

Three 6-year-old boys were playing the wise men in the Church's Christmas pageant. As they came up to Mary and Joseph, the first one handed over his present and said, "Gold." The second presented his gift and said, "Myrrh." The third one then gave them his treasure and said, "And Frank sent this."

The story of the magi is the most famous trip to attend a baby shower! Only 2 points today – I know how deeply disappointed you all will be, but I DO have 3 sub-points under point 2, just to make your pain a little more bearable. So first, this epiphany story is a great metaphor for the spiritual life – the journey into the heart of God. What is it that draws us to a spiritual life? From as far back as we can remember, we sense that there is mystery in simply being alive. We get glimmers of it from time to time --if we are privileged to witness the birth of a child, or when someone we love dies. It is there in a compellingly beautiful sunset or a moment of silence at the end of a busy day. We have an intuition that connecting to something larger than ourselves -- the sacred – GOD --is perhaps our deepest need and longing. There is a call that comes to us in these moments – a call to awaken that cries out to us in a thousand ways, just like that star called out to the magi so long ago. As the poet Rumi sings, "Grapes want to turn to wine." There is a pull to wholeness, to being fully alive, even when we have been so busy that we have almost forgotten. The Hindus tell us that the child in the womb sings, "Do not let me forget who I am," but that the song after birth becomes, "Oh, I have forgotten already." At some point in life, we realize that there is so much more than just work, money, and diversion. We realize how little we know of God, and how great is the unknown. (freely adapted from Jack Kornfield, AFTER THE ECSTASY, THE LAUNDRY, p. 3-4)

We undertake the spiritual journey because we need to ask ourselves why we were born. What is it that we have -- that the world needs – and is waiting for us to provide? That is the star that we must follow to its end. If we are at all open to such a journey, we know that happiness is not about an endless search to appear young, or amass power or prestige. It is about who we are and what we do with our life for the sake of others. We learn that giving ourselves to something worth doing is more important, more valuable, than giving ourselves only until something better, something more exciting, something more lucrative comes along.

We want to be more than simply all the trappings of self. We long to become fully human, which is to say, holy. Then we will have come to be about more than the baubles of life which, without a sense of purpose and direction, will soon begin to define us. As William James wrote: "The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it." (adapted from Joan Chittister, FOLLOWING THE PATH, p. 74-75)

Second, the only way forward in the spiritual life is by trial and failure. The journey is both the lesson and the end of life. As Elizabeth Ann Seton said: "We make the path by walking." Only by pursuing what does not fit can we ever appreciate what does. At the same time, if we are ever to reach our particular call to completeness, to wholeness, to the true self in life, we must bring to the darkness of the journey 3 major characteristics. For those of you who follow my points, they will be a, b, and c.

So a, we must come to understand that the dissatisfaction we feel with life is the very essence of what we name call. Clearly, it is at the moments of dissatisfaction with life as we know it now that the door to the future swings open for us. There is a holy restlessness that has been placed within us, pulling us forward into God. Feeling that something is missing pulls us into pursuit.

Which requires b, openness of the heart and abandonment of our ego – which are portals to the future. Unless we can let go of our present feeling of security, unless we are willing to begin again, we will simply become accustomed to the lack of a sense of meaning in the here and now. And the grace of doubt

that invites us forward will die in the wind. And with it will go all the unfinished parts of ourselves, left to shrivel in the face of opportunities not taken. These are the kinds of moments we look back on years later and sigh, “if only....” while the heart beats slower and the present loses another layer of glow.

But openness and letting go are not enough. There is a parallel project that comes with the call to begin our lives again and that is the task of learning what we do and do not know. Everything we have ever done has taught us something about our skills and taught us about ourselves as well – our personality, our soul style, our dreams deferred. Simply put, there are things we may feel we are called to that we are not emotionally equipped to handle.

To really understand what it is in life that we’re looking for, we have to come to understand. Ourselves. Otherwise, we run the risk of making the same mistaken choices over and over again. Why do more SECOND marriages fail than first? Because so often we jump back into the same thing we just left! We did not take the time to figure out our own part in the failure of the marriage. It’s so much easier to just blame everything on our ex. But that leaves us with no new understanding – and no better direction.

Also, no authentic call is a call to more of ourselves than we have to offer. As I have said many times, our vocation is something that we are well equipped for – something we have gifts for – something we like – something that will give us meaning and purpose and fulfillment – even as we are challenged to our fullest potential.

Finally, point c, following the call takes courage. It demands a faith in the fact that there is nothing that can happen to us in the process that will do anything other than teach us more or bring us closer to our true selves. What can possibly be bad about either of those things? Clearly, failure is not failure unless we allow it to be, if we define it as such.

The reality is that there are 2 faces of failure – one of them life-giving, the other death dealing. We’ve all seen them both. Joan Chittister tells of an internationally recognized writer who, first intent on becoming an English professor, studied at Oxford but failed the final exam. That would have dashed the dreams of many against the rock of life. But she spoke about the loss of those years and that degree with a laugh and a toss of her head: “Luckiest thing that ever happened to me,” she said. “Otherwise, I’d be in a small college someplace teaching writing. As it is, I’m doing just what I’m supposed to be doing, writing and researching.” That was a woman who knew the place of failure in the eternal spiritual quest to become the best of ourselves.

The second face of failure she reports seeing in a woman with great musical talent who, discouraged by the difficulty of her early studies, dropped out of music school and never studied another thing in life. She died disgruntled, underdeveloped, and trapped within the boundaries of the self. Failure may be the real test of what it takes to follow our real call, for we all fail. But what do we do with failure? That’s what defines the way forward. (adapted from Chittister, FOLLOWING THE PATH, p. 64-67)

Did the magi journey in vain? Not at all. But the whole thing was like nothing they had ever imagined. They found no baby in a palace being served by courtiers, but a child in a manger surrounded by animals. King Herod of Jerusalem turned out to be a conniving royal fraud, but the real king was asleep on the hay. Nothing was what it once seemed. Nothing was what they expected. Everything in their lives was now altered – forever. And so that poignant last line of the gospel – they went home by another way. They had no other choice.

We are on a similar pilgrimage, a similar journey, searching out the signs and making our way as best we can. To the king who wishes to reign in our hearts. Which will require a frequent change of direction in order to bend our lives to His ways. Not such a bad thing to go home by another way. It may just mean a whole new life. Amen.

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