

All Saints
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Shepherd By The Sea, Gualala, CA
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This past week I flew to L.A.
because I was cast as a super hero
in a production I could not pass up.

For Halloween, my two-and-a-half year old grandson had the whole family dress up as characters from the toddler television hit *P J Masks*. I spent weeks working on my Owlette costume. I wore pink. No one has pried me into a pink outfit since I was myself a toddler. But, it was Halloween, and my grandsons and their mother created a memorable event.

People spend a great deal of energy on Halloween.
Halloween is important for the human psyche - drawing out shadows which,
if not enacted in playfulness - costumes, personas, spookiness – would manifest in more
covert, unpleasant ways

[Spring Triduum like Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter. Death to Life. All Hallows Eve- All Saints- All Souls]

Halloween is the eve of All Saints – one of the great feasts of the Christian Church –
Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, All Saints.
All Saints raises up for us the men, women, and sometimes children, known and unknown,
who led extraordinary lives and serve as examples for those of us
still struggling in the field.

Here's my question. We spend a lot of energy preparing for Halloween:
Where is the Energy around preparing to be a saint?

Maybe you think of a saint as superhuman.
If so, you can say “I can never be a saint,” and put it out of your mind.
But look behind the hagiography- that is, the church's fanciful re-telling of lives
to inspire us to good deeds.
Look carefully at the saints celebrated in the Christian tradition.
I can't think of any that did not have some horrific blind spot,
some presenting moral impediment,
some rankling sin,
some shadow self erupting wildly onto other people.

(Except maybe Saint Agnes. But she was only twelve when she was martyred,
and hadn't even been tested by puberty
let alone the insidious compromises you make in adulthood to your milieu,
society, prejudices, context within historical time.)

Who, then, is a saint?

The writer Graham Green played with the same question in his 1940 book
The Power and the Glory.

The unnamed hero – well, *sort of* hero, who we come to love very much, –
is an alcoholic priest constantly on the run,
hiding from place to place in the Mexican district of Tobasco in the 1930's.
When Catholicism was outlawed there, our hero was an arrogant younger man
who decided to stay and risk being arrested and shot
while other priests had fled to safer parts of Mexico,
or been forced to marry and live a life of humiliation and ridicule.

Now, on the run, always in search of a drink,
guilty about - but protective toward
his illegitimate daughter and her mother,
he tries to avoid - but does not refuse - to celebrate mass or hear confessions
or perform other priestly duties when he is pressed to do so.

But wherever he goes, the police are right after him,
taking hostages in the villages where the Whiskey Priest has been seen, and shooting them.

Just after he finally escapes to a safe province,
a betrayer convinces the Whiskey Priest to go back and hear the confession of a dying man,
even though the priest suspects it is a trap.
He is arrested, and in this scene is awaiting his execution:

*When he woke up it was dawn.
He woke with a huge feeling of hope which suddenly and completely left him at the first sight
of the prison yard. It was the morning of his death.
He crouched on the floor with the empty brandy-flask in his hand
trying to remember an Act of Contrition.*

'O God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins...crucified...worthy of thy dreadful punishments.'

*He was confused, his mind was on other things:
it was not the good death for which one always prayed.
He caught sight of his own shadow on the cell wall;
it had a look of surprise and grotesque unimportance.
What a fool he had been to think that he was strong enough to stay when others fled.
What an impossible fellow I am, he thought, and how useless.
I have done nothing for anybody.
I might just as well have never lived.
His parents were dead- soon he wouldn't even be a memory -
perhaps after all he was not at the moment afraid of damnation -
even the fear of pain was in the background.
He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed,
with nothing done at all.*

*It seemed to him, in that moment,
that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint.
It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage.*

*He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place.
He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted - to be a saint.*

-Graham Greene 1904-1991
The Power and the Glory

I think most real saints are like The Whiskey Priest.
Full of flaws, and broken, questioning God and themselves.

Ordinary people in mind-numbing jobs, living in obscurity,
with courageous ordinariness,
or barely surviving – but somehow keeping their humanity
in prisons, gulags, refugee camps, in slavery of one kind or another.

The Dalai Lama asked a recent refugee in Dharmasala, “What was the hardest thing about being a prisoner of the Chinese?” The man replied, “My worst fear was that I would lose my compassion for those who were torturing me.”

How many heroes have no witnesses?
How many more men and women did not escape and live to tell about the extremes of human nature –
the torturer and the tortured?
How many, buried in mass graves, known to G-d alone?

A very holy man – The Baal Shem Tov – in the 18th century said

*The master key is the broken heart.
When a man truthfully breaks his heart before G-d,
he can enter into all the gates of the apartments
of the King above all Kings, the Holy One, Blessed Be He.*

-The Baal Shem Tov

What makes a saint –
- that man or woman of broken heart, the gaping blind spot, the moral weakness,
the bundle of faux pas and good intentions falling short,
the shadows belying his or her ignorance,

– the things that made them saints
was not anything extraordinary ... Only that they gave their weaknesses to God *to use*.

[Praying] *Here. This is Yours.*

And grace entered the abyss of brokenness.

My power is made perfect in your weakness, said the Lord to St. Paul, who was a bundle of contradictions and thorns in the side, if there ever was one. He said, “Where sin increases, grace abounds even more.” -Romans 5:20

Paul *knew* – or at least learned, that the greater the sin, the greater the grace.

That's the secret of the saints. And mostly it is a secret even to themselves.
Like the Whiskey Priest, the saint slogs into sanctity
slipping in the mire of his or her own sins.

What makes them holy is the same grace offered to us.
They simply knew, or were broken enough to give even this to G-d.

[Praying] *Here. This is Yours - to transform into holiness, if that is Your will.*

So if you find yourself saying, “I can never be a saint” -

Stop and think: maybe you just haven't sinned enough.

I end with Leonard Cohen's famous 'Anthem' which sums it all up:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
bring your perfect* offering
there is a crack in everything
that's how the light gets in. - Leonard Cohen*

Note: * *Leonard Cohen is being sarcastic here about “perfect”*

END