not being too cynical in saying this, but I don't think we really want to walk that mystery ourselves, so we worship it in Jesus. Now let me explain that. This theory is exemplified in the recent movie the Passion that's gained so much notoriety and fame. You know, **Jesus never once said, "Worship me," he said, "Follow me."** One of the cleverest ways to avoid following someone is to worship him, it really works, it's very clever. You just put him on a pedestal, you make God out of him and you pay all kind of homage to this God figure and then you don't have to do what he did. All he was doing was walking the journey of a good and full-blooded Jewish man into love and he died a good full-blooded Jewish man on the path of love and when you love that is where it is going to lead you. You're not going to fit into the system as it usually is structured which is not usually in the direction of love. It is usually structured in the direction of power (and not necessarily in any kind of descent, certainly the Roman empire would have been structured in the ways of ascent). There is no way he was going to fit inside of that world and inside of that culture. We use Jesus to answer a problem.

Again, go back to our Franciscan tradition; in the 13th century there was a great debate in the University of Paris. At that time Catholicism was actually a bit more broad minded than it is today where we could have two different schools of thought, the two great debating societies at that time were the Franciscans and the Dominicans. We disagreed almost on everything; they would take one opinion and we would take another. In classic debate form the Dominicans would say one thing and we Franciscans would always say the other and neither of us in those days were kicked out of the church. We were both allowed to be good Catholics at that time. I don't think it would work that way anymore. It's amazing how history can be regressive, but at any rate one of the great debates (and I guess one reason I am bringing it up is because of the recent movie, the Passion) was "Is Jesus necessary?" The Dominicans based their argument on many fine biblical metaphors and concluded yes, Jesus was necessary. Jesus had to offer this sacrifice, pay this atonement bill, and we didn't realize what a terrible thing this was saying about God. You have to ask, "If God needed to be bought off to love us, what kind of God is this?" It breaks down any kind of organic connection between God and God's creation. If God has to be talked into loving us, if God has to be convinced...you see that all reflected in the atonement theology of the movie.

Well we Franciscans never agreed with that. John Donscotis, who was our teacher, (he was never canonized like Thomas Aquinas, he was beatified, but that wasn't the top) said no, Jesus was not necessary, and he was solving no problems. There was no problem to be solved; he was simply for Christians, the phrase from Colossians being he was the image of the invisible God. He was the icon who brought us into the lovability and generosity of God. Quite possibly that is why the Cross became that deepest icon because humanity needed an image that God was on our side, that God was given to us, that God was for us and not against, and benevolently involved with the universe: that's of course supposed to be the transformative meaning of this image of the crucified Jesus. Unfortunately, the fixing mode engineers him into solving a problem, paying a price. This terrible atonement theology that we're stuck with today claims that there was something to be atoned for. I think that is simply a rather horrible theological example, it's been called the most unfortunately, unsuccessful theological debate that ever happened in the church, but pretty much it's been accepted for the last 700-800 years. Jesus came to identify with the pain of the world and enter into it with that cosmic sympathy and to invite us into that identification with sadness. We are invited, like Francis, to proactively move right into it and say this is where life is at; this is where you

understand, not at the top of things but at the bottom of things. This depth of understanding became the Franciscan way: to identify with the poor and not the rich, to remain as far as possible on the edge, not in the center. I think that did come from Jesus, I think that is the heart of the Christian way when it's understood on a spiritual level and not just a functional pragmatic problem solving level which so much of Christianity has become. When it's understood on the mystical level where it should be understood, the mystery of tears, the mystery of sadness is the breakthrough into liminality. It's the breakthrough to a different consciousness and let me finish quoting Albert Einstein who I really do believe was his own form of mystic. He said no problem could be solved by the same consciousness that caused it.

I think the way of tears, the way of sadness and tears as experienced by the Christian saints and our mystics, should and can be realized if you have a good spiritual director to guide you through it. Just the opposite of how it feels, tears and sadness feel like the worst way, but are the best way to break us into liminality and transformation, frankly because the old consciousness can't work anymore. Do you understand the old problem-solving consciousness? It doesn't suffice. Until you let go of that consciousness where everything has got to be $2+2 = 4$, you cannot break through to what I think all of our religions would call enlightenment or transformation.

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