

YOU GET THESE FREE OF CHARGE! A few snappy comments in the right situation.

There's a much-quoted line from Leonard Cohen that suggests that the place where we are broken is also the place where our redemption starts: There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

That's true, a major wound is often the place where wisdom flows into our lives and a weakness that habitually overpowers us can keep us aware of our need for grace. But that's half of the story. A fault, while keeping us humble, can also keep us mediocre – and joyless. John of the Cross offers us an image by way of an explanation:

If one small crack in a pitcher goes unrepaired, the damage will be enough to cause all the liquid to leak out. Accordingly, one imperfection leads to another, and these to still more. We hardly ever find a person negligent in the conquering of one issue who will not have many others flowing from that same weakness and imperfection caused by this one appetite. Such persons, consequently, are ever stumbling in their spiritual development. We've known people that were making a serious effort and advancing in detachment and freedom – fall from happiness and giving up their faith practice because they indulged in something they knew was not really good for them. And by giving in to that one thing, they gradually emptied their lives of prayer and Mass – all because they did not put a stop to their initial satisfaction and sensual pleasure, and retain their connection to God and community. (adapted from ASCENT TO MOUNT CARMEL, Book 1, Chapter 11)

Our infidelities, our attachments, and our various falls from grace invariably start at the spot where we have a certain flirtation with fire, satisfaction, or pleasure. It might not even be initially sinful in itself, but it eventually leads us into an emotional and moral quagmire that robs us of peace and happiness and, most damaging of all, forces us to hide things, to hide ourselves, to lie, and to be less than healthily transparent.

And even when the fault is not big, it still serves to block us from deeper growth and deeper happiness. John has an axiom that says it doesn't matter in the end whether a bird is attached to the ground by a heavy chain or a light string – it can't fly in either case. Hence, he cautions us strongly against being comfortable with any of our faults or addictions by rationalizing that this or that fault is not so serious that we are fundamentally good persons, despite our weakness. Whether we are held by a heavy chain or a thin thread, we still can't fly.

If we grow comfortable with a fault or habit inside us, we will find ourselves impoverished in other ways: we are robbed of real happiness and a sense of goodness, wholeness, and peace. French philosopher Leon Bloy suggests that ultimately there is only one true human sadness – that of not being a saint. That may sound like over-pious moralizing, but there's a part of us that understands exactly what Bloy is saying. Our infidelities, and our less-than-healthy indulgences might well bring us some fleeting pleasure – but they soon enough turn into a compulsion – but these never bring us joy. They bring us sadness. Joy is not the same as pleasure. There can be a lot of pleasure in our lives even as our hearts are sad -- and our consciences are heavy.

True joy is something beyond pleasure and can co-exist with renunciation and pain. It is dependent rather on honesty, transparency, and gratitude – the true hallmarks of holiness. When we are honest in examining our experience, we know this truth. If any of us ask ourselves: When have I been most truly happy in my life? The honest answer invariably will be: I have been happiest and most at peace at those times when I have been faithful, honest, fully transparent, when all the goods were on the table, and I had nothing to hide, even if I was less than perfect.

Nobody is perfect, that's not what sanctity is about. But we must never grow comfortable with our faults and rationalize them because they are not grievous or because we can keep them hidden. If one small crack in a pitcher goes unrepaired, the damage will be enough to cause all the liquid to leak out. The net result will not be that we become bad persons. No. We will remain as we are – solidly mediocre. But holiness will escape us – and we will have failed in the one thing we were put here to become – a saint. Amen. (freely adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, “A CRACK IN OUR PITCHER,” posting of 27 May 2012)

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