

Removing spiritual calluses

This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of Jan. 30–31, 2010.

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HAWKINS, Texas—Some time ago I bought a pair of shoes that proved slightly narrow at the ball of the foot. Eventually the continuous rubbing resulted in a hard callus (a formation of tough dead skin cells to protect against further irritation). The discomfort led to a purchase of some protective pads to soften and eventually remove those hardened patches of dead skin.

In human relations, a parallel hardening or callousness sometimes takes place. Jesus predicted that "because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12).

Emotionally, people living in a moral relativistic society exposed to continual irritants emerging from society's moral breakdown develop a thick skin, a tough hide. Callousness and hardened become the metaphors of choice we use to describe this predictable, learned behavior.

Brittle state

Lawlessness and unbelief often lead to a hardening and brittle state. This was true with ancient Israel. Paul described the Israelites as being broken off as dead branches (Romans 11:17). The apostle Paul warns Timothy that in the latter times some will yield to the incremental pulls of sin, "speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron." This cauterizing process in effect destroys sensitivity, intimacy and compassion.

American writer Stephen Crane once wrote a short, pithy epigram in which he spoke of this cumulative, irreversible hardness:

"A man feared that he might find an assassin; another that he might find a victim. One was more wise than the other."

Former Israeli prime minister Golda Meir shed some light on this conundrum when she said to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat: "For killing our children we can forgive you. But for turning our children into killers we can never forgive you."

In Stephen Crane's riddle, the assassin's concern that he would find a victim would also represent an incremental destruction of his humanity or compassion, forming an irreversible callus.

Crowded lifeboat

Jesus taught us in the manifesto of faith, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). He seemed to imply a two-way cause-and-effect relationship between expressing sorrow and having the capacity to receive compassion or consolation, as well as the capacity to express compassion or empathy and the capacity to feel.

Because of the breakdown of moral standards in our relativistic society, people increasingly turn inward, selfish and narcissistic, ignoring the pitiful plight of society or even the demise of their fallen brethren.

The situation resembles a crowded lifeboat in which a leak sprang through on the far end. One survivor said: "I'm glad I'm not on that side of the boat. I don't have to be concerned about it."

The "self-absorbed wrapped up in self" trait was articulated in the words of the pop-culture balladeers Simon and Garfunkle in the late '60s with their refrain:

"I am a rock. I am an island. / And a rock feels no pain."

Death of outrage

Cynicism and callousness describe defense mechanisms in a culture that has blatantly tolerated hideous and outrageous immorality in the highest offices in the land.

Typically we react to these outrages with smirks, ridicule and cynicism (everybody does it, you know). But the deeply felt sorrow and pain for what our people and fallen brethren are doing to themselves seem to have gradually dried up and disappeared. Former secretary of education William Bennett has decried what he has described as the "death of outrage."

The capacity to feel sorrow or concern was predicted to become a scarce commodity as love for God's holy law disappeared. God Almighty instructs Ezekiel:

"Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it [God's temple]" (Ezekiel 9:4).

Revealing essay

Several years ago one of my students wrote a cause-and-effect essay in which he revealed that he did not have the capacity to express tears for more than three years. He suggested that he found substitutes for crying in cynicism, sarcasm and anger.

These measures, he learned, did not provide the wholesome relief he needed to render his grief bearable. The student reported agonizing and straining for days to force one single tear from his eyes. Fortunately he did ultimately find success overcoming his affliction.

Like my former student, our society feeds on a massive daily dose of cynicism and derisive ridicule, ostensibly in an attempt to keep its collective equilibrium. Ridicule and cynicism feed the one-liners of late-night talk-show hosts Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien. Millions of Americans lock into cynicism to feel a temporary sense of relief from the obvious disintegration of moral standards.

In the workplace "therapeutic" gripe sessions spontaneously erupt in company canteens, restrooms, loading docks or vacant nooks in the warehouse. Political correctness has enforced a stilted public politeness but greatly exacerbated an undercurrent of hostility and anger.

In the recent diaspora of the greater Church of God, some groups have advocated a scorched-earth spiritual isolationist stance, taking a "good riddance to bad rubbish" approach as they sever themselves from the offending amputated limb. The apostle Paul takes a jaundiced view of this form of spiritual egocentrism, warning: "Do not boast against the [broken off] branches . . . Do not be haughty, but fear" (Romans 11:18, 20).

Amputees, when they lose a limb and are fitted with a prosthesis, still feel the pain from their phantom limb often months after its removal. The apostle Paul certainly felt sensitivity from the brutal spiritual amputation of his people from the spiritual vine, adding:

"I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to my flesh" (Romans 9:2-3).

Lessons of Jeremiah

The prophet Jeremiah refused to develop a sense of smugness or spiritual isolationism. Rather, he provided a sterling example of sensitivity and empathy for his people, demonstrating that even in their shortcomings and failings he felt a kinship and bond with them, crying and sighing with them.

"For the hurt of the daughter of my people I am hurt. I am mourning; Astonishment has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead, Is there no physician there? Why then is there no recovery For the health of the daughter of my people?" (Jeremiah 8:21-22).

Jeremiah identifies himself with the welfare of the entire group, even though he realizes his people have brought on their own demise through their own stiff necked and willful stupidity.

"Oh, that my head were waters, And my eyes a fountain of tears, That I might weep day and night For the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Jeremiah 9:1).

In the subsequent verses it is clear that Jeremiah does not tolerate the immorality of his people, but that doesn't prevent him from demonstrating the most profound sorrow and grief for them. Jeremiah is credited for composing the most moving dirge and lament ever written, rehearsed every year in the Jewish community at the fast during the month of Av.

Songs of sorrow

Western culture, largely influenced by Protestant tastes in music, has not learned the therapeutic qualities of the lament, the songs of sorrow. American culture, focusing on what William Dean Howells considers the "smiling aspects of life," almost totally ignore the melodies of grief, even though a great many psalms. Psalms 55, 60 and 69 are songs of anguish, supplication and lament. A major key and crisp 4/4 time do not really express the sentiments of the hymn "By the Waters of Babylon."

In Proverbs 25:20 God's word reveals:

"Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather, and like vinegar on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart" (Proverbs 25:20).

Did David do something foolish by playing melodies for Saul on the harp when Saul was troubled with a spirit of depression (1 Samuel 16:14-23)?

The scriptures do not contradict each other. David did not play a knee-slapping jig or an up-tempo ballad but actually matched the mood of Saul, locking into what music therapists would term an isomodic principle or *zeitgeber*. David's melancholy harp melodies matched Saul's depressed temperament, bringing about a cathartic release.

On with the performance

Back at the time of President Kennedy's assassination I was playing in the Mankato Symphony Orchestra. John Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963, and we were scheduled to perform on the next Sunday afternoon.

A debate occurred among the symphony board of directors whether to continue the concert since the whole nation seemed to be in a state of mourning. Dr. Rolf Scheuer insisted that the main featured piece on the program was Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, a work with a decided melancholic cast. The directors decided to go on with the concert. The headlines in the next day's Mankato Free Press read "Music Speaks Where Words Fail."

Likewise, orchestral works like Gelbrun's *Lament for the Victims of the Warsaw Ghetto* or Brahms' *German Requiem* get in sync with the emotions. Brahms based his *German Requiem* entirely on comforting bittersweet scriptures such as Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

And Psalm 126:5-6:

"Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

Music helps

When my own mother died three years ago, the music of Brahms' *German Requiem* seemed about the only music I could tolerate. The comfort and sen-

sitivity expressed by the sentiment of the composer seemed to underscore the old Yiddish proverb "The only whole heart is a broken one."

Sorrow and grief certainly constitute one aspect of the life process, and Scripture encourages us to accommodate that aspect.

"Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth" (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4).

Of course we realize that everything has its time and place, "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

Value of crying

Dr. William Fry Jr., who has done extensive research into the therapeutic effects of laughter, has also, believe it or not, researched the therapeutic effects of crying.

Dr. Fry hypothesizes that toxic substances build up in the body during times of emotional distress and anguish. He suggests that tears produced by the body during periods of distress are probably chemically different from those produced by an allergy or an irritant.

He conducted research that confirmed that tears of sorrow contained considerably more protein. Upon closer analysis, researchers discovered that tears of sorrow also transmit chemicals including the pain-reliever endorphins called catecholamines, including trace amounts of adrenaline. These findings seem to corroborate the common-sense notion of crying as a cathartic or purifying release of tension.

Mourning and crying, then, are not some primitive behaviors to be expunged in enlightened society. Properly vented sorrow reawakens our sensitivity, puts us back into contact with our community, develops empathy and compassion for the afflicted and rids us of our spiritual calluses.