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Elections 08: Uses and misuses of bitterness

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés | Oct. 24, 2008 El Rio Debajo del Rio

Loss of "The Bounty"

You're wearing your scars inside-out, man,

Hardened Scars on the outside

Softest heart buried far down in the bilges....

That's backward, man; such a captain

disheartens, insults, barks orders far too harsh,

claims he's being lenient

when he orders sailors to be whipped in public,

instead of merely ordering they be hung til dead

Without gratitude for the entire crew of souls

Without respect for these waters....

Roiling and soiling all clear passages,

such captains rage

when time and again they are met with Mutiny ...

even as all the while they have told themselves

they were truly serving Majesty...

First, a story from our family: How The Sweetwater River Turned Bitter...

> Once upon a time there were people who lived in peace along each side of a long, sweetwater river. But one day, in a dispute--instead of using counsel-- a man from the north side of the river, killed a man from the south side of the river.
>
> So great was the certainty of the righteousness of this act by those neighbors on the north side of the river, and so great was the certainty of need for revenge by those on the south side of the river, that though the river, not at all wanting to take sides, continued to flow free and clear whilst the people overland fought and killed and maimed... all convinced of their purity of thinking.
>
> Yet, over time, as the people went down to the sweetwater river to bathe, to wash their battle garments and weaponry... slowly the river, from the residue of anger and bile and dispassion on the people's hands and tools... began to burn with infusions of bitterness.
>
> This turned the sweet fragrance of the water into an odor that was sulphurous. Next, fog formed on the waters; the fumes from it began to rise up over the river, and then that cloud of gasses caught fire...
>
> Finally the river, drugged with bile and on fire, slowed, could no longer throw itself into the air with joy when it met river rock, could not eddy and talk at the banks' edges, was no longer entered by lovers or children or old people or other wise ones for fear of sudden sickness, ... and like the people, the sweetwater river was polluted completely...
>
> and the poor unintending people on both sides of the river were left to drink of the bitterness caused by their own bitterness....

How could such a thing happen? Water, source of Life, worthy of all protections... but instead, its guardians polluted the entire sweetwater river out of personal animus.

Our Culture's Bitter River?

Are we living now on a bitter river too? I regretfully think we might. In our times, the once sweetwater river turned bitter, is not only found in some pained individuals who use bitterness as armor-- and heaven knows there is plenty in our time to be pained ? and armored-- about. But too, the once pure soul river that ran through many of our institutions and methodologies, turned seemingly bitter as well.

Who, for example, has not noted the excessive and ongoing screed in the current Electoral, not Season, but rather, Age? (Would anyone like to join me in begging that we please be shipped to another planet if ever again we have such a long Electoral Ice Age, I mean, election process... one which causes most of us to have some contagion from the rampant 'election psychosis' going around, not to mention whiplash and loss of a several darn good IQ points from hearing all the bone-cracking volleys to opposing vessels?)

What kind of bitterness and weaponry is being washed in our once sweetwater, such willingness to bash and bellow that makes "divisiveness" too pale a word for much of what has become national political shiv war on hundreds of thousands of fronts

....complete with fog of battle, yellow journalism, rumor paraded through the streets on decorated biers, veiled and unveiled hatreds put to song

... and that despicable euphemism, 'friendly fire,' has become fashionable... wherein some people of every party

acid-bomb anyone they perceive as 'not right,' 'not us.'

Threats, defacements, disbelief of others' or one's own good traits, attacks on how a person looks, dresses, speaks, unfairly editing what others have said or done and ever finding them deficit then, holding humans to standards of purity that are so arch they surely violate the first Commandment: "Thou shalt put no other gods before me."

...not to mention the Second and Ninth Commandments: Thou shalt not make nor worship idols... and Thou shalt not present false evidence.

Yet, a fast turn of the radio dial, flicking through various cable and network news, a clicking across many political blogs sites reveals a huge pollution of the river of civil dialog, meaning a discourse and information flow where soul's love and clarity was supposed to preside, but now, instead, we are flooded by speeches of rank and bitter scorn.

When the soul has gone missing, 'discussions' too easily turn into rants... insultology overtakes factual knowledge, bitterness longs more and more toward vulgarity.

And our sweetwater river begins to die. As do we die to La Voz, the Voice Greater.

How does one cure a bitter river? What can we do to reverse this pollution of the cultural river that our souls depend on?

There's a saying that if you wish the world to change, to cleanse... then begin with yourself, so that we are not carrying our own disappointments into the stream of life that is meant to nourish, not to dishearten, us all.

Perhaps what works for cleaning up an actual river would help us to begin to clear the cultural river we all live on together too.

Long ago, I helped clean two rivers, the south bend of the Saint Joseph River up near the Great Lakes, and the Platte River in the plains before the Rockies. First act was to determine how pollution comes into being. Just for starters, I'd offer these possibilities to be weighed by the heart.

--Brother Bitterness and Sister Cynicism, often take root in what might be called, 'the disappointed idealist,' ... one who has never quite yet found a "good enough" mend for one's own precious but broken heart.

--This broken-heartedness occurs most often through no fault of one's own-- other than being born with a tender naivetéthat leaves one unable to see the underlying foibles of human nature accurately. To have one's best spiritual vision of heaven on earth burnt, cut, severed... brings on a natural state of temporary bitterness.

--But, bitterness and cynicism are not meant to become states of being, nor philosophies of life, nor vendettas for avenging oneself, a principle, or an idea. They are supposed to be days' long reason for contemplation about how to mend and create anew, rather than decades of being sealed in the grave with one's dashed ideals.

--Bitterness and cynicism are signals from the psyche to the soul, signals of pain and loss... signals which convey that something is awry and now needs the soul's vision, healing, and love fully attendant.

Which brings us to another step in the actual cleansing of a badly polluted river... for sometimes though the understanding of causation is present, the soul cannot hear its summons, or else the call is diverted by ego's focus on anger and hurt only.

The spirit has many good responses to this dilemma. For example, in one form of Latino curanderismo, a healing ritual for the spiritually ill is made upon diagnosis of bilis or la amargura, both meaning bitter, one in particular, pertaining to an overage of bile.

Bilis is understood as a person being lacking in the spiritual practice of cleansing mind/ body, spirit, of disappointment and disillusionment properly and regularly....

Without a dedicated practice, living in a world that encourages and in fact flogs us to become hyper-harried... and addicted to perfection.... then bilious thoughts back up, instead of being carried away as waste material, instead of being cleansed... and thus bilis y amargura begin to poison a person's thoughts, fealties, hopes, relationships, creativity, confidence, cultural discourse. Just like the bitter river.

When these conditions are registered, then the work begins.

I know, I know: I sometimes say it to myself: What do you mean I have to do something, I'm tired of doing things. Do you know how many 'doing things' I've done that have come to exactly nothing in my lifetime? Or else my 'doing things' added to others' 'doing things' actually resulted in a great something... and we all were supernaturally glad until, as the years went on, the great something fell apart, declined in grace and meaning and became graceless and just plain mean. Again.

Yet I'd lend you my grandmother's thought ... that every truly decent and righteous right a human deserves will, with struggle, be granted... but then will have to be fought for all over again every two generations forward.

And so, we proceed, tired or not, complaining or not, whining or not, hopefully with some grace to cleanse the river: Here's the short list that I know that works; read it as metaphor, apply it pragmatically:

- Remove all seeable objects, philosophies, disappointments that degrade; find ways to dispose of them in ways that in some way help but do no harm.
- Pluck out thoughts ideas and acts which leach their toxins into the water
- Reveal the hidden polluting sources that pour into the river over land, and especially, from underground; deal with them and divert them
- Cease adding effluvia, castoffs, renderings, sewage from things that manufacture objects, ideas, endeavors of little worth
- Help objects, notions, ideas that are needed be construed and fashioned in ways that are safer for the river
- Dredge the algae overgrowth out, the overly acidic and bitter
- Let nothing down into the water that would burn the skin of a baby, that is, the human spirit
- Whatever vessel you lay into the water must be clean so it does not spread harm, invasive seed, or unsweeten the waters.
- Then, let the water laugh again, throw itself up into the air in joy, exuding rainbows
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Teach those upstream and downstream to do these same practices.

It is not by accident that the ancients who inked the holy words knew about how to cleanse bitter rivers also. The Word gives clear antidotes about how to make the waters sweet again: Here, from the very first hymn, called Psalm 1, I place in modern day English for you:

Creator takes our hands and whirls us around in a dance

- when we do not follow the advice of the 'endless-scores-to-settle' people,
- --when we don't walk hand in hand with people or ideas that erase Creator's sweetness,
- when we refuse to sit on the scoffer's throne, vying to become King Scorn or Queen Cynic.... for all these narrow-minded ways are bitter-makers, soul-stealers, all.
- ...tWe are, after all, dependent on the sweetwater, like the flowering tree planted by streams of water... it is nourished by the water underground, and thereby yields sweetest fruit... and it does not wither, not its leaves, not its trunk, not its beautiful natural crown.

So may it be for all of us, not only now in this time of tempests and tensions, but ever and always. Let us each, in some way that means something to us, care for the sweetwater river in daily practice, ever. For Sweetness. For Soul. For Succor. For Sanity. For One Another, both Upstream and Downstream.

God bless us all.

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"Loss of "The Bounty,"" poem is based on three mutinies and rebellions provoked by the harsh Captain Bligh of HM Bounty sailing ship fame. He was a man who, despite the murder and death surrounding his harsh way with others, had a knack for continuous promotion in the foreign service. But, in the end, he is still best remembered in fable as the bitter man who had the gift of thought, but chose instead to become a cruel man by day, a sycophant day and night.

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