The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Sometimes, when people tell you their story, you hope what they are saying is true. But even if it isn?t you?re still grateful for their sharing it and for the fertility of their imagination. In fact though, after some stimulating moments of doubt, I believed him.

His father was born to a preacher in Oklahoma in the time before the dollar-driven era of today?s mega churches where you go on a Sunday, as to a mall, to get a Christian hairdo and visit a Christian tax advisor. In his father?s day a congregation of a thousand was impressive. At the age of seven his father had a vision ? all the Hebrew prophets had them too, with quite specific messages. This one told him he was to be a preacher and, after his family and church agreed on the authenticity of the call, the boy took up the mantle. He carried it with integrity for the rest of his life showing no sign of burnout, psychological duplicity or anything other than a genuine love of the Word and a passion for communicating it to ordinary folk.

His son, telling me his story on a meditation retreat, had a rougher ride. He too entered the evangelical ministry although unlike his father he had felt no life changing personal call. He nosedived during his bible studies at a Catholic university ? where he got a girl pregnant and began a slide into sex addiction, drugs and alcoholism. He plummeted away from his church and culture of faith. All he salvaged was a talent for making money. From time to time he would meet his father in hotels or airports. His father never condemned or rebuked him but always embraced him warmly ? a prodigal?s son welcome before repentance. But his father never failed to remind him that God still had a plan for him.

He gravitated to Russia during the wildest period of economic privatisation after Communism and dived into the dangerous jungle of mafia and big bank competition. He had nothing to lose and gambled recklessly. He flourished, with houses around the world, a succession of four wives and a lifestyle that fed his multiple addictions. The turning point came during a night?s romp in the most expensive brothel in Europe. On the muzak channel came ?Amazing Grace? and he stopped what he was doing to listen to it and let the melody slowly lead him back to his lost youth and the exiled world of his faith.

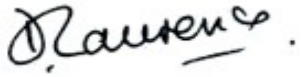
The rest of the conversion took a couple of years but eventually he walked away from his business interests and other addictions. He returned to an evangelical ministry. However, for the first time knew what he was preaching about. ?I had always been good at speaking about God and the love of Christ, but had no experience of what I was talking about.? His addiction now is simply to communicating the good news of Jesus and his flagship project is to

distribute a book on the life of Jesus, a simplified synthesis of the gospels, to every child on the planet. So far he has delivered 500 million copes. He knows that most will get trashed but one in a hundred, he hopes, will get read. He speaks business jargon and has the latest research at his fingertips. A team of translators renders his books and apps into twenty languages because with them you can reach eighty percent of the inhabitants of the earth. Like a good evangelist he does his job to the best of his ability and lets the Spirit handle the outcome.

More recently, in the past two years, he had discovered the contemplative dimension of the gospel and has begun to meditate. He has no doubt that being reconnected to this part of our prayer life is urgently necessary for the Pentecostal churches and he was devising smart ways to bring it to them, among which talking about the monastic tradition seemed not to be the most prominent.

Not long after hearing his story I heard another that I had no trouble believing. I was discussing the Evangelism program of a diocese. For budget and internal reasons Evangelism had been subsumed under Education but it lacked a chairman at present as the diocese was still waiting for a new bishop. So Evangelism was somewhat ?in abeyance? for a while. Their fervent prayer is that the new bishop will reinstate Evangelism to its own proper field.

Maybe they should also pray for a full-blown crisis of faith such as the prodigal evangelist underwent. Crisis can allow the Spirit of Pentecost to rush into the collapsing ruins, hover over the chaos to bring about a new creation and incidentally clarify the priorities of life.



Laurence Freeman OSB

The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program ? ?Meditatio? (www.wccmmeditatio.org)

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