

Counselor's Corner: *The Dying Leaves of a Hundred Million Autumns* by Steve Palmer, M.A., L.P.C., Westminster Counseling Center

612.332.7743 ext. 220

spalmer@wpc-mpls.org

www.ewestminster.org/counseling.asp

The dying leaves of a hundred million autumns have built up the humus from which our crops spring...a hard, polished acorn falls to the ground and cracks open, but it sends one shoot down and another up, and later there is a tree...Life springs and grows where bearers of life do not clutch it to themselves, but hear the call to let it go in the interests of fuller life and action. The caterpillar consents to the cocoon, sensing its destiny. — Maria Boulding

When my great aunt died, I received a small book on the spiritual life from her things—the only tangible memory I have of a woman who was legendary in our family. Aunt Marie was a Benedictine nun who, with her fellow sisters, ran a military boarding school not far outside of Washington DC. The quiet, gentle soul I knew from our visits was regularly saluted by uniformed cadets as she strode the halls of the school with a yellow parakeet named Pretty Boy perched on the top of her habit. The quote above is from that book.

It seems fitting that out of an experience of death I should receive a book that stresses that “death and resurrection, always interpenetrating, mark Christian life and Christian prayer.” And this idea—so central to our self-understanding as Christians—has been on my mind a good deal lately. I’m sure it’s partly because we are beginning to see the dying leaves of this particular autumn. It’s also the medical concerns with our oldest daughter (now thankfully resolved) that make a father’s mind go in scary directions he’d rather avoid. It’s the emerging situation in Myanmar as Buddhist monks attempting to lead a peaceful change in life there are met with violence and death. It’s the wars and the rumors of wars all around us. It’s also the lives of my counseling clients where I consider “death and resurrection, always interpenetrating.”

Some time ago I had a conversation with a young man dealing with self-destructive behaviors he could not seem to stop engaging in. Despite his desire to live in life-giving ways, he found himself echoing Paul: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Romans 7:15). As we explored the dynamics involved, including his own self-criticalness and anger at what he felt was his lack of control, he began to see that his behaviors were in some ways actually a way to exercise control...that by engaging in them he could avoid some really painful thoughts and feelings that he simply didn’t know what to do with. We explored his need to let go, to be prepared to experience the (metaphorical) death involved in letting his negative thoughts and feelings come to the surface of his awareness. And we talked about the hope that this willingness to “die” might lead to new freedoms—from the compulsive behaviors and eventually from the underlying fears and sadness, even though the way forward did not feel clear yet.

In our best moments, whether or not faith is explicitly mentioned, I recognize the paschal possibilities (of letting-go-into-death-leading-to-resurrection) come forth as people learn to surrender in faith to the work at hand and the pain involved. It’s the pattern for all of our lives really, if we have the courage to let go in trust...The “humus” referred to in the quote from my great aunt’s book is the root of the word “humility.” If we can learn to be simply who we are, negative as well as positive, we can begin to see new life come forth.



Steve Palmer



WPC Children & Families Say Goodbye to Nikki

If you can find Nikki Goulet Jordan in this picture, you can also see how many people have been touched by her warmth and creative spirit. As choir director of our choristers, youth and high school choirs going on eight years, she helped us grow. Many parents and youth recalled how much she has brought to the health and liveliness of our music program. We are grateful for the gifts she shared with us and wish her many blessings in her life ahead.