

## ***Restraint***

***Few people wake up in the morning and reach inwards to locate their golden source of restraint, believing that it will support them throughout the day. Yet once you untangle it from its web of negative connotations – most of which more fairly belong to constraint – you could find that this is the virtue on which all the others depend.***

### ***Stephanie Dowrick, Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love***

The word restraint certainly does have negative connotations today. Most of us would probably associate it with words such as confinement, constraint, control, censure, brake, curb, suppression and even words such as captivity, blockade, barricade. Restraint is not something which, at face value, is held up as attractive in a world where so much emphasis is given to free expression, individualism and the right to be and do whatever feels just right for me. However, as we explore this and reflect on how and where we might practise restraint, we do find that it is quite the opposite of those limiting negative connotations, and is in fact an expression of freedom and an essential characteristic and practice in the development of a healthy Christian spirituality.

As we look back over the years, and over several millennia, we find a number of sayings about restraint which show that in the past this was indeed held up as a virtue. Mahatma Gandhi said, “It is his restraint that is honorable to a person, not their liberty”. The nineteenth century English art critic John Ruskin said, “Remove severe restraint and what will become of virtue”? And in the first century CE the Roman philosopher Seneca claimed that “restraint and discipline are examples of virtue and justice. These are the things that form the education of the world”. If we go back even further into the Wisdom writings of the ancient Hebrews we find an abundance of sayings extolling the virtue of restraint: “Unjust anger cannot be justified, for anger tips the scale to one’s ruin. Those who are patient stay calm until the right moment, and then cheerfulness comes back to them. They hold back their words until the right moment; then the lips of many tell of their good sense” (Sirach 1:22-24). In the Book of Proverbs, amongst the wise sayings of King Solomon, we find this: “Do you see someone who is hasty in speech? There is more hope for a fool than for anyone like that” (Proverbs 29: 20). And again on the subject of hasty speech, “Rash words are like sword thrusts” (Proverbs 12:18). There are also quite a number of sayings about how to develop wisdom and each of these extols the virtue of patience and due consideration: “The simple believe everything, but the clever consider their steps. The wise are cautious and turn away from evil, but the fool throws off restraint and is careless. One who is quick tempered acts foolishly” (Proverbs 14:15 – 17), and, “The mind of the righteous ponders how to answer” (Proverbs 15:28).

The Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is just fabulous, full of all sorts of wisdom about every human tendency, relationship and folly and it is well worth dipping into it. These are just a few examples showing that restraint, reflection, curbing hasty and thoughtless speech and action, are all ways of growing in wisdom. The wise person is one who has developed the ability to pause and stand back and is someone who considers their words and actions and is thereby able to proceed in a better way. I am sure we have all experienced the consequences of hasty and ill-considered words and wished we could just turn back the clock and pause for a moment. Sometimes we rush into decisions that bring regret and have been made without really thinking through the impact and long-term effect of those decisions on ourselves and on others. The saying, "Act in haste and repent at leisure" is a rather chilling reminder of what hasty decisions can mean. On the other hand, there is something reassuring and 'safe' about being in the presence of people who consider their words. We have a sense that what we are hearing is indeed wisdom and has come from some deeper place, a place of real meaning and value where options are considered and mulled over and real insight has been found.

So restraint is about 'pausing'. It is about creating a space before we speak, before we make choices. It is like a 'circuit breaker'. The practice of restraint will enable us to break our usual patterns of behavior. Restraint gives us breathing space so that other responses may become an option for us. It enables us to move from reacting to responding. It is so easy, as the years go by, to fall into predictable patterns of response, and when that happens we in fact do become entrapped, confined. We lose that most precious human quality of growth and change. When we push forward mechanically and simply act out familiar patterns of reaction, we diminish our world and we lose sight of the richness of other ways of thinking, of other beliefs, of insight. We do ourselves a disservice by rushing in and making hasty decisions. But if we are able to step back and restrain or curb the immediacy of our responses, we will find that our vision may be enlarged. We will make the space to allow other options in and to listen to ourselves too.

So restraint is, paradoxically, an act of freedom. It is an act of will which will enable you to decide for yourself. Each one of our lives is made up of the consequences of millions of choices. Every day we make choices on both a small and large scale and all these choices create the fabric of our lives. When we think of our choices in this way we begin to see that we need to be able to make them in the wisest way possible. As King Solomon said so long ago, "The clever consider their steps".

Restraint is linked to love, and it may indeed be an expression of love. In all relationships we have many choices to make. We can, for example, choose not only what to say to another person, but we can choose whether to say something or nothing at all. In her book, *Forgiveness*

*and Other Acts of Love*, Stephanie Dowrick tells of a friend who came to tend her garden for her while she was ill. Her friend knew how much a well-kept garden meant to Stephanie and so she came and spent her day clearing and pruning. When Stephanie later went out into the garden she found that, to her horror, her friend had severely pruned a plant that she had lovingly coaxed into growth for many years. She recounts how she had the choice of whether to be honest and express her disappointment to her friend or simply thank her profusely for her love and generosity and let go of the matter of the over-pruned plant. She chose the latter and she chose it out of love. In this case her reflection on the situation led her to see clearly that it had been done with every good intention and that to speak honestly to her friend would be devastating. It required restraint to do this, the ability to let go of her annoyance and disappointment.

Restraint is an act of love because in that 'pause' we are able to move out of our self-preoccupation and see the world through a much wider lens. We are able to become other-centred rather than self-centred. So much goodness and richness becomes apparent when we do that. When we are other-centred and when we hold back from imposing our own will, reaction or desires, as we recognize the impact of that on others, we are in fact loving them. I think of Jesus' words: "There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends" (John 15:13). There are times when we must simply put aside our own needs and surrender to the greater good, to what will be good for the relationship, for the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of another. Whenever we do that, we love, for to love another is to wish deeply that they may live and grow and to make that possible in the relationship. Think of what, from the many options available to you, will be the most valuable thing to say. Restraint, that pause, may be just what we need to break out of our restricted world. And it is the way of love, the self-giving, self-sacrificing, *agape* love, of Jesus.

Restraint is also linked to humility. 'Humility' is related to the Latin word *humus* which means 'of the earth', so in its ethical sense, humility is about being real about who we are, being grounded. St Thomas Aquinas describes humility as, 'Keeping oneself within one's own bounds, not reaching out to things above one, but submitting to one's superior'. In a spiritual or religious sense, humility is about submitting or surrendering to God, opening one's heart and mind to God. It is about allowing grace to enter in. Humility is about allowing ourselves to be led, inspired, guided by God. For that to happen we simply need to create a space, we need to listen for God and to God. "The divine will is a deep abyss of which the present moment is the entrance", said Jean-Pierre de Caussade. The practice of slowing down, stepping back, waiting, will bring us into the present moment and take us to that entrance where we become aware of God, and God's 'voice', in the many strands and realities of our everyday living. The mystic, Angela of Foligno said, "The whole world is pregnant with God"! Yes, indeed, but how will we ever know this, see this, feel it, respond to it, say 'yes' to it, if we relentlessly and thoughtlessly

push ahead and impose our own will? In that great Christian prayer, The Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Your will be done". But to allow God's will to be done, indeed to participate in its being done, requires that we ourselves become the channel of that will. And for this to happen, there is a letting go that is needed, a space needs to be made. That space is provided for us when we practise restraint. What matters, we affirm every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, is not that every desire of ours be fulfilled, but that God's way becomes our way. And as we curb our own desires, we slowly advance along that path.

The concept and practice of restraint is akin to that of chastity. Chastity is not simply a sexual practice, it is about enjoying all things at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner. Chastity invites waiting - waiting upon the right moment, the right time. Chastity is about approaching life with open hands, as opposed to clutching or grabbing, knowing how to be receptive at the right time. There is a time and place for everything and the Book of Ecclesiastes (part of that Wisdom literature of the Bible) expresses this: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). The concept of chastity is the perfect expression of restraint. It is the surrender to a deeper rhythm to life. "My life is listening", says Thomas Merton, "God is speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond. For this, my life must be silent" (*Thoughts in Solitude*). Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit who, he said, will teach us all things. But we need restraint, we need chastity, if we are to be taught at all.

Restraint is a practice which says that meaning matters, value matters. Actions and words themselves are expressions of that meaning and value. The practice of restraint invites us to see that we are part of an interconnected web of relationships, an eco-system we might say, in which our acts and choices have far-reaching consequences, and we need to be mindful of that. When we pause, we notice that web of relationships – we are able to imagine those consequences - and in a most beautiful and profound way we are taken beyond ourselves into the great Flow of Life, into God.

So this week, you may like to think of one area of your life where you might practise restraint. It may be hard at first, but let that be your prayer. In the space you make, God will surely enter in.

***"If our life is poured out in useless words, we will never hear anything, and in the end, because we have said everything before we had anything to say we shall be left speechless at the moment of our greatest decision".***

***Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude.***

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