

FULFILLING EMPTINESS

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I remember when I first heard the question, "Is the glass half full or half empty? It was grade 4, Mrs. Eskridge's class. She placed the glistening glass down on her desk at the front of the classroom and said, 'Children, consider this...is the glass half empty or half full?' I studied that glass. As the moments passed I became more and more confounded. How could there be a right answer?? It seemed like she was looking for THE answer, but how could there be one? Surely the glass was BOTH half full AND half empty. It wasn't until I was a little further down the road of life did I figure out that this question is actually an assessment of optimism. If you see the glass half empty, then you're focusing on the space of nothingness, centered on what you lack...a presumed position of pessimism. If you see the glass half full, then you appreciate what you do have, focusing on existing bounty, with perhaps a bit of hope that the rest of the glass might one day also reflect fullness.

For many years this was the extent to which I considered this initially perplexing question. It wasn't until much later that a new consideration crept in...does *emptiness* always have to be bad?

There are different kinds of emptiness after all...One kind reflects a kind of void, an abyss, a kind of nothingness that inspired Gertrude Stein to say, "There's no there, there." There's also emptiness born of sadness and loss, where it feels like there's a hole in your heart, a place deep within you that feels hollow due to grief of some sort. Most of the time, when we think about the concept of 'emptiness' we think of it in these terms. We don't think of it in positive terms, certainly not something we'd choose. "Ma'am, would you like your cone filled with ice cream, or just left empty?" is a question we'll never hear, and a choice we'd never make.

We don't often think in terms of not only tolerating emptiness, but actually embracing it. Words you'll see in our February newsletter address this. It says...

"Thirty spokes run into one hub; yet in the emptiness of the wheel lies its essence.

From clay a jar is formed; yet in its emptiness lies the essence of the container.

Rooms are made by cutting windows and doors into the walls, yet in its emptiness lies the essence of the room.

The visual matter can be observed but it is the invisible that constitutes the true being."

The invisible constitutes true being.

Ironically, many of us mistake invisibility for a vacuum, for nothingness,

Ahh, but what an oversight this is. David Suzuki remarked about this when he said, "Emptiness which is liable to be mistaken for sheer nothingness is in fact the reservoir of infinite possibilities." To take it a step further, we as people of spirit, are called not

only to recognize the inherent sacredness and possibility of emptiness, but are invited to mindfully pursue practices of emptying of self.

Such practices are not only useful to us, but some would say are *essential* to our journey. When we engage in spiritual emptying practices such as fasting and meditation, chosen stillness, we are making room so that we can be filled with newness, with grace, the Sacred....love, God, self awareness, understanding of others. I don't have to tell you how difficult actually doing this can be. Instead of working toward space and quiet, we tend to fill our minds, our time, our calendars with a myriad of activities and distractions. We all fall into this. I did, just two days ago....

....on Friday, I was sitting in the waiting room in the PTB hospital, waiting for Claire McCellan to finish her visit with Gord. I had brought in a couple of books to peruse for ideas for today's sermon, and had exhausted those books. Do I go out to the car and grab my laptop to stay busy? No, Claire might come looking for me. A moment later I received the invitation....*just sit quietly, just BE, open yourself, quiet yourself, empty yourself.*

It even consciously occurred to me that embracing this impromptu moment of meditation by emptying my mind of other thoughts could be advantageous to gaining the insights that I was seeking in those books. But did I do it? Nope.

A moment or two into it my mind was off to the races, thinking about how else I could sit there without resources, and still make my time 'productive.' "Let's see, Dave's got the Welcome, Paula's doing the chalice and offering....are we doing a responsive reading on Sunday?"

It was a lost opportunity. I did not follow Laozi's (LOU -ZEE) encouragement to...

Become totally empty

Quiet the restlessness of the mind, because

Only then will you witness everything unfolding from emptiness"

And here's the big irony of this thing about becoming mindfully and totally empty....Through doing it we come to know in a way deeper than before that we are in fact NOT empty and not alone at all. Have you ever experienced being a part of the interconnected web of all existence more deeply than ever when you were most alone? Perhaps some of you saw the film "Gravity" with Sandra Bullock. She plays a scientist who is on a mission to repair the Hubble Space Telescope. Things go wrong and at several points in the film she is on the edge of being immersed into the vast emptiness of space. Perhaps you can visualize the picture from the film ads, this person suspended in space, barely tethered to the rest of the world. While these circumstances were quite distressing, of course, it was during this experience of being 'lost in space,' when communications with others ceased, that she gained clarity of mind and spirit like never before. The distractions were set aside, not by choice, but by necessity.

I've heard it said that silence, like the vast silence that scientist experienced as she was suspended in space, is, like love, something we don't reason our way into. But once we are in it, we recognize that it has been there all along. It's there like the background

noise of the universe. Many times we miss it, though, because it requires listening, when we want to speak. It requires trust and vulnerability and choosing to remain open in times when we most want to cling to what we know, to remain tethered to the tangible world. And the pitfall is that, as we work so hard to stay tethered and “secure,” we convince ourselves that we’re all set, we’re well enough, and thus live in the illusion that emptying ourselves is unnecessary.

This is why I’ve always thought that in some ways being in substance abuse recovery, such as being in Alcoholics Anonymous, is a blessing in a way...because it ensures against the slippery and subtle slope of complacency. I’m well enough, why do I need to listen more intently or look more deeply?

People in recovery can’t afford to settle in a ‘comfortable’ existence...to do so could literally kill them. Therefore they must work toward emptying themselves of arrogance, and self satisfaction, and recognize something that universally true for ALL of us...that we are not self sustaining, but instead are called to empty ourselves in a spirit of humility in order to gain insight and strength, and in order to be led to a higher, healthier, more centered way of being.

Our Sunday worship here isn’t entirely unlike an AA meeting, a place where like-minded people are seeking, allowing emptying within ourselves in order to be filled, and doing it in community. That is the reason many of us are here today. There are so many other places we could be this morning. Surely some of us, especially with the weather, strongly considered being somewhere else, like home, this morning. But coming to this sacred space reinforces the fullness of the reality that we are not alone, we’re never in ULTIMATE solitude. We are connected as we bring our pains and losses, the death of our parent, the ending of our marriage, the drug addiction of our child, or the rent money we can’t come up with. Our connections help us to move through the seeming emptiness that is born of these pains. And it’s our connection to each other that helps equip us to embrace solitude, and thus understand what might appear to be the dichotomy between connection and solitude, between fullness and emptiness.

-pause-

It’s in our nature to gravitate toward the light, toward joy and fullness. But just as the sacred circle of life includes birth AND death, light AND dark, joy AND sorrow, so does it contain fullness...AND emptiness. This brings to mind the ideas offered in a Wendell Berry poem “The Real Work”...

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do or who we are
Because we can no longer sustain ourselves,
we have come to our real selves,*

*and that when we no longer know which way to go
because we are void of direction, in the vast openness of space,
we have come to our real journey.*

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

May our minds no longer be baffled as we ponder the mystery of a glass half full or half empty.

May we be willing to climb that fence that we heard about in our children's story....the fence that holds us back from being on the other side of fullness, so that we can know the true fullness that comes with embracing the empty part of our glass too.

And so may it be.