Opinion
Spirituality



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Twelve Degrees of Humility

In the face of global turmoil and the emergence of authoritarian right-wing leadership around the world, Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's recent columns have dealt with the place of the Twelve Degrees of Humility in human and political development as delineated in the sixth century Rule of Benedict, the oldest monastic Rule in the Catholic Church.

To recap the first three:

- First, we don't have to 'earn' God. There is no such thing as merit theology where we keep the rules in order to accumulate the points that guarantee that God is pleased with us. The God we're searching for waits patiently for us to realize that the presence of God is within us always, if we will only cultivate it.
- Second, the Rule of Benedict tells us, we also don't have to create a new path for ourselves as we go. All we need to do to be happy is to keep as a light for our feet, the will of a loving God who wills us "well and not woe."
- Third, Benedict says, we don't need to go through life alone, either, just stumbling from one thing to another. We can, if we are willing, honor and trust the experience and good will of those whose place it is to teach us how to grow. They start us on our life's journey, however sternly, however crudely, by showing us how things can be done, however different from our own instincts, if we will only accept the direction they give.

Healthy and self-respecting Americans tolerate nothing that's slow. Not trains, not coffeemakers, not toasters, not online purchases, not education, and definitely not success.

Speed, finality, and pressure are in the American DNA. And it shows. We rush as a nation to be first politically. We struggle as individuals to make profitable decisions before the sale ends, before the deal gets away, before we wind up on the bottom end of a very high social ladder to climb. We move relentlessly from one job to another in search of the perfect one. No grass grows under our feet. Ever.

So, along the way, we swallow a lot of Tums, forego a lot of vacation time, take a lot of sleeping pills.

And yet, there are whole segments of life that cannot be avoided, that must simply be borne. And, at the same time, are more important than they look at first glance.

Then, however much pressure is the name of the game now, it is time to realize that the ancients lay out another way to go through life, equally effectively, certainly more happily.

Issa's haiku may have more to say to us about human development and long-term purpose than all the modern theological treatises and psychological research we have: "O Snail, climb Mount Fuji, but slowly, slowly."

Most interesting of all, it gives immense insight into the 1,500-year-old Rule of Benedict, whose prescription for spiritual development is distilled in one chapter concentrated on humility. After he situates us in the presence of God, focused on the will of God and open to wisdom teachers, he begins to talk about our personal development.

In the fourth degree of humility, the Rule of Benedict cautions us to realize that we can't rush life. "When difficult things are commanded," he says, "Endure and do not grow weary." There are some things that simply must be borne. There are some mountains in life that must be climbed but can only be climbed one boulder, one level at a time.

But if we don't like them, then what? Quit the job? Blame it on the teacher, the boss, the situation, on someone else's failures? On everything but our refusal to learn, our resistance to direction?

Yet, everything, the Book of Ecclesiastes says "is for its own time only." It is its own stage in life. It is a part of life we're meant to go through. What is meant to happen will happen when "the fullness of time has come." When we're ready, in other words.

Until then, we must, Benedict says, "Endure. Hang on. Don't give up." Or to put it even more pointedly, whether we realize it or not, there's a purpose in being in this place, at this time. There are lessons to learn here, a reason to persist. Keep trying, the simple teaching of the Rule insists, and don't get frustrated.

It's a simple lesson but it will change all of life if we allow it. Nothing really important, long lasting or profound happens quickly. Immediately. Exactly how and

when I demand it.

I must learn, this fourth degree of humility insists, to bear with patience the burden of visions envisioned but not yet accomplished. I can see what should be done in the country but cannot for the life of me make it happen. I wander from one level of life to another seeing clearly what is missing in society, what needs to be done, while an astonishing number of people around me do not see what I see, do not realize the need for the Shangri-La of economics or politics or religion or business or human community that I want to shape for them.

Nevertheless, the Rule says quietly, there is something here that must change in me first, before I can manage to be part of even greater changes elsewhere. Don't pout. Don't stamp your feet. Don't collapse just because other people do good things differently than you do. Trust the wisdom of others, even if it differs from yours. That very difference will stretch your experience and contributes to your learning process.

Indeed, "Endure and do not grow weary," the Rule says and so we learn that humility does not force its way on others, does not demand its own satisfaction, does not run before learning to walk.

Then, given that period of development, at moments of greater moral meaning, you will find you have the patience it takes to stay at the great questions of life with equanimity, with calm certainty, no matter how long it takes. You will have developed the strength you need to save the marriage, to get the children past the pitfalls of life, to squelch the poisons of discrimination where you are.

Society, too, will profit from your power of patience.

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When we develop the long view, we see success differently, too. We come to understand that life is whittled one sliver at a time. When we begin to shoulder the reformation of the church, for instance, or the elimination of sexism, racism, militarism, the salvation of the planet, and the end of extremist and divisive politics, we discover that it is not necessary to succeed in the militant meaning of the word.

We discover now that success really lies in learning to stay at a thing so that generations to come are not left to begin again what we failed to pursue with patience.

From where I stand, it's then, I think, that we are ready to inscribe the motto of the snail on our hearts: "O snail, climb Mount Fuji. But slowly, slowly."

Or, on the other hand, the prayer I myself say in the face of every hard, dark, long, life-changing challenge of our times is "If not for us, then because of us." Then, and only then, am I able to begin one more slowly evolving struggle for the will of God on earth as we try to do our part of its coming in our own time.

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Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Joan Chittister's column,* From Where I Stand*, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions:* Email alert sign-up*.*

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