

Ronald Arms: A Good Enough Commitment

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Seekers Church

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A Good Enough Commitment

[Psalm 137](#)

A seeker asks a teacher, "What are you really talking about?" The teacher replies, "You see this goblet? For me this glass is already broken. I enjoy it; I drink out of it. It holds water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put the glass on a shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, 'Of course.' But when I understand this glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious."

This began as a response to the October 4 lectionary question, "How do you sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" [Learners and Teachers](#) mission group wants to offer sermons the next four weeks working with various dimensions of commitment. A last minute change in our schedules has given me a new set of lectionary readings. So with apologies to [Margreta](#), I want to work with the meaning of commitment in exile. This isn't a perfect or a total commitment. If we allow the exile experience to teach us, however, it can be a good enough commitment.

Several of us have been reading John Spong's latest book, *Christianity Must Change or Die*. In it he writes, "I live in a

state of exile from the presuppositions of my own religious past. I am exiled from the literal understanding that shaped the creed at its creation. I am exiled from the worldview in which the creed was formed." He traces Christianity's exile through Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Freud and Einstein in interesting fashion. I suspect Annie Dillard would add, "Only a brainless tourist on a packaged tour of the Absolute could still feel at home."

To enter into exile throws us back on ourselves. It destroys our temples and monuments. We leave our homes and valuables behind. Exile scatters our friends and neighbors. It leaves us with little more than the clothes on our backs. The experience of exile leaves us little more than our bodies.

Marjory reminds me I choose to be an outsider. I grew up a foreigner, living for ten years as a North American in South America. I know about learning another language and looking at the world from another's point of view. While I'm hardly in exile, I am feeling defeated and somewhat of a failure at times. I find my body a useful companion in these situations. Thus, this subject seems an appropriate task.

The theme for this recommitment season is the mystery of God. Nowhere is this mystery more real than in our bodies. Many think learning takes place only in our heads and feel commitment takes place only in our hearts. But exile is a time of incarnation. Foreigners embody their values and beliefs. Our physical selves have the capacity to incorporate the Creative Mystery of the universe. Learning through the body softens our certainties. It provides physical intelligence. The experience of exile may leave us nothing more than our body, but in so doing it also makes the point that our body is a learning laboratory, an instrument designed to explore the mystery of God. As a Muslim noted, "The body should be studied not only by those who wish to become doctors but by those who wish to attain a more intimate knowledge of God." Al Ghaz Ali

One way to use our bodies as learning instruments is to work with our habits. We are all addicts—creatures of our habits. They are body functions. They are our personal bureaucracy. The code of habit has much to teach us. Habits are one of the boundaries where we are most likely to meet the Mysterious. Habits are one of the places where our body learns about a good enough commitment.

As I work with my body it suggests these lessons to me about commitment in exile: 1) Broaden your choices; 2) Risk and learn from failure; and 3) Respond rather than react. While they won't dispel the mystery of God, they may provide a good enough commitment—a commitment of the body. This is a commitment you can take with you into exile.

Broaden your Choices

Few habits are stronger than breathing. This rhythmic in and out invites us to explore stillness and silence as path and practice. I used to think paying attention to my breathing made me weird. If I was going to meditate, I did it in private where others couldn't observe or interrupt me. I preached a sermon once before on three different kinds of breathing and got sarcastic comments from a favorite uncle who had been a missionary in Japan about my Christian yoga. He seemed to think my faith had taken too sharp a turn East.

Now I keep a cushion and a mat on my bedroom floor. I've learned to tell my kids I'm going to meditate. For six months this year I awoke an hour earlier to pay attention to my breath. It is a body practice that helps use the finite as a telescope with which to explore the infinite. It takes a simple in and out repetition and transforms it into a wealth of experience. At times it is quiet, tranquil and relaxing. On other occasions, it takes every bit of effort to complete a sitting.

One thing that breathing has taught me is the importance of

slowing down. There is a saying: "A wise person is never in a hurry." I too often rush through my days, as though there were a reward for getting to the grave first. But watching my breath come in and go out reminds me it is better to do nothing than to waste time. There is a Thai proverb I've come to appreciate, "Life is short. We must move very slowly." Or as another of my teachers put it, "Don't just do something, sit there."

Slowing down broadens my choices. It helps me realize that either/or is merely a mindset, a map of a particular way of viewing the territory. I often allow this map to trap me. I'm an either/or freak. This logic limits me. When I step out of the bureaucracy of my mind I enlarge my perspective. This nurtures an immensity of vision that breaks the tyranny of rationality and frees me from my own mind forged manacles. I discover more options, wider horizons and greater possibilities. These move me from a culture of certainty to a culture of inquiry. Even if I decide to do what is my habit, the choice has a different quality. Decision replaces obligation.

This bit of physical intelligence suggests a teaching story about a hunter who goes into the forest to try and capture a bird. He wanders for a long time in the forest, and in the end, never captures the bird. But that is all right, he has learned the ways of the forest. I take this to mean that I can't capture freedom as a personal trophy; I can only be free. I can't display commitment as a School of Christian Living certificate, I can only commit.

Too often I want to capture power, spirit, a first hand experience of the Sacred. Inasmuch as I want to claim these as prizes they will escape me. Instead I must realize commitment is a grace. It is a gift. It is not something we earn, or deserve. Commitment does not happen on command. It is an accident. There are a number of practices that make me more accident-prone. Paying attention to breath is one of these.

One day we will wake up in the middle of a habit we no longer want and come face to face with the Mysterious.

The in and out of breathing uses a habitual body function to help us break out of prisons of our own making. We no longer need to limit ourselves to either/or thinking. We have multiple choices that allow us to learn a little more about a commitment of the body—a good enough commitment.

Risk and Learn from Failure

Ironically the first lesson of meditation is always failure, and in some ways this is the most important lesson of all. Just try and sit still and count your breath to four. The Thai meditation teacher Ajahn Chah once observed, "There are people who are born and die and never once are aware of the breath going in and out of their body. That's how far away they live from themselves." Even when we take the step of working with the breath, we fail. "This is a difficult lesson. We are all so goal oriented, so conditioned by society to regard every new undertaking in terms of success or failure. Though the goal of breath counting is to count the breath from one to four without losing count, frequently the most vivid awareness actually occurs at the moment when we realize our minds have wandered and we renew our effort by returning to one." (Clark Strand, *The Wooden Bowl*)

Interdependent relationships are a key skill in the physical thinking a good enough commitment takes. This means letting go of the illusion we are invulnerable, without needs, perfect creatures that learn without making mistakes. This is the invitation to risk failure. This is difficult to understand. We prefer comfort and security. We sanitize our sins so that their smells don't contaminate our sanctuaries. We wear our Sunday best to church so that we don't have to face that we are playing with our chemistry sets on the floor mixing up a batch of TNT. To sing the Lord's song in a strange land we need to stretch the muscles of our perception. We must move

beyond our preoccupation with what is right. It is no longer enough to offer only our very best. The exile experience invites us to offer our worst, our mistakes as well.

I know the body can be a battlefield, a burden, and a prison. We are chained to a dying animal. We all grow old, get sick and die. So making it an instrument with which to explore commitment and the mystery of God is not an easy step for me to take. But then again, neither is exile, nor life for many of the world's inhabitants. Many commentators consider today's gospel lesson Jesus' most difficult parable. Frederick Capon points out in *Parables of Grace* Jesus didn't come to improve the improveable, perfect the perfectible or to teach the teachable. He came to raise the dead. His incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection are bodily events. Jesus calls us to our bodies so that we will not some day die as "one who almost lived."

The body is not an easy subject for me. This week my eldest daughter from my first marriage had her 28th birthday. She still must be dressed, bathed, bathroomed and fed each day. Cerebral palsy has left her with little use of her body. She controls one finger on her right hand with difficulty. She is amazing. Her speech is slurred but understandable. She began school in a special program for disabled kids, was mainstreamed in grade school, and surprised me when she finished high school. I flew to Utah full of pride for her graduation from college. And she is a paper or two away from her Master's Degree. But her body frustrates her so much she has attempted suicide several times. Her disability is so severe that even killing herself is a challenge.

To explore how I could use my body to offer my worst and learn from my mistakes I took Aikido lessons. It is a soft martial art and a fascinating combination of movement and breath. The road to commitment in aikido begins with learning how to fall without injury and how to yield without losing face. It meant buying a gi and wearing strange clothing to a dojo on a

regular basis. There I realized that these martial artists practice falling on a cushioned mat. They learn to cope with uncertainty best when they can practice making mistakes in a safe environment that offers support.

Increasingly I found familiarities in this practice hall and in Seekers. It is when we are willing to allow each other to practice making mistakes in a safe environment that we make a good enough commitment possible. Our faith incorporates the belief Jesus came to raise us from the dead. Salvation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing learning process that keeps inviting us to get up from life's failures and grow some more. Physical thinking can greatly help us understand a good enough commitment, particularly when we are in exile. Our bodies need to take us into relationship with others, also imperfect human beings, if they are going to teach us about the mystery of God.

To risk failure is an invitation to harvest our mistakes. Rather than hide them, pretend they don't matter or deny them, give them attention. This can lead to new and better beginnings. We have the permission and the command to enter difficulty with hope. Making mistakes frees us from our need to pretend how good we are. In that freedom we discover again there is no need to earn what God has already freely given.

One of my favorite stories from *Kitchen Table Wisdom* is about an athletic youth who loses both legs in a tragic accident. In rehabilitation therapy he draws a picture of himself as a broken cup. Gradually he recovers and learns to walk with artificial limbs. He hears of a woman who has lost both breasts to mastectomies and goes to visit her. She is in deep despair. Not knowing what else to do he turns on music and begins to dance around on his artificial legs. She finally breaks out in a smile, figuring that if he could dance with no legs the least she could do was smile with no breasts. When the young man shares this story the therapist asks him about the drawing of the cup he had produced long ago. Looking at it

again he adds bright dashes of yellow to the crack and allows that perhaps the Sacred put the crack there to let light shine through.

The willingness to risk and learn from failure, to depend on others is at the heart of community. None of us does it perfectly. But what Seekers and the School of Christian Living can provide is a place where we can continue to practice it on a regular basis, knowing that we are in a safe environment that offers support. Time and again I have seen different members of this community reach out and care. With holy wickedness and healthy imperfections we explore interdependence. This is commitment in a bodily form—that is good enough commitment.

Respond rather than react

My use of my body as a learning instrument begins most mornings when I head out our side door with our Spanish Springer Tony on his leash to take a five-mile jog. I've been running on a daily basis for almost thirty years. It is a habit of mine. On this particular day I used the same old leash. It was six feet long and allowed us to find a comfortable rhythm that makes keeping company easy. Because it was old, the metal clip that hooks on to Tony's collar broke. Imagine my surprise when in the middle of our run I looked back to see the leash was dragging on the ground. Tony was faithfully close by keeping pace. We must have been a funny couple. A person running with a leash that had no dog on the end of it, followed by a dog without a leash who stayed close to his master. Both of us had such strong habits that they dictated our actions.

The hardest thing to learn is something you already think you know. After 30 years of practice it is easy to think you know it all. But some of the best lessons are those you learn after you thought you knew everything. As a result I've been working with my running, both on the roads and in my reading. It has

taught me a good enough commitment moves as a response rather than a reaction.

I want to use my body as a begging bowl for spirit. To run as a response invites me to expand my movement vocabulary. We are all, in varying degrees bound by our reactions. But our advantage is we can develop movement alternatives. We can perform the same act in different ways. We can update our habits. The objective is not to simply move, but to learn what we can discover about movement.

One important discovery is that each of us must define what constitutes better movement for ourselves. There is no need to give up striving to move well, but well is not necessarily far or fast, large in quantity, strong or long. One runner says that when he first began to practice better meant faster, shorter. But as he began to explore marathons the meaning changed to going longer. And now it better means staying healthier and enjoying it more. Moving well can be realized when you breathe with the movement and feel comfortable, elegant and joyful. We can teach our brains to harvest satisfaction from movement. When we run in response rather than in reaction we sweat our prayers. This takes us beyond the preoccupation with wrong to acknowledge and explore what is gratifying. We envision and embody our potential.

Responsive movement is a kind of reverse immunization process. Instead of increasing in small portions our tolerance to negative influences, we open up to more pleasure. To search for ease in many cases means to do things with less strength, less speed and less distance. A slowness that knows how to wait provides the currency of well-being. This ease of well-being includes the grace of pleasure and the taste of enjoyment.

Paying attention is the alchemy that improves the quality of our action. One way to check ourselves on this count is to answer the question, "When you see a speck on the wall do you

notice the stain or the cleanliness of the background?" Awareness is the clutch pedal to human freedom. Its pause gives us the choice to act in another, original way. It gives us more options with time and space. If we want to know whether we have done something with awareness, we can notice how we feel afterwards. Attention and awareness leave us refreshed and content.

I'm learning that efficiency is not one better way of doing things, but a willingness to alter the habitual. My running is still a thirty-year habit, but it is also intimate research on myself. I'm open to the Divine gamble that Spirit and matter are capable of incarnation. Movement is one of the ways I explore the mystery of God. It is physical thinking that makes my commitment a matter of the body-a good enough commitment.

Conclusion

D. W. Winnicott, the psychotherapist, taught that to go willingly into the unknowing is the key to living a full life. To do this we need to develop the capacity to be alone. Good enough parents must be able to leave their children alone. Leaving them alone means allowing a child to have her own experience. Leaving kids alone is the balancing act between too much care taking and too much absence. When we are willing to allow the feelings of emptiness, dissatisfaction, imperfection to teach us we will grow. Perhaps the exile experience is one way a good enough God teaches us about a good enough commitment.

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