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Embarrassment is a doorway to grace

Michael Leach | Sep. 11, 2012 Soul Seeing

"All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." -- Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being

Many years ago the painful truth that I was more interested in being "a nice guy," a people pleaser rather than the kind individual I thought I was, came to my attention and was killing me. I didn't want to face it. I didn't want anyone to know it. I was at a crossroad and could either stay asleep or awake from a bad dream.

I was with my wife, Vickie, sitting in our car in front of Baskin Robbins. I had to tell her. My thoughts poured out like soft-serve ice cream. I was embarrassed. Though I knew better, I feared she would think less of me. Me, a phony? What could be worse?

"I know," she said. "It's all right."

"I've spent my whole life trying to get people to like me," I confessed.

"I know," she said. "It was the only way you knew to get through life. It's all right."

I talked, and Vickie listened. Her few words were the right words. The pressure started to release like someone else's bad breath coming out of a punctured balloon. "I've really gotten good at it, haven't I?" I said.

"Nobody does it better!"

We both laughed. And my laughter turned to tears. The kind that heals.

The courage to be embarrassed is a doorway to grace.

And it only hurts for a moment.

"Sweetheart," she assured me, "you are the kindest man I've ever known. Nobody's perfect."

I knew then, in front of Baskin Robbins, what Julian of Norwich knew eight centuries ago when she thought she was facing death: "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

Peter must have had a day like that when he jumped off the boat to walk on water like Jesus did, only to sink like a crosier. How embarrassing to realize you're a fool. How healing to be told, "Peter, upon your imperfect character I will build my church!"

It takes the grace of embarrassment to face our foolishness and then accept the assurance that despite our lack of understanding, in Jesus' eyes we are perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Dr. Thomas Hora, a psychiatrist and spiritual teacher, used to say that we would rather confess to murder than to being ignorant. Admitting that we don't know something, especially a thought that hides in our hearts, is too embarrassing. But he reminded his students, "The heat of embarrassment is the consuming fire of 'hell' in which the ego is annihilated." A Zen master earlier counseled: "Erase yourself, utterly." Jesus taught that if you want to find your life you must lose it.

We cannot do this without the courage to be embarrassed.

Embarrassment is not the same as being ashamed. Shame is the handmaiden of guilt. It says, "Look at me! I'm awful!" Embarrassment is the companion of truth. It says, "Look away from me! I'm weak." The Bible comforts the embarrassed: "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not inflamed?" (2 Corinthians 11:29). Guilt is a form of bragging. Embarrassment is a sign of humility. It grounds us, invites God to make us whole.

In the movie "We Bought a Zoo," Matt Damon encourages his teenage son, who is afraid to tell the girl he loves what he feels: "You know, sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage. Just literally 20 seconds of just embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it." Whenever we are willing to be embarrassed, like I was with Vickie at Baskin Robbins, like Peter was all the time with Jesus, like many Catholics are in the confessional, truth reveals itself and it doesn't really hurt, it sets us free.

My journey to Baskin Robins began when I was about 19 and read a huge hardcover book with a shiny blue jacket called *Kindness*. I wish I still had it. It was then that I knew: Kindness was the value that I valued more than any other. I had always given away my comic books as a kid and never wanted anything in return, often to the dismay of my mother. I learned that good things come from kindness, and that other values follow in joyful step like the von Trapp kids prancing after Julie Andrews.

I'd also learn, through experiences of distress more than through wisdom, that the desire to be unconditionally kind and helpful has a shadow side: an insatiable hunger for love masked as approval, applause or affection. Manipulation, even unintended, lurks in the moonlight of our consciousness like the Wolfman. Once that discovery of darkness blew through the hole in my heart and into my awareness, I was able to tell Vickie, like the boy with his 20 seconds of embarrassing bravery, what I had been discerning about a lifetime of mixed motives. I lost my life that day. I found the life that was already there. And our hot-fudge sundaes never tasted so good.

[Michael Leach, who shepherds Soul Seeing for *NCR*, is the author of the book Why Stay Catholic? Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question, which the Catholic Press Association voted the best Popular Presentation of the Catholic Faith in 2012.]

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