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Burnout: La Chispa, Reigniting the Gift

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The first line of the prayer attributed to St. Francis of the birds and creatures is ?Lord, Make me an instrument of Thy Peace.? I stop right at the phrase, ?Make me an instrument...? and I wonder, what if, instead of the word ?instrument? meaning appliance or tool, it meant literally, Make me into the musical instrument of your choosing?

What if that phrase meant, Make me into an instrument so fine and so fair that I could be practiced and shaped and played into a more beautiful sound on earth the longer I lived?

And what sort of instrument might each of us be? A silver flute? A grenadilla clarinet? A spruce and willow Stradivarius? A dark toned viola? Two hundred-twenty strings inside a case made of rosewood?

What if we were nothing grand, but simply ?good enough? ...maybe only a little drum made from a wooden cigar box but carrying a heartbeat somehow greater than our own?

And how would we care for whatever holy sound we?d been granted? How would we tend to the instrument so well that a Master, just suddenly stopping by, could pick us up and play us... and the sound issuing forth would not be muffled, not be muddied or mad, but be odd and ancient, clear in every attack: largo, andante, allegro, bravura....

Burnout occurs for those who thrive on creative life, whether that of the reflective mind; inspired art; the deep family; one?s most rooted work; just getting through personal challenge; pouring hope and action into the world, or that of spirit pure... or all of these

--when a work, a person, or group we care about does not seem to gain, nor blossom, nor respond to our kindest and wisest touches, no matter how long a time or how fittingly we attend...

--when we give all we?ve got, nourishing and supporting with our own brand of infinite tenderness and strength... but are offered little or no support or meaningful sense of relationship, in return...

--when we are allowed no meaningful collegiality with occasional warm exchanges of sincere appreciation and admiration for our usual work, for our helpfulness, for our innovations, or for complex tasks well done...

--when we are already overburdened and yet continually charged to do more with less; asked to endlessly ?fill in? or work more, do more, but without additional assistance...

-- when whatever compensation or acknowledgment or reward is promised if we will just keep pulling a very heavy dray, but despite our loyal dedication, promises to us are repeatedly broken...

-- when we give everything we have, and we are as though invisible, not seen; when we are not listened to, not valued, merely seen as a number, or a ?troop? or a ?worker? only, instead of seen as a human being rich in worthy gifts...

--when we are treated with chronic scorn, dismissal of our ideas, disdain, impatience, ridicule, constant scoldings as though we are bad children, or treated with sly put-downs masking disapproval and disgust...

--when the reciprocal circuitry between ?the I and the Thou? is broken, not complementary, then too, the beautiful musical instrument we carry, more and more will not play well in such deleterious-to-the-soul settings.

Foremost, in the life of the soul, is the care of the instrument, so that we can turn to tend to work and others with far more verve, creativity, and interest, far more daily ?jing.?

Vibrant energy does not leave the psyche during burnout. Strong and vital energy for our works and our loves in life, as well as our challenges-- both exciting ones and horrible ones?burns low during burnout... for lack of proper tinder, for lack of proper wind, from errors of judgment, errors of commission and omission, for lack of rest, lack of reaching out for strong enough support, from self-isolation, from forgetting one?s beautiful instrument and instead only expecting the ?same ol,? same ?ol bloo-blah.?

Thus energy normally spent on motivation, new idea-making, taking initiative, moving forward, creating anew, bringing oneself together, begins to sometimes burn depressively low. But eventually this lowered energy becomes *la chispa*. And that is good. I choose this metaphor *la chispa*, because in Spanish, this is the tiny ember at the end of a piece of burnt wood. *La chispa*, life force energy which, even when it cannot be fully discerned, remains alive, no matter what. It is the filament and the energic core of the soul, both.

The soul and psyche, the heart and spirit remain alive during burnout too, but they also burn very low. If the ill fit of work, relationship or other continues, these aspects of our lives can also become *las chispas*.

Yet, no matter how demoted nor by whom, the breath of the Holy Ghost on *la chispa*, fans the fire again... creates blasts of new energy, new and different ways to play the instrument deeply and well. All that seemed so deadened and without lilt, comes back to life again. If one seeks it assiduously. If one allows it unequivocally. If one removes the detritus and makes the pathway clear. Thus one frees the instruments clear and true purposes again.

This process is not sanctioned or certified or pedigreed by the outer culture. It is certified only by the soul and the Source without source that breathes through the soul.

Our lives, our instruments, are not meant to be treated as though they are merely slabs of wood to be cut down, carved up, battered about, misplaced, left out in the rain. Our end game is not to accept, nor make, nor concede to any external force that moves against us so that the gifted instrument will eventually no longer play at all.

Have you ever noticed how carefully musicians cherish that which they make music with? How they protect and care for the guitara or cimbalóm or harp... so that this central heart of their life force will last and last? We can imagine ways to care for our own gifts by watching how musicians care for their instruments. It may not be the exact gestures a musician uses that give us clues about caring for our spirit?s gifts and callings, but rather the musician?s process of so careful and daily attention to keeping the instrument strong.

The clarinetist makes sure the reed is whole and in one piece and thereby will speak its tones clearly. If the reed has dried out or split, or ?molded,? that part will be replaced so the flute will play true.

The flute player will tenderly dry the inside of the silver flute after each playing, lest any part of it corrode from the moisture of the breath. If you?ve ever seen flautists wipe down their flutes after playing in order to remove their fingerprints, lest those be too acidic and irritate the precious sterling silver skin...you might swear the flautists are stroking a lover, so often tender is their touch.

And even though the cymbals are made of stocky stuff, they are lathed at their edges to fit together with the precision of an ocean shell, and they cannot be battered about without their resonance suffering. The cymbalist is not reckless in crashing those spheres together, but measured, aiming, and standing in the torrent of the ?flow? from the soul, the cymbalist knows how to hit the crescendos without injuring the instrument.

The stringed instruments, the violin, the bass, the viola, and the venerable trees they have been borrowed from... do the musicians place them in environs and ecologies that are bound to warp and distort them so the voices of the heart of the living wood cannot come through?

No, the stringed instruments are given every consideration. While being used, the strings can practically smoke from the pressures exerted on them, and the soul strength used to play them is profound. But after, there is beautiful little bed made of acra violet, or scarlet, or cobalt blue padded velvet, made just to the instrument?s shape and liking. And this is always waiting for them to rest in after working so very hard.

Why would our care of the soul gifts we?ve been given on earth, be any less than the care musicians give their beloved instruments? Attention to the music we choose for our instruments to play and the environs to play it in, the care of the whole, is not an issue of me-ism. It is an issue of preservation, to the best of our ability, of the one thing we are charged not to sell, imprison, nor harm... our own souls.

Burnout can occur from toxic proximity to those who want to redirect or misdirect the soul against the soul?s own promises to God. But also, as often, burnout can come from corrosive neglect of the soul, with oneself as the culprit.

--Some good people forget, feel unable, prevent themselves from feeding their own life force by arranging to place themselves in ill environs and agreeing to merely survive there, rather than walking overland with their precious instruments in their bindle bag on a stick over their shoulders if need be, to root themselves in hospitable terrain where they can truly thrive.

--Some are bewildered about the actual cause of deterioration of energy regarding their own gifts. Sometimes we become stuck in burnout because we?re a little like the old song ?Poor Johnny one note, he sang but one note...? meaning he was stuck singing one note, but he sang the only note he knew for all he was worth. He never realized however, that changing just one tone slightly, and then slightly again, would eventually change the entire key. If he?d persisted, eventually he would have many notes to create most any song he wanted.

Thus, some of us may think we are burnt out solely because this and that other thing or person or place blocks us, prevents us from doing anything other than what we now feel trapped in doing ad infinitum and ad nauseum. We sometimes misplace the fact that small motions outwardly can create large ripples of change. A symphony isn?t played all at once, going from page one to page 15 all in a single leap. A symphony is played one note after another. Reorienting in a more meaningful and rich environment, attitude, or paradigm can come about by changing one thing at a time, then another, then two or more. Then, as in music, rest. Then, as in music, begin again. Then, as in music, the passage opens again.

--Some omit consciously making, insisting upon setting aside the time daily to do the prophylactic practice that I call the Five R?s: Review, repair, restore, rest and retune the instrument; literally resetting one?s own

quiet, sometimes brilliant, occasionally wild, harmonies to ?true to soul,? instead of tuned to ?trying to be a good boy,? or ?trying not to make too much noise,? or ?trying to please the 6.5 billion, that is, everyone on the planet.?

One can most be assured especially that if one is attempting to please everyone on all seven continents including the two that have not been discovered yet... that one is not pleasing God. I am not a theologian, but it seems to me that God doesn?t ask us to be burnt out in order to show how much we care or love or have value. God only asks for *fidelitas* in all things... a word some are quick to point out means ?*faithfulness*,? ...but sometimes forgetting to point out that *fidelitas* also means *to trust*... the voices of the soul and God over the voices and assertions of mere humans.

However, Catholics and those who come from other religions and disciplines which value the sweetness of introverted practices, have a huge advantage in preventing burnout ... and in repairing burnout once it seems as though it has taken up residence like a big black *sopillote*, buzzard, tearing at your heart....

Spiritual and religious advantage, the wind of healing spirit, the raising of a vortex of renewed energy, all come barreling through via the knowledge and skills associated with the conscious, not haphazard, but scheduled practice of daily self-examination -- another way of saying intense attention to the condition of the bones of the beloved instrument.

We, you and I and others of the old believers, were born into and come from the ancient contemplative traditions which are geared to accomplish this exactly: restoration and integrity of the instrument.

I know that ?examination of conscience? may have, as a contemplative practice, fallen somewhat by the wayside perhaps. But, there is no finer repair shop for whichever instruments we have been granted. I personally call it ?examination of the creative fire,? which includes inquiry about conscience, consciousness, as well as creative life force.

Some of my contemplative questions to myself are these: They might be about a specific situation, or an entire inventory. I might focus on just one for days until I feel I know, gut know, not just mind-know. I start with a prayer to *La Nuestra Señora* for help to guide me. Then a review in contemplation ...

Who do I belong to? What have I promised to God in service on earth before I was ever born? How am I doing in fulfilling those promises at this moment? in my future plans? What needs deletion? What needs to be added?

What and who needs mending, and how? What needs resisting, and how? What needs resting, and in what way? What needs strengthening, and how shall that occur? What needs my daring now? What and who needs my comfort?

Then, prayers asking for mediation and mercy. Most often I ask just to be shown the way, many times asking please that it be posted before me painted red, white and blue and with sparkles if possible, so I cannot fail to see and recognize it.

Lastly, these words to pray... Please help me *care* for whatever holy sound I?ve been granted. Teach me today, how I can tend to this instrument so well that The Master, just suddenly stopping by, could pick me up and play me... and the sound issuing forth would not be muffled, muddied or mad, but odd and ancient, clear in every attack...

Please help me to live *largo*, with as much dignity as I can manage for myself and all others... and *andante*, please help me proceed forward with determination and moderation in myself and for others, all... and *allegro*,

Please help me carry humor and as much gaiety as a chronically grouchy person can ever bring forth... and *bravura*, please grant me that I might be able to sometimes, including accidentally, manage to be bold, to be brave, to even in some small part, some of the time, be brilliant.

This is my prayer for all human beings.

And, so may it be for you, dear souls.

And so may it be for me.

And so may it be for all of us.

Truly.

Amen.

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