

Sacrifice

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Since wondering about lack of reference to the crucifixion in Chris Scott's 'Christ as Archetype' (vol 31 no 4), the subject of sacrifice has been clamouring for my attention as much as the issue of forgiveness did previously (see reg col vol 31 no 2.) In fact, I sense a close connection between the two, and not only by their strong religious associations; both are to do with giving and both are frequently bound by 'got to's and driven by guilt.

The purpose of my enquiry is to understand better what I've identified as a mutation of the practice, namely the addiction (one I've been working on myself) I call Self-deprivation. I suspect this is far more common than realised. With a bit of encouragement, friends have divulged ingenious variations on thrift, many recognised as habits inherited from parents rather than driven by current necessity. I wouldn't presume to call any of them addicts, but when a tendency is normalised it can more easily escape attention, particularly as going-without is the inverse of using or doing addictions. I only woke up to the extremes I'd reached when I hesitated outside the loo,

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debating my need to go in terms of cost (water, loo-paper), which was way outside the requirements of financial circumstances. Once admitted, I recognised numerous areas where I was cutting back, making do, all in the name of saving.

Like any other addiction, this behaviour is driven by the fear 'I'll die without having/doing it,' the truth being that the 'it' is the potential killer. Like any other addiction, the purpose is to feel better, via the fix that repeatedly tries and fails to deal with emptiness experienced as intolerable. 'Better' in this case means feeling virtuous, but predictably the immediate glow is quickly replaced by the original fearfilled emptiness that comes from not enough nurturing. And feeling safe. My brief satisfaction had nothing to do with giving away what I saved, because I didn't. I was sensibly and selflessly saving for my future. Needless to say, the time would never come when I'd spend the stash hoarded in the name of safety.

Sacrifice - a ritual that's been recorded since records began, its form depending on culture, religion and historical setting, seemingly an integral piece of human behaviour. What's it all about? My earliest history lessons introduced me to myths and legends; in scripture we dotted round the old testament. Both fed me exciting gory stories, though the latter were more scary since they were about 'proper' God. Lasting images of stone slabs, slit throats, deliverance of babies - whatever was most precious to mortals given up to all-powerful and usually raging gods, to appease and placate - to ensure survival.

Original sin I find an outrageous suggestion. Born bad - bah... Original fear, however - aren't we all naturally afraid to die, and isn't that fear part of our instinctive drive to survive? The kind of sacrifice I've just described feels like part of mankind's survival story, unlike the kind used to fix a different sort of personal terror.

Trying to reconcile God the ogre with God the loving father was confusing. The memory of sitting between my grandparents beneath the vicar's voice booming from the pulpit 'I, I, cross out the I,' won. God'd be angry if I wasn't gooder, which meant less for me and more for others, whether I knew those others or not. As for Jesus - sharing, giving, being nice all the time. How could he do that? I knew I wasn't, couldn't. Guilt galore.

Forty years later and I'm wondering about sacrifice - giving away something precious - in terms of being able to afford it. If I give from too empty a pot, using the very act of giving to feel virtuous, my self quickly erodes. The receiver also pays. I recently had the experience of being on the receiving end of unhealthy giving. Driven by the need to feel appreciated, this friend's insistence on helping and supplying material goodies was overwhelming. I took on his erosion, becoming increasingly incompetent and helplessly dependent; what a relief when the effort and guilt it took to say 'no thanks' told me it was time to heave him out of my life, get my self back, and leave him to deal with (or not) what was his.

The stronger the sense of self, which depends on enough needs being met

enough of the time, the more giving is affordable. Nobody loses; neither giver, nor receiver. No demand for thanks, no guilt at receiving what the owner can't do without. This is the link to 'real' forgiveness, which is fuelled by the same generosity. The motive isn't to feel virtuous; the effect, though, is satisfaction. Gain to both parties.

I realise I'm describing the essence of the therapeutic relationship. Early on in training, a session on rescuing activated strong resistance: 'What's the matter with wanting to help?' I argued, having no idea of my own neediness, and thankfully a long way from working with clients. Now I just hope there are not too many therapists out there giving of themselves at the expense of their clients. (Hey - a moment of realisation re my 'addiction' to tv soaps: they fill a need for emotional drama harmlessly.)

Time to bring sex into the picture, without which talk of God 'n' religion wouldn't be complete. My mother, directly descended from the straight-laced variety of Victorianism, taught me I had 'to suffer to be beautiful.' Hers was the era of pantigirdles and stilettos. Lots of squeezing. The packaging of bottoms, bellies and bosoms I grew up with said 'Look but don't touch, get off, keep out.' To be comfortable, relaxed and natural was too sexy by far. As for nipples, to be disguised at all costs. Heaven forbid. So how come God didn't approve of comfort, let alone sex? Correction, sexual pleasure. And how come Jesus didn't do it, so far as we know? Or his mother...

Was it jealousy that made God eliminate competition? Did his anger come from

feeling threatened, was his demand for sacrifice a bid for reassurance? Aged fourteen, I decided after about ten minutes' consideration, not to become a nun; if all that discomfort went unnoticed, what was the point? Heroism needed witness. It was then I began wondering how much God's demand for 'all', sexual love included, was responsible for guilt - for not supplying. Jealousy and Guilt are quite a pair.

I continue to wonder how much I've constructed this version of God from how I experienced my stepfather - the epitome of 'dog-in-the-manger' - and from my religious instructors' projections of their instructors. In the quest for a less cluttered image, I can now sense that another kind does exist - if and when I want one. More tolerant, encouraging and most importantly unconditionally loving.

How to feel secure enough to shed the clutter? And how to break the spell of this particular addiction, arising I believe from maladaptive religious practice - without swinging to the other extreme (gluttony) also well-documented in the history books from my school days.

From as young as I can remember I knew 'it's not so much what happens, but how it's dealt with.' Having just been training with Babette Rothschild in Somatic Trauma Therapy, in terms of post traumatic stress I'm delighted to have this child-wisdom affirmed and supported by research and practice. During my own therapy, it wasn't long before I insisted 'It (attention, care, love) has to come from outside first,' by which I meant that to re-stimulate the instinctive drive to self-care, I needed lots. That enough

good treatment can heal both spirit and brain to reinstate self-care as an automatic response fills me with awe.

I call the second stage of the process The Hot Chocolate Challenge, since this was where my battle with me commenced once I took on more self-responsibility - after I'd settled essential needs such as peeing. The battle-ground, though, kept shifting. Once I cracked warm drinks, there was hot water, heating, new socks, anyplace where the issue was pleasure and comfort. Then came learning to differentiate between needs and wants. I'd been so good at talking myself out of hot chocolate, for two weeks I insisted on a daily dose. Only then could I consider whether I actually wanted one or not, and choose. If I chose not, I'd spend the £1.40 on another treat, so I couldn't get away with having nothing. Building trust - to know what's ok to spend and what's genuinely be too much - is ongoing.

The last challenge is giving. Here comes Christmas again, and I want to feel generous. Well, I know from experience now what I only knew intellectually last year - that generosity depends on treating myself to plenty. I'm working on it....

Describing the recovery process it sounds straightforward. Well, it is; and the experience is unlikely to be a smooth ride. Boulders of resistance and periods of relapse can repeatedly interrupt the flow. Via thinking 'what's the point of

living if I don't enjoy?' I regularly faced the choice between giving up and persevering. The challenge of hot chocolate was a good one. There was simply no excuse (too expensive, don't have time, too far to go etc) that wasn't me saying 'I'm afraid.' Sip by sip I learned that having a good time came from everyday things, and the more I had the safer and better I felt.

I turn to the difference between martyrs and suicide-killers to get a clear picture of 'true' sacrifice and its maladaptation. The former choose to die from a secure enough sense of self to survive (transcend) even death. That the motive is selfless is seen in the after-effect of such deaths. The latter use extreme acts they perceive as heroic; heroism is the motive rather than the result. That such misplaced attempts to fix existential terror are supremely selfish is evident in the destruction left in their wake.

My belief is that behind any addiction, including the drive to kill as a misguided route to satisfaction, lies an unresolved episode when the self was overwhelmed to the point of wipe-out. Hence the emptiness, the terror, the 'I, I, all for me' call for attention.

Next on my agenda is to take a closer look at the Buddhist way. I begin this adventure mistrusting what I've gleaned so far, resistant and suspicious; but nevertheless curious...