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The Grace of Interruptions

Snowstorms in New England may be lovely to watch, and we’re accustomed to them, but unless one is a skier they usually upset a lot of plans. A case of the flu, on the other hand, has no redeeming features. There may be times when we would welcome the chance to spend a day in bed, but not on account of sickness. Lots of things can make us lose our concentration or modify our schedules, of course; some are trivial, others are very serious. If she gets a phone call while mixing cookie dough, for instance, my mother loses count of the cups of flour or sugar already in the bowl, and we laugh about it. When a student learns that his twin has just been killed in a car accident, tomorrow’s mid-term suddenly appears awfully inconsequential. If I’m on my way to the library, I generally don’t mind pausing to chat with a colleague along the way; but running into a traffic delay when I have only minutes to get to church makes me tense and impatient.

Life works better, it seems, when everything obeys a schedule. Imagine the temperamental adjustment we would have to make if airplanes simply departed when the pilot felt ready, or if banks kept random hours, or if one did not know from one day to the next whether schools, or post offices, or grocery stores would open their doors. There is nothing unspiritual, in other words, about the need for order and routine in our lives. Indeed, order and tranquility may rightly be regarded as great blessings. All of us depend on a healthy measure of structure and predictability if we are to lead secure, productive lives.
Still, each day has its share of interruptions, the things we were not counting on or expecting but which are part and parcel of human existence. Some we welcome, others cause us to be anxious or to grieve. Some interruptions delight and console us, while others invade our good moods and steal our peace. I would wager that interruptions of whatever sort are probably good for our souls, in the same way that distractions paradoxically can refocus, strengthen, and purify our efforts to pray. For one thing interruptions prevent order and routine from turning into the narcotic of false security. An existence from which all interruptions had been sealed out would be not just dull but downright grotesque. The human spirit would wither quickly if it were compelled to live inside a huge, aseptic bubble.

More importantly, however, interruptions require that we learn how to adapt and respond to the fluid and unpredictable everyday world of which we are so much a part. Circumstances, events, and people are constantly exerting their claims on our attention. Sometimes we are merely distracted, sometimes we have to adjust our schedules and reapportion our psychic energy, and sometimes we can be thrown completely off course. Yet dealing with the things that either sidetrack us or force us to pause in whatever we have been doing, I believe, leads to resilience of spirit, patience, compassion, and even to wisdom. “The human mind plans the way,” says the author of Proverbs, “but the Lord directs the steps” (16:9). Interruptions may sound like an odd way to direct our steps, but if the mystic is someone who knows how to find God in all things, then Proverbs has summed up a great mystery.
Interrupted by the Spirit

From a religious point of view, what else is a vocation if not one enormous interruption? Although some men and women gravitate toward ministry or religious life in a fairly smooth and almost instinctive fashion, there are many others who would describe the history of their vocations differently. For them, being interrupted by the Spirit lies at the heart of the experience of being called. Fresh from the waters of the Jordan Jesus certainly interrupted the lives of the four fishermen by the lakeside and Levi at his tax station, while the risen Jesus movingly interrupted a determined young Saul as he was rushing toward Damascus. The word of the Lord often proved to be a notoriously powerful interruption, as figures like Jeremiah and Amos had discovered, and as many a Christian reader over the centuries has likewise learned.

In many cases it was not a biblical text but the stories of martyrs and saints that suddenly broke into the ordinariness of their lives and led them to ask, “What am I doing for Christ?” Ignatius Loyola, thrown onto a sickbed by French cannon fire, suffered a far more serious interruption when he came across the medieval compilation of saints’ lives referred to as the *Golden Legend*. And Edith Stein’s decisive interruption occurred when, fingerling a friend’s bookshelf, she chanced upon *The Book of Her Life*, the spiritual autobiography of Teresa of Avila.

In other cases events have played the key role. The murder of Father Rutilio Grande radically interrupted Archbishop Oscar Romero’s life and ministry, while Sister Helen Prejean recounts her vocational identity being interrupted by poor people in a Louisiana housing project.
Vocation is not a matter of having one’s life interrupted just once, however. Experience reminds us that after God has entered our lives in some momentous way, sameness often resumes, old habits or patterns gradually reassert themselves, and pious resolves tend to blur. A major reason for making retreats or undertaking a daily examination of consciousness is to create an opportunity for the mind and heart to recollect themselves. The thought strikes me often that praying is a matter of talking to oneself, but always with the firm awareness that God is listening. Where that awareness of a God who constantly hears and knows is lacking, then the talking amounts to little more than processing and ventilating one’s feelings. The exercise of talking with oneself may be therapeutic, but it is not really prayer. A well-placed distraction now and then can pull us out of those monologues. The ease with which we slide inwards, even as religious men and women, makes interruptions all the more salutary.

All of this brings me to wonder whether vocational awareness, whatever the particular path we embark upon, does not involve a deep, lifelong acknowledgement that ours will be (to draw on the title of Etty Hillesum’s unforgettable diary entries) an “interrupted life.” Although we do not exactly promise to solicit interruptions, the reality is that we do pledge ourselves to remain open to the divine mystery; for what else does walking in the presence of God—living by faith—mean? And openness to that mystery inevitably leads to being interrupted in minor or major ways. To those familiar with the ways of the Spirit it is not surprising that the unplanned moments, like the stone rejected by the builders, should turn into the cornerstones of our lives.
The lesson, however, can be all too easily forgotten. The more determined we are to set goals, follow agenda, and finish what we have on our ministerial plates, the greater the risk that we may wind up being celebrated for the wrong accomplishment. Mission sometimes transmutes into fixation. A veteran religious once remarked that the figure in the Gospel with which he identified most was the donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem, because when the Lord needed him he was tied to a post! The people and situations that occasionally throw us off course may thus be doing us a great favor. After all, isn’t that what the disciples did when they untied the donkey? And is that not what the Spirit does in untying us from our ministerial routines or our religious comfort zones? The human mind may plan the way, but (as the proverb reassures us) it is truly the Spirit who directs our steps.

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