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The day I stood simmering in shame

Brian Doyle | Jan. 14, 2014 Soul Seeing

Committed a sin yesterday, in the hallway, at noon. I roared at my son, I grabbed him by the shirt collar, I frightened him so badly that he cowered and wept, and when he turned to run, I grabbed him by the arm so roughly that he flinched, and it was that flicker of fear and pain across his face, the bright, eager, holy-riveting face I have loved for 10 years, that stopped me then and haunts me this morning, for I am the father of his fear, I sent it snarling into his heart, and I can never get it out now, which torments me.

Yes, he was picking on his brother and, yes, he had picked on his brother all morning and, yes, this was the culmination of many edgy incidents already and, no, he hadn't paid the slightest attention to warnings and remonstrations and fulminations, and, yes, he had been snide and supercilious all day, and, yes, he had deliberately done exactly the thing he had specifically been warned not to do, for murky reasons, but still, I roared at him and grabbed him and terrified him and made him cower, and now there is a dark evil wriggle between us that makes me sit here with my hands over my face, ashamed to the bottom of my bones.

I do not know how sins can be forgiven. I grasp the concept, I admire the genius of the idea, I suspect it to be the seed of all real peace, I savor the Tutus and Gandhis who have the mad courage to live by it, but I do not understand how foul can be made fair. What is done cannot be undone, and my moment of rage in the hallway is an indelible scar on his heart and mine, and while my heart is a ragged old bag after nearly half a century of slings and stings, his is still new, eager, open, suggestible, innocent; he has committed only the small sins of a child, the halting first lies, the failed test paper hidden in the closet, the window broken in petulance, the stolen candy bar, the silent witness as a classmate is bullied, the insults flung like bitter knives.

Whereas I am a man, and have had many lies squirming in my mouth, and have committed calumny, and far too often evaded the mad, ragged Christ, ignored his stink, his rotten teeth, his cloak of soggy newspapers, his voice of broken glass.

No god can forgive what we do to each other; only the injured can summon that extraordinary grace, and where such grace is born we cannot say, for all our fitful genius and miraculous machinery. We use the word god so easily, so casually, as if our label for the incomprehensible meant anything at all; and we forget all too easily that the wriggle of holy is born only through the stammer and stumble of us, who are always children. So we turn again and again to each other, and bow, and ask forgiveness, and mill what mercy we can muster from the muddle of our hearts.

The instant I let go of my son's sinewy arm in the hallway, he sprinted away and slammed the door and flew off the porch and ran down the street, and I stood there simmering in shame. Then I walked down the hill into the laurel thicket as dense and silent as the dawn of the world and found him there huddled and sobbing. We sat in the moist, green dark for a long time, not saying anything, the branches burly and patient. Finally, I asked quietly for his forgiveness and he asked for mine and we walked out of the woods, hand in hand, changed men.

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