

## **Edward Hays - Whose voice is it?**

We have within us a lifeguard far more effective than any you might find at the beach or pool, and its name is conscience. Our silent inner voice of the spirit is responsible for guarding our precious gift of life. That voice is formed by many influences, including our parents, society and religious beliefs. But for the voice of our inner lifeguard to ring true, it must come from deep within. And that's where the practice of daily meditation or the prayer of centering comes in. As we find the centre of our being, we begin to see clearly those things that are harmful to the quality of life. Such an insight comes from being close to the divine ground of our being. The kingdom of God is within and when we approach the very core of our being, we can experience not only the presence of God but the wisdom of God as well.

But the voice of the lifeguard that dwells in the shrine of the heart needs to be distinguished from the voice of our inner critic. The inner critic is not the same as our conscience. Instead of originating from our centre, it is merely a combination of parental figures and social pressures. The inner critic judges our behaviour as good or bad not to guard life but rather to protect reputation. Such a voice warns, "Don't wear that dress, it looks too young for you. If you don't go to the gathering, people will talk. If you fail once more, no one will like you," the intent of the lifeguard, on the other hand, is not to box in behaviour according to what is "proper," but rather to keep us free to respond to Life. It warns us that when our deeds begin to close us off from the possibility of loving God or others with a full heart. The inner critic has its office in our head while the lifeguard resides in our heart. We should attempt to tune out the inner critic while attending to the lifeguard. For the lifeguard is so finely tuned to the Spirit that it is alert to those things that outwardly appear as good but inwardly are only destructive to a true enjoyment of life.

When we are attuned to our inner lifeguard, we can swim safely and freely in the waters of life. Perhaps the best way to keep one ear open and sensitive to the inner lifeguard is through regular prayer. If we pray daily, we can truly play in the world. It is not "saying prayers" but the quiet prayer of stillness that provides this freedom to playfully enjoy life. And this freedom comes because in stillness we can let go of fear. As St. John told us, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn. 5:18). By daily spending time with Perfect Love, we will find that we are able to approach life with trust rather than out of fear. And trusting in the ever-vigilant watchfulness of our inner lifeguard, we once again become children of our Heavenly Father.      *(From A Pilgrim's Almanac)*



# The last word

FR RONALD ROLHEISER

## Despair as weakness rather than sin

Classically, both in the world and in our churches, we have seen despair as the ultimate unforgivable sin. The simple notion was that neither God, nor anyone else, could save you if you simply gave up, despaired, made yourself impossible to reach. Most often in the popular mind this was applied to suicide. To die by your own hand was seen as despair, as putting yourself outside God's mercy.

But understanding despair in this way is wrong and misguided, however sincere our intent. What is despair? How might it be understood?

The common dictionary definition invariably runs something like this: despair means to no longer have any hope or belief that a situation will improve or change. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which sees despair as a sin against the First Commandment, defines it this way: "By despair, man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it or for the forgiveness of his sins. Despair is contrary to God's goodness, to his justice – for the Lord is faithful to his promises – and to his mercy."

But there's something absolutely critical to be distinguished here: there are two reasons why someone might cease to hope for personal salvation from God and give up hope in having his or her sins forgiven. It can be that the person doubts the goodness and mercy of God, or – and I believe that this is normally the case – the person is too crushed, too weak, too broken inside, to believe that he or she is lovable and redeemable.

But being so beaten and crushed in spirit so as to believe that nothing further can exist for you except pain and darkness is normally not an indication of sin, but more a symptom of having been fatally victimised by circumstance, of having to undergo, in the poignant words of Fantine in *Les Misérables*, storms that you cannot weather.

And before positing such a person outside of God's mercy, we need to ask ourselves: what kind of God would condemn a person who is so crushed by the circumstances of her life so as to be unable to believe that she is loveable? What kind of God would condemn someone for her brokenness? Such a God would certainly be utterly foreign to Jesus, who incarnated and revealed God's love as being preferential for the weak, the crushed, the broken-hearted, for those

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*Nobody goes to hell out of weakness, out of a broken heart or a crushed spirit*



despairing of mercy. To believe and teach that God withholds mercy from those who are most broken in spirit betrays a profound misunderstanding of the nature and mercy of God, who sends Jesus into the world not for the healthy but for those who need a physician.

Likewise, this also betrays a profound misunderstanding of human nature and the human heart. Why would a person deem herself so unlovable that she voluntarily and hopelessly excludes herself from the circle of life? It can only be because of a deep, profound wound to the soul (which, no doubt, is not self-inflicted). Obviously, unless it is a case of some clinical illness, this person has been deeply wounded and has never had an experience of unconditional love or indeed of faithful human love.

We are facile and naïve when, because we ourselves have been undeservedly loved, we cannot understand how someone else can be so crushed and broken so as to believe himself or herself to be, in essence, unlovable. To paraphrase a painful question in the song *The Rose*: are love, and heaven, really only for the lucky and strong? Our common understanding of despair, secular and religious, would seem to think so.

But nobody goes to hell out of weakness, out of a broken heart, out of a crushed spirit, out of the misfortune and unfairness of never having had the sense of being truly loved. Hell is for the strong, for those with a spirit so arrogant that it cannot be crushed or broken, and so is unable to surrender. Hell is never a bitter surprise waiting for a happy person. Nor is it the sad fulfilment of the expectation of someone who is too broken to believe that he or she is worthy to be part of the circle of life.

We owe it to God to be more empathic. We also owe this to those who are broken of heart and of spirit. Moreover, we have a Christian doctrine, expressed inside our very Creed, that challenges us to know better: "He descended into hell." What Jesus revealed in his life and death is that there's no place inside tragedy, brokenness, sadness or resignation, into which God cannot and will not descend and breathe out peace.

God is all-understanding. That's why we're assured that "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isaiah 42:3). You can bet your life on that. You can bet your faith on that. And you can also live in deeper empathy and deeper consolation because of that.

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