

Counselor's Corner: Mountains and Valleys

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Popular religion and “pop” psychology have for some years been about “feeling good.” In many mega-church congregations true believers are told they can expect wealth, good fortune, and happiness to be their reward for faith. Smart consumers of mental health therapy are encouraged to find easy relief in pills that, according to ubiquitous TV commercials, bring sunshine, butterflies, love and meaning back into one’s life: eternal spring, eternal Easter, eternal feeling good.

These “pop” realities would have us believe that we can make our mountains of good feeling higher and higher and escape the insecurities of those stuck down in the valley. But then our ever growing mountain of high living and certainty about an ever better future suddenly erupts in volcanic proportions. Or we find ourselves in the valley of a shattered relationship or a painful loss, or in a deep place of depression and anxiety. What now?

There is wisdom and comfort in knowing that the mountain and the valley exist in the same landscape. Such comfort comes from the repeated act of showing up for the humble (but exultant) activity of worshipping God. There is comfort and wisdom in knowing that height and depth are one reality. Such wisdom is acquired by those who have chosen, when needed, to do the hard (but satisfying) work of relationship repair and personal growth. Neither the mountain nor the valley is our permanent home. In intimacy with both we find life.

Life and Death

Easter and Good Friday

Joy and Pain

Summer and Winter

Sunshine and Rain

Security and Uncertainty

Stability and Change

Love and Loss are in constant flux,

Coming and Going,

Succeeding one another in the living breath that sustains and inspires us.

Easter and weddings seem to me to be religious and psychological twins. For all their wonder and beauty, hope and promise, if they are all you choose to show up for, or to invest in, you have to put a lot of energy into

denying what inevitably comes later. The nurture of emotional self awareness and making worship a vital part of faith are antidotes to that denial.

The experience of worship and the experience of counseling have a lovely and telling symmetry. Both activities begin with feeling the need to be there, choosing to make the effort to go. On arrival there is a context of welcome, of finding your seat, of opening yourself to what may happen. You have the feeling of being in a sacred or special place, protected from, yet somehow connected to life outside the space. Early on there is a time to confess what brings you, followed by an assurance that you are safe and heard. The story/scripture of where you have been, what has gone before you, what has been seen and heard and done is retold. The conversation/ sermon attempts to understand once again, in a new way, in an eternal yet ever changing way, what it all means. Then comes a personal/prayerful plunge into the depths of who you are, where you are going, how you can do this. There is a time of giving back/offering gratitude for what for what you have received, and then a parting expression/hymn of hope, joy, resolve, and reaching out. Finally, you are sent forth, knowing you can and will return.

Come, to find yourself in this symmetry is to find God. Wendell Berry says it best:

By expenditure of hope

Intelligence, and work,

You think you have it fixed.

It is unfixed by rule.

Within the darkness, all

Is being changed, and you

Also will be changed.

...and yet,

And yet the light breaks in,

Heaven seizing its moments

That are at once its own

and yours...

My thanks to Anna Kendig for sharing this poem with me.