

Here are some great truths about growing old:

1. You feel like you now know all the answers, but nobody bothers to ask you the questions.
2. Forget the health food. You need all the preservatives you can get.
3. When you fall down, you wonder what else you can do while you're down there.
4. You get the same sensation from a rocking chair that you once got from a roller coaster.
5. Time may be a great healer, but it's a lousy beautician.

First, a little bit of background on this Feast of the Epiphany. Much of ancient literature – like the Bible – carries metaphors to which we don't have the key or to which we are unaware. So we hear or read the stories and take them as simple narratives, a good read perhaps, but hearing nothing more than the surface level of the words.

The ancients, however, were incapable of telling or writing a story in this way. In their world, everything solicited the reader's or hearer's minds and hearts to something deeper. No one at the time, for example, took literally Matthew's account of the Magi and the star or Luke's account of the shepherds. They knew rather that these were symbols and metaphors that pointed to vastly deeper truths. Jesus' invented story of the good Samaritan resonated uncomfortably with His listeners and itself became a metaphor for compassion.

No one takes Aesop's talking animals literally. No one reads Mark Twain's HUCKLEBERRY FINN only for its entertainment value. They contain deeper messages. But we moderns – raised in a so-called objective, digital world where the imagination is denigrated and fairy tales are relegated to children; where legal briefs, dissertations, records, and the printed word are considered 'objective' truth – have lost our ability to hear or read stories and their metaphors and hidden meanings, and this includes the Bible, which is more or less a centuries-old collection of stories.

We are the first culture in history to identify truth with factuality, the first culture in history to declare that stories can be true only if they are factually verified and validated. Only then, we say, can we believe them. But stories are not about belief. Stories are about seeing, not believing. We see there is truth in the metaphors used. In Arabia, traditional storytellers begin their stories with, "This was, and this was not." In the country of Georgia, they say, "There was, there was, and yet there was not"; and Native Americans begin, "Now I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true." (William J. Bausch, TOUCHING THE HEART, p. 51-52)

So we have this beautiful story of strange seekers from afar – people who dabble in mystery, wonder, and a star, and a grown King on a throne -- frightened of a baby King in a manger. So what does all of this have to say to us? We know that dealers in wonder are a mixed bag in the Bible. Some operate under divine authority and others dabbled in the occult. Still others were simply charlatans. But if there can be a good thief on a cross, tax collectors like Matthew, and Pharisees like Paul, we have to admit that categories can be deceiving in the gospels. If the magi were occult leaders, they were also reliable ones.

What makes them reliable is that they do not undertake their journey under their own volition and by their own powers. They are led: first by a star, and later by a dream. This willingness to be taken by the hand and guided along the way is a sign of deep humility and trust in A Higher Power. They clearly did not know the

God who compelled their journey or their worship. Yet like children, they fell in behind the leadership of the star and went.

Travel wasn't a leisurely adventure in those times. It was expensive, perilous, and decidedly uncomfortable. You didn't take to the roads unless there was no other way to conduct your business. But homage is one of those things you can't send by letter. It requires a personal act of submission, which the magi were prepared to offer to the unknown king. Pride was not an issue for these men. We are sure of that because they were even willing to ask for directions! When they got to Jerusalem, they immediately inquired in the streets for the whereabouts of the new king. That got Herod's attention. These 3 trusting souls found themselves making inquiry of the least likely man in Israel to join them in honoring a new king. Happily, they did not allow Herod's authority to rule over the inner imperative of the dream that directed them to go home by another way.

So we could ask ourselves: From whom are we most likely to take directions? Do worldly powers impress us enough to derail our path of faith? Does our culture prevent us from doing what we know to be true and just and decent and fair? Do we pledge allegiance only to our own authority, our own opinions, or our own will? Is there anything outside of ourselves that might compel us to fall on our knees and lower our eyes? Most of all, are we willing to take the journey of faith, an enterprise that requires us to surrender, change, and grow? I think here of those who are nostalgic for the Latin Mass and the pre-Vatican II church. Their refusal to surrender, change, and grow, has arrested their spiritual development. Are we willing to be led along a path we cannot predestine or control, toward a goal we only vaguely apprehend? That is the journey of faith – and these are hard questions. But this is what Epiphany demands of us. God manifests the divine presence before the world. But the only way to see it is to be led there like a child. (adapted from PREPARE THE WORD.COM, Jan 6, 2008, Alice Camille, p. 2-3)

Finally, one lens to look at what the Magi DID, which is also an invitation for us as to how to be led. And so a story from the arts. Many of you have seen the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's classic LES MISERABLES. At one point in the story, Hugo's hero, Jean Val Jean, goes off in search of a young man, Marius, who is in love with Jean Val Jean's adopted daughter. At this stage of his life, Jean Val Jean is already an old man, and the young man, Marius, constitutes a powerful threat to him because he will take his adopted daughter away from him and in that way rob him of the last joy in his life. Initially, his motivation in going off to search for the young Marius is not first and foremost to bless him. Rather, he wants to see who this young man is and form an opinion of him. So he goes off in search of him.

He finds Marius at the barricades with a group of idealistic, but naïve young revolutionaries. And he finds the boy asleep in a double sense: asleep physically and asleep to the fact that he is almost certain to die in the morning. Then in a very powerful scene, both artistically and morally, the old man, Jean Val Jean, sings a prayer of blessing over the young Marius: He begins with an invocation to God, {Greg} "God on high, hear my prayer," then, turning to the young sleeping boy, he says: "Look at this boy....he is young, he is afraid....tomorrow he will die." He finishes the song with a refrain repeated a number of times over within which he asks God to spare the young man's life and take his life instead: "Let him live, let me die – Let him live! Let me die!" ***** His logic is simple: young Marius should live precisely because he is young. He, Jean Val Jean, can die because he is old. The old should give up their lives for the young.

This is one of many lenses in which we can view this story of Epiphany. Matthew sets up a powerful archetypal contrast, blessing and curse, between the reaction of the wise men who bring their gifts and place them at the feet of the new king, and King Herod, who tries to kill Him. The wise men, on seeing the new king, place their gifts at his feet. What happens to them afterward? We have all kinds of apocryphal stories about

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their journey back home, but, while interesting, are not helpful because their slipping away into anonymity is part of their gift. We do not know what happens to them afterward, and that is integral to the story. They disappear because they can now disappear. They have placed their gifts at the feet of the young king, and like old Jean Val Jean after having blessed young Marius, they can now leave life safely in the hands of the young.

And Herod, how much to the contrary! The news that a new king has been born threatens him at his very core. The glory and light that will now shine upon the new king will no longer shine on him. So what is his reaction? Far from laying his resources at the feet of the new king, he sets out to kill him. Moreover, to ensure that his murderers find him, he kills all the male babies in the entire area. A lot of books could be written about this last line. Fish are not the only species who eat their young! But the real point here is the contrast between the wise men and Herod: wise men – and women -- see new life as promise and they bless it; Herod, who is not wise, sees new life as threat and he curses it.

To bless another person fully is to give away some of our own life so that another might be better equipped for their journey. And part of that is a dying; we must die so that the other might live. In that sense, a blessing is not just an affirmation, a simple exclamation of “You are a wonderful young person!” These affirmations are good and life giving but still lack something. To fully bless someone is to give up some life for that person, to die for him or her in some real way.

Good parents do that for their children. In all kinds of ways, they sacrifice their lives for their children. They die to self so that their children will live fully. Good teachers do that for their students, good mentors do that for their proteges, good pastors do that for their parishioners, good politicians do that for their countries, and all good elders do that for the young. They give away some of their own lives to resource the young. Blessing a young person when we are older is as simple as it is difficult: Do we want to bless a young person? Step back and let them shine.

This would be more natural for us to do if we were all flowers, as opposed to being people. We can be physically and sexually mature, able to procreate, long before we have the adult maturity required of a parent. Hence, we can procreate and create life without having to bless it. Flowers cannot do this; procreation is necessarily tied to their own death: they can give their seed away only by dying themselves. They bless their young by completely giving up their lives.

We bless others when we see them, delight in their energy rather than feel threatened by it, and give away some of our own life to help resource their lives. Sadly, the reverse is also true: we curse others when we demand that they see and admire us, when we demand that they speak well of us, and when we use their lives to build up our own. A gesture of blessing feeds others; a cursing gesture feeds off of them.

This wonderful, archetypal story of Epiphany tells us to be humble enough to follow a plan bigger than that of our own devising and our own wants, to give our gifts, bless those younger than ourselves, and then with lumps in our throats and smiles on our faces – go home by another way. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, SACRED FIRE, p. 227-231)