

Just Rub a Little Dirt on It

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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Reading:

by Rev. Alison Cornish

My 11-year-old nephew came to visit for a few days this summer. It was the first time he's been here without his parents, and I was really looking forward to the time together. In the course of the visit, Andy discovered that I wasn't using my laptop, and he really, really wanted a computer of his own at home. So I said that I would be willing to put my laptop on long-term loan to him, *if his parents said it was OK*, and that we would ask them when they came to join him in a couple of days. Well, Andy started acting like the computer was his ... ad nauseum. What he would do, did the computer do this? what about internet connections ... finally, I had had it, and I said that the subject was closed - until we knew if his parents said "yes," I wasn't going to talk about it anymore. He stormed off, angry.

Later, I made him lunch, and ventured "you got angry with me." "No I didn't." "Yes, you did - and that's OK, - you were disappointed that I said we weren't going to talk about the computer anymore - I understand." He insisted he wasn't angry, or disappointed.

It took me a while to figure out that he has no resources for disappointment because he wheedles and whines until he drives everyone nuts and then he gets what he wants. Always. He had no connection to the feeling of disappointment, and no means for dealing with the feeling.

I suspect he is not alone. I am surrounded, here, by kids loaded with entitlements and privilege, and the sense of disappointment is kept at bay - by parents who say "yes" all the time, by shopping, by diversion and entertainment. Who has time - or space - for disappointment?

Sermon:

My husband simply refuses to watch TV commercials. He only watches programs that have been previously recorded allowing him skip through the commercials so it's rare I see any commercials, but frankly I enjoy them, sometimes for their cleverness and sometimes for their sheer dreadfulness. My favorite commercial of the last year starred Peyton Manning, quarterback of the Indianapolis Colts. Peyton is in a coffee shop placing an order when you hear off camera the harried and over-caffeinated clerk go down in a crash of scalding coffee and smashing china. Peyton leans over the counter with a look of concern and says, "That's OK. You're good. Just rub a little dirt on it."

I have no idea what the product is so in that respect the commercial was a real failure, but on the other hand it has given me this delightful new phrase which, by dint of ordination, I have turned into an entire theology.

Just rub a little dirt on it. The imagery is just so crisp, and the absurdity of it cracks me up. Plus, it seems so much more compassionate than “suck it up.” It conveys that I know you’ve suffered a real injury, and that if there was anything truly helpful I could do about it I would. But since there isn’t I’m sort of clutching at straws here. The real cleverness of the thing though is that at the same time that it is expressing concern it also delivers the message to keep things in perspective. No bones are broken, no blood visible. Just rub a little dirt on it and you’ll be fine.

We all suffer many small accidents over a lifetime, both bodily ones and accidents of the spirit. We suffer a thousand bumps and bruises, visible and invisible. As the reading expressed, when we have no way of dealing with life’s disappointments they can blow up out of all proportion. And ruin a day, a week, maybe more.

Of course, not all of life’s little disappointments are created equal. Sometimes the new bestseller turns out not to be quite as gripping as everyone said. Sometimes the cake falls and the potatoes are too salty. Disappointing, but not worth spending much psychic energy over. On the other hand you spend four years in college and then can’t get a job? Really disappointing, and for so many reasons worth taking a closer look at. Keeping it in perspective.

A spiritual response to the disappointments and losses we suffer does not mean that we simply ignore it. It means, rather, that we do not dwell in it any longer than we need to in order to understand it, to make meaning of it, learn from it and release it. We don’t anticipate that disappointments are lurking around every corner just to get us. And when we do walk smack into disappointment’s arms we don’t make it our permanent resting place.

It’s like Hepzibah in *House of the Seven Gables*. I’ve been reading Nathaniel Hawthorne’s lately although I know reading Hawthorne as winter is setting in is just asking for a case of seasonal disappointment. Anyway, this is the passage I read last night in *House of the Seven Gables*:

Hepzibah, though she had her valuable and redeeming traits, had grown to be a kind of lunatic, by imprisoning herself so long in one place, and no other company than a single series of ideas, and but one affection, and one bitter sense of wrong.

The aged and isolated Hepzibah has taken the disappointments of her life – the absence of her brother, the one person she cares for, and the family fall from fortune — and she clasped those disappointments, those losses, to her bosom as if they were her very identity. One might argue that Hepzibah’s losses were more than disappointments; they were substantial causes for grief. But what she has done with each event in her life, no

matter its weight, is let it pile up rather than dealing with it as it came. She has let the losses, great and small, define who she is and rob her life of any meaning other than the impossibility of restoring the past. For disappointment, like grief, does pile up. Each disappointment is not new and single of itself, but carries with it the memory of all the disappointments that came before.

Perhaps a better illustration is dinner at my house. I like to cook and every now and then, early in my marriage, I would make an actual effort to cook a nice dinner. However, my husband kept forgetting to come home from work when dinner was ready. Turned out I forgot to tell him when dinner was going to be ready, or that dinner was going to be ready at all. He should simply have known it was going to happen. Anyway, despite the thoroughgoing irrationality of it all, every time he didn't show up I was disappointed. Nobody died, nobody lost the family fortune. It was just a disappointment. But like Alison's nephew in the reading each disappointment brought some anger with it. And each disappointment didn't get dealt with. And over time those little disappointments turned into \$90 an hour of therapy.

So if we are not to let the little stuff turn into the big stuff, what do we do about it? The biggest thing I think we can do is to check our expectations, to have realistic expectations of what we can expect in life, in a relationship, in any given circumstance. When it came to being late for dinner my expectations weren't realistic. It simply isn't realistic or reasonable to expect someone else to do something when you haven't communicated that you would like them to do it. Heck, even when you communicate what you would like you can't just *expect* other people to fall in line with your wishes.

There's a poem by Alice Walker called "Expect Nothing."

Expect nothing. Live frugally
 On surprise.
 become a stranger
 To need of pity
 Or, if compassion be freely
 Given out
 Take only enough
 Stop short of urge to plead
 Then purge away the need.

Wish for nothing larger
 Than your own small heart
 Or greater than a star;
 Tame wild disappointment
 With caress unmoved and cold
 Make of it a parka
 For your soul.

Discover the reason why

So tiny human midget
Exists at all
So scared unwise
But expect nothing. Live frugally
On surprise.

I think this poem is saying that we can strangle all the joy and wonder out of life by layering undue expectations upon it and missing the miracle that already exists. It is somewhat akin to the Buddhist philosophy of non-attachment. Non-attachment is an acknowledgement that everything in this life is impermanent, things are always changing, circumstances are always changing, people are always changing. If you become attached to things or circumstances or people remaining always the same you are setting yourself up for disappointment. One helpful way to look at it is that you cannot become attached to a particular outcome, because you alone do not control the outcome. You can plan it, you can work for it, but you can't guarantee it and you have to be willing to accept that without it overwhelming you. Expectations.

I think that is perhaps why we take disappointments so much harder when we are young; we do not yet have the experience of the world that helps define realistic expectations. We are not able to place things in perspective. As we gain experience of the world we are more able to see the little things for what they are in the overall scheme of things. But if we have had no strategies for coping with those little things they can become immense. I heard a study recently that children who undergo a stress of short duration early in life show less stress later in life than do children who underwent chronic stress or no stress at all. The theory is that a moderate amount of stress early in life provided them with something akin to an inoculation, sort of stress immunity. I wonder if the same thing happens with disappointment, like building up disappointment antibodies. Coping early with disappointment not only helps us build the skills to do so, but also offers us the perspective that things aren't really so bad.

In the final analysis I think the best way to cope with disappointments is when we make something new of them; when we use them to make meaning and to grow from what they have to teach us. When you learn to say "dinner will be ready at 6:30 and I would love for us to enjoy it together" rather than sulking, you have turned disappointment to your advantage. When you can turn "that was awful" into "live and learn" you cope with disappointment.

One of the most useful ways we have of making meaning is to make positive change. Disappointment and discontent has fueled some of the most remarkable and needed change the world has known. But one of the most *fun* ways we have of making meaning is to turn what happened into a narrative. I have a friend who always says you either have a good time or a good story. I think that's a great way to cope with disappointment. To know that what might have been the worst date of my life will, in about two years time, be a hilarious story adds that perspective of time and distance that heals all wounds. And even in the moment, when you can see the humor, the story, in the disaster, how much easier it makes it to bear.

Think of all the Christmas pageants you have witnessed or heard of. No one ever says, “Oh, yes, in 1985 everything went very well.” No, they tell you about the year that someone thought it was a good idea to have Mary arrive on a donkey and the donkey ran off down the street with a wild-eyed Mary, or the year one of the angels was allergic to the hay bale they sat her on, or the year Joseph, who ate too much pizza at the rehearsal dinner, was ill right into the crèche. Mary, the angel and Joseph were not amused at the time. But twenty years later they’re still telling the stories. And twenty years later we’re all still putting on Christmas pageants knowing full well that Gabriel will smack a few shepherds in the back of the head with his trumpet and someone will think a live goat will add atmosphere and one of the three kings will burst into tears because everyone is looking at him. With all that we do it anyway, risking disappointment and disaster. And we’ll all help the shepherds and the goat’s owner and the third king cope with the disappointment that it wasn’t at all what they expected.

And then we’ll all go home and cope with the holidays not being everything Martha Stewart told us they would be and we’ll put whipped cream on the pie to hide the burned spot and hang extra tinsel to hide the bare spot on the tree and tell the stories of why the just past election or Thanksgiving celebrations were a disappointment. We’ll readjust our expectations once more. We’ll get a little more perspective on things. We’ll become a little less attached to everything being just so. And next year we’ll have a heck of a good story.

As we learn to see our disappointments as offering more than pain, we will diminish the pain. As we continue our spiritual practices and spiritual growth we will find new ways to cope with the small things giving us courage to face the big things. And we offer each other compassion and encouragement. We laugh at ourselves and our ridiculous predicaments. We learn that rubbing a little dirt on it early enough can boost our disappointment immune systems.

Por lo tanto, puede ser.
May it be so.
Namaste.