

## ***Choose Life***

***See I set before you today***

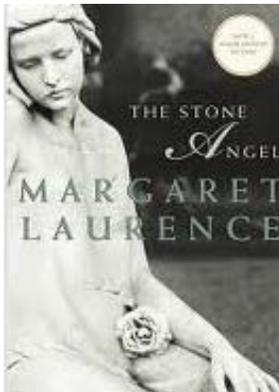
***life and death***

***blessing and curse***

***Choose life***

**Book of Deuteronomy**

To be spiritually healthy, we must choose life! It's as simple and as complex as that. I say 'complex' because we are complex beings: so much gets in the way, so much prevents us from opening ourselves to the offer of life. I am thinking here of the inner workings of our mind, our emotions and memories, what we refer to as the intra-personal dimension of our being. It is so often this intra-personal dimension that causes us to close up to life, to love, to grace. Biblical writers often referred to this as 'hardness of heart'. In the writings of the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah, for example, we find God saying: "I will take out their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh instead". When hardness of heart becomes habitual, it really is 'death' to spiritual well-being.



To explore this a little, let's look at a story, a modern day parable, *The Stone Angel*, by Margaret Laurence. This is the story of a woman, Hagar Shipley. Hagar is the daughter of a store-keeper on the Canadian prairies. Her father is wealthier and more cultured than most of the other people in that area. Very early in her life, Hagar learns from her father to look with disdain on those less well-educated, less clear-headed and weaker than herself. She also learns to look down on weakness of all kinds, either within herself or others. The secret of life, as she learns it, is to be self-reliant, independent, never to cry and to be stronger than others. As she grows up, goes to an eastern finishing school and returns to help her father in his business, Hagar learns more and more to be in perfect control of herself, how to not feel anything: neither warmth nor sympathy for others, nor weakness, nor loneliness, nor tears within herself.

Her father considers her too cultured to mix with the local boys, but she rejects her father and eventually marries Bram Shipley, the most uncouth, unmannered, unfeeling and irreligious man in that area. But Hagar is so unfeeling she doesn't seem to even notice.

She expects nothing from him or life and receives nothing. She is neither happy nor sad, neither depressed nor tearful, when her life degenerates progressively into nothing. Worst of all, she is totally uninterested in bettering it. Her father had rejected her when she married Bram, and now, living on his farm outside of town, she no longer even goes into town to shop or to go to church. She begins to neglect her physical appearance, and soon even begins, outwardly, to resemble the ragged Bram. She continues in this way for a meaningless twenty-four years. Then a particular jarring incident moves her to act and nearly to save herself.

After twenty-four years of semi-comatose existence, her physical appearance has degenerated considerably. One day she goes to town with her young son, John, to sell eggs. It is winter and she is dressed particularly shabbily in an old and oversize parka. She rings a doorbell at a well-to-do house and is greeted by a well-dressed young girl. The young girl calls her mother, saying, 'the egg woman is here'. The girl's mother turns out to be none other than one of Hagar's former school friends. Hagar, hearing herself called the egg woman by the offspring of her former school friend is prompted for the first time in years to take a real look at herself. Immediately upon leaving the house she goes to a public washroom and looks at herself in the mirror. The pain is searing. In this graced moment she is a mystery to herself: "I stood for a long time, looking, wondering how a person could change so much and never see it. So gradually it happens...the face – a brown and leathery face that wasn't mine. Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some truer image, infinitely distant."

At that moment she makes up her mind to leave her husband. She does this within a few days, taking her son with her. She goes to the West Coast, becomes a live-in housekeeper to a well-to-do widower and slowly regains her manners, cultured speech and physical appearance. But in no way does she ever regain her feelings. She suppresses her loneliness, never cries, and never allows herself to feel genuine warmth for another person. Throughout her life, she experiences moments that open up the possibility of genuine tenderness – for instance, when her son leaves to go overseas during the war. The moment calls for tenderness, for feeling, but Hagar, as always, manages to close the door just at the moment of *kairos*, the moment when God breaks through. She refuses to hug her son as he says good-bye. "I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him not to go, but I did not want to embarrass both of us nor have him think I'd taken leave of my senses."

This incident is typical of her whole life. As a result she goes through life believing it is a cruel trick, with really nothing to offer. Her inability to believe in the possibility of meaningful human contact and community also prevents her from believing in God. Her relationship with God is like her relationship with others and with life in general, a matter of profound indifference. Her last chance to seize life comes at her death. She is visited, on her deathbed, by her daughter-in-

law's minister, and later, by her son. When he first comes into the room, she greets the minister, with a mixture of pragmatism and indifference. She feels that he has nothing to offer, but she will be polite so as to get rid of him as easily as possible. He asks her whether he can pray over her. Initially, she refuses, but then, remembering a church hymn from her youth, she asks him to sing it. He consents and begins to sing the hymn. As he sings, the words of the song, coupled with her intuition of her impending death, spark a sensitive moment, a *kairos* moment: *All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with joyful voice.*

And later she says: "I must always, always, always, have wanted that – simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to stand still by some brake of proper appearances – oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth? I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched."

However, just as in times past, Hagar resists redemption. She refuses to cry, to admit guilt, to reach out for help. Instead, after a brief graced moment, she withdraws back into her hardened self and misses redemption as it passes her by. The soil was moist, the rain had come, the sun was warming the fertile land, but she refused to drop the seed. Her last opportunity for redemptive tears comes just before her death, when her son comes to see her. He lingers awkwardly at her bedside, and she senses that he wants a final reconciliation with her. She feigns tenderness and reaches out to him, but underneath her heart remains aloof. She lies to get rid of him and thus, even on her deathbed, is unable to reach a moment of genuine warmth and togetherness. So she dies as she had lived, aloof from life, from herself, her needs, her heart, from others, and from God. Expecting nothing and receiving nothing.

A sad, tragic story, and perhaps you, like me, get that uncomfortable, almost panicky feeling in the pit of your stomach as you read it and as you see a woman relentlessly refusing life. *Hagar lived aloof from life, from herself, her needs, her heart, from others and from God. Expecting nothing and receiving nothing!* The ancient desert mothers and fathers in the Christian tradition of the early centuries had a word that aptly describes this. They called it *acedia*, 'the noonday devil'. *Acedia* is a lethargy about life, a deadened, numb way of being, an inability to engage with life. And we saw this in Hagar. There were several opportunities offered to Hagar, several moments in which she was touched by grace, on the brink of something new, but she let them pass her by. Every graced moment, she let pass by, she turned away from every *kairos* moment. As she said: *"I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched."* *Kairos* is a Greek word meaning 'a favourable time'. In the story of Hagar the favourable times were those moments of breakthrough, those opportunities to welcome life.

I think our spiritual lives are made up of a series of many, many favourable moments of breakthrough when we are indeed offered life. What will we do? Will we respond by allowing ourselves to be reached, softened, changed? Or will we turn away, business as usual? Much will depend on how intently we are listening – listening to ourselves to the movements within our hearts and minds, to the people around us, to the accumulated wisdom of humanity, to the world around us. Are we able to truly engage with life? Are we able to discern and sift what is truly good from what diminishes, seeing it as something truer – the heart's truth, as Hagar said – and then actively and courageously choose that?

Discernment is at the heart of Ignatian spiritual formation and practicing discernment is a sure way to avoid the pitfalls of indifference and the numbing to life which sets in. Discernment is the practice of seeking and wisely acknowledging that which enables us to flourish, and choosing it. Discernment is followed by action, reflection upon action and further discernment. This constant to and fro keeps us alive to the possibilities for growth and fullness of life. Discernment is also recognizing that which leads us to bitterness, resentment, to holding on to anger, fear, hatred, painful memories, disappointment, disenchantment. Those are the things that lead us to close up to life and are often like a prickly blanket – we wrap ourselves up in their uncomfortable familiarity and get on with it. And over time we become afraid to let go – for what will remain? To choose life and flourishing is risky.

In his book *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoyevsky has a scene in which a pious woman tells a holy man that she dreams of serving the poor as a Sister of Mercy. The wistful thought brings tears to her eyes, but the romance fades when she considers that the real poor may be ungrateful for her sacrifices. The holy man replies, "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams". Mary Ward was a woman who knew this costly love. Mary had her 'love in dreams'. She listened and listened, as she said, to God's dream for her and felt a longing to respond to God's invitation. She spoke of God drawing her away, little by little, from all else so that she might settle her love in God. But Mary knew that 'costly love' too as she faced adversity, criticism and misunderstanding, from her Sisters being spoken of disparagingly as 'the galloping girls', to imprisonment and the Bull of Suppression on her Order. That very harsh criticism came from the Church she so loved and served, and as we know, when Mary died she was even denied a Catholic burial. But she never gave up. Life, love, passion – God's call – had taken a hold of her. Costly love indeed. Risk. Life.

The life that depths our human potential, the engagement and passion that drive out indifference, that keep the 'noonday devil' at bay, may not always be comfortable. It will surely take us beyond our comfort zone. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah is a perfect example of this. Jeremiah accused God of seducing him into a life that brought him nothing but hardship and rejection: "O God, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you

have prevailed” (Jeremiah 20:7). He never wanted to be a prophet, but he was seduced by God who spoke tenderly, saying, “I formed you in the womb”, “I am with you to deliver you ... I will put my words into your mouth”. And Jeremiah fell for it and allowed God to work through him. The people rejected him for proclaiming God’s word and Jeremiah was not happy! “I have become a laughing stock all day long, everyone mocks me”. But he does recognize that this is something he simply must do: “If I say ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot”. Jeremiah surrendered to the deeper and the truer – he chose life.

Jesus chose life. As Mary McGlone says (*National Catholic Reporter*), “He gave himself as bread to the hungry and moved through life as God’s hand outstretched to the rejected and needy. History and his own experience of being criticized, rejected and threatened assured him that the powerful would seek the way to do him in.” When Jesus went to Jerusalem – the centre of religious and political power – he did it to be true to his calling. He had to go to Jerusalem because if he had avoided the religious and political powers aligned against him he would have been admitting the powerlessness of his own message. Jesus had to decide between being true to his message and saving his skin. A risky place to be. An uncomfortable place. He chose life. “In essence he said, ‘They are going to unleash everything in their arsenal against me, and it is going to take my life. But God will not let that be the end of the story’”. A graced moment, a graced life.

Here is a beautiful story to end with. Just today I received this from Graham Long, the Pastor at Wayside Chapel in Sydney:

“Just ten minutes ago, a tall fellow in a large cowboy hat approached me out the front of Wayside. I expected him to bellow at me but instead a soft voice said, “I need a blessing. Can you do that?” We walked to the Chapel and sat awkwardly looking at one another. In these situations, I’m always shy about leading people to believe in magic. Any blessing is just a feature of a relationship. With some trepidation I asked, “Why are you needing a blessing?” I expected to hear a story of a looming court date or some health crisis or even just a naive hope that good can be conjured, like a rabbit out of a hat. To my surprise the softly-spoken man said, “I just want to know there is something outside of me; something bigger than me.” We held hands while I recited some ancient words. The big bloke seemed relieved and thanked me. We’d never met before today, but we both walked away changed and lifted.”

To choose life is to recognise that – and it may be vaguely sensed or a compelling conviction – there is something deeper, truer, more lasting, and that to deny it would indeed lead to death.

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