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Somersaults and tomfoolery

Rich Heffern | Dec. 30, 2009

One of my favorite wise women, Brenda Ueland, once counseled parents exhausted by their energetic children, fed up with endless evening exhortations to get their overly hyper children to bed, thusly:

> "You yourself should be so vigorous, so healthy, in the pink of condition, so inexhaustible, rambunctious, jolly, full of deviltry and frolic, of stories, of jokes and hilarity, of backward somersaults and tomfoolery, that your children at last, after hours of violent exercise, worn down by laughter and intellectual excitement, with pale, neurasthenic frowns on their foreheads, cry 'Pleee...aase, Mama, go to bed?' "

Hildegard of Bingen, 12th century mystic, counseled her spiritual directees to be "juicy people," folks who are so filled with wonder and curiosity, with lusty appetites and high spirits, that they embrace life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness with a burly, grinning bear hug. To be juicy is to be: a fearlessly joyous optimist, a troublemaker tirelessly afflicting the too comfortable, a passionate lover of good talk and tasty food, an anonymous prophet hovering over the cosmological riddle, a frequent violator of the ordinance against indecent exposure of the heart, and a guerilla in the insurrection against dream molesters everywhere.

Mostly, juicy folk are starry-eyed passengers on that wide boulevard the creation spirituality tradition calls the Via Positiva. A deep well for our spirituality, this tradition tells us, is to be found in all the good things in life. In awe, delight, making friend with beauty, falling in love, being fascinated by the world's wonders, we sustain ourselves and fill our lives with adventure. Juicy people act as if they had just read a headline that shouts, "Scientists find universe is awash in tiny diamonds!"

The juiciest people I've known stand as my heroes and heroines. I'm enlarged by knowing them.

I once knew an elderly couple, owners of a sheep ranch outside Petaluma, California, who had spent their honeymoon in the 1940s flying an open-cockpit Steerman biplane down California's central valley, across the Sierra foothills and the arid Mojave, all the way to the tip of Baja California where they angled for swordfish. They navigated by means of gas station roadmaps and when dark came, landed in pastures and slept covered with a wool blanket on the ground cooking dinner on the engine coils of the airplane.

A friend once quit his job, rented a small office in a city skyscraper, furnished it with a desk and typewriter and spent six months writing a quirkly novel about elves in an imaginary land he conjured out of his imagination.

Another juicy friend, passionate about archeology, hitchhiked around the Middle East in the 1980s. Once I got a postcard from her with an Iranian stamp and a photo of the ruins of Persepolis, the city Alexander the Great built during his Persian conquest. She had slept in a moonlit cave near the ruins. Other postcards came from Lascaux in France and from the Valley of Kings in Egypt.

Courage and faithfulness to their own inner lights and passions seem to be the virtues the juicy have most in common. Juicy ones take risks. They willingly endure tensions and ambiguities, even big-time anxiety if need be. They carefully assay, then plunge. They don't treat intimacy like a live hand grenade. They trust the

wondrous universe is not particularly out to get them, that somehow they will emerge from any ruckus ruffled, scraped up, mangled maybe, but ever clear-eyed, whole. They know the sacred is squarely smack dab in the ordinary and that to pray is to open yourself to the sky, to earth, to the sun and moon, to the one whole voice that is within you.

And we'll know we've arrived at that human, holy state of juiceiness when we hear our kids entreating us to pleee....ase go to bed.

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