

A FOUR-PART SERIES: MATTERS OF THE HEART

COMMENTARY I: HEART OF STONE

by John Bennison

Note: This is the first commentary in a four-part series entitled "Matters of the Heart." It is offered as a corollary to the more traditional season of Lent and Easter observance. As such, this first commentary is preceded by prefatory remarks that provide for the reader a framework for the four commentaries that follow. As always, comments are welcome to enhance the conversation and continue the dialogue.



PREFACE:

MATTERS OF THE HEART

"Ah, but I might as well try and catch the wind."

Refrain to an old song by Donovan

Recently a plainclothes undercover police officer was staking out a neighborhood in Sussex, England, where law enforcement was trying to combat a spike in home burglaries, when he received a radio call from a closed-circuit TV operator, who reported someone acting suspiciously in the area.

The operator continued to track the suspect, but every time the figure would dart into a side alley or turn another street corner, the police officer would radio in to report there was no trace of the phantom figure. Time and again the TV operator would briefly spot the suspect and update the officer. "You're hot on his heels!" the operator cried out at one point.

After the frantic pursuit had gone on for nearly twenty minutes, a sergeant happened to come into the control room at the police station, recognized the suspect on the monitor as a member of his team, and realized the cop on the beat had, yep, been chasing himself. True story.

It seems one of the most elusive characters we can ever try to encounter is ourselves. Our *true self*, some like to call it. And, as egocentric as we tend to make our lives, it is surprising that we have trouble nonetheless recognizing our own shadow. You might as well try and catch the wind, one might say.

It seems the most elusive characters we can ever try to encounter are ourselves. Our true self, some like to call it.

It is precisely because of this that some of us deem it wise and useful to perennially pause and take stock of ourselves, and our relationship with those around us. In the context of the Christian tradition and faith journey, this kind of introspection is sometimes called Lent.

It is not meant to be yet another exercise in self-indulgence, but self-examination; expressed in a willingness to open the mind to new ways of thinking, and the heart to new ways of acting towards others. Consequently, it is customarily a time to practice more concerted acts of charity; as if, with practice, it might become more habitual.

And simultaneously, it is a journey that takes us to the heart of the matter; where we ask the kinds of questions Marcus Borg poses in his classic, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*.

What is the heart of Christianity? What is most central, the heart of the matter?... As an organic metaphor ... what is the animating source of Christianity, without

which it would cease to exist? (It is) something deeper than the intellect and the world of ideas. ... The heart, this deeper level of self, is the 'place' of transformation. What is it about Christianity that gives it power to transform people at the 'heart' level?

This is what is best about the traditional observance of a "holy" Lenten season, which leads to the celebration of transformation more commonly known as Easter. So it is that it begins with ancient words of admonition and invitation.

The prophet bids us "rend our hearts, and not our garments" (Joel 2:13). The psalmist's verse implores the Holy One to "create in me a new heart ... and restore a right spirit within me." (Ps. 51:10) And the Galilean spirit sage instructs, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Mt.5:8)

Such a journey leads us from *believing things about* Christianity, especially Easter (including many things many folks really no longer believe, and for good reason, I would add), to a new way of *being* Christian; of actually integrating head and heart in such a way that it has both intellectual integrity and emotional authenticity.

Ultimately, this all suggests a richer life of faith lies in a re-emersion deep within the matters of

the heart; where we can both identify and experience those oft-touted virtues, like charity (love and grace), generosity of spirit, humility and empathy, forgiveness and reconciliation. These are, indeed, the *matters of the heart*, because they reveal, restore and transform the best of what the Christian tradition is all about. This is what this series of four commentaries will explore.

We begin, however, with the simple acknowledgment this is not a simple task. Hearts grow cold, even stone cold. For it seems as though we often spend so much time chasing after so many other things.

It's as if we would do our best to distract ourselves from our true self and what lies at the heart of the matter. If we're honest about it, the task of actually catching ourselves in the act of inaction, distraction or self-deception is not easy, but it is possible.

I liken it to Sally the dog, who'll run in circles, chasing her own tail. But fortunately – and unlike the hapless English bobby -- she's smart enough to know it's *her* tail; and skilled enough to periodically succeed in actually catching it. But once caught, she quickly loses interest; as if the important thing is the reassurance of knowing who's really who, lest the tail wag the dog.

COMMENTARY I: HEART OF STONE



Woman Caught in Adultery, Artist: Qi He, China, 2001

Text for Context: Early in the morning Jesus showed up again in the temple and everybody gathered around him. He sat down and began to teach them. The scholars and Pharisees bring him a woman who was caught committing adultery.

They make her stand there in front of everybody, and they address him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?" (They said this to trap him, to have something to accuse him of.)

Jesus stooped down and began drawing on the ground with his finger. When they insisted on an answer, he stood up and replied, "Whoever is sinless in this crowd should go ahead and throw the first stone at her." Once again he squatted down and continued writing on the ground.

His audience began to drift away, one by one – the elders were the first to go – until Jesus was the only one left, with the woman there in front of him. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where is everybody? Hasn't anyone condemned you?"

She replied, "No one, sir." "I don't condemn you either," Jesus said. "You're free to go, but from now on no more sinning." [John 8:1-11]

Former senator and once-presidential hopeful John Edwards made the news again last month when it was reported his lawyers were seeking a delay in his upcoming trial due to some mysterious illness.

Edwards, of course, faces felony and misdemeanor charges for allegedly mishandling campaign contributions to cover up an illicit affair with a campaign staffer four years ago, while his wife was dealing with a recurrent bout of the cancer that would subsequently take her life.

“Why do we find John Edwards so particularly loathsome?” asked *Time* magazine writer Jeffrey Kluger; calling him, “the putrefied meat of the American political system.” [*Time*, 1-11-12]

Kluger’s article went on to describe a *scientific* explanation why certain people committing particular misbehaviors are regarded as being more despicable than others of the same ilk (arguably, in this case, current presidential hopeful Newt Gringrich’s notorious past offenses and indiscretions).

“With the widespread use of functional magnetic imaging (fMRI),” the reporter explained, “neurologists have discovered the overlapping circuitry that governs morality and disgust.”

In other words, it’s all in our heads.

"There is literal disgust and moral disgust, and the two overlap," says Jonathan Haidt, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. "Betrayal, hypocrisy, certain kinds of baseness trigger the brain's moral response."

In one study cited, brain activity in the “disgust” lobes were triggered when people observed someone getting cheated; and the more honorably the victim was regarded to be (e.g. Elizabeth Edwards), the higher the repulsion response.

The negative consequences – or even potential consequences – of such misbehavior inflicted on an even greater number of others prompts an even stronger reaction. In

Edward’s case, the harm he would have caused his political party had he won the nomination, or the country as a whole had he been elected President, is incalculable.

With all his brains, fame and notoriety, success and talent, good looks and slick talk so eloquently advocating for the needs of the nation’s poor, people ask in bewilderment, what in the world was he thinking?

The obvious answer few seem willing to acknowledge was, he wasn’t (thinking, that is). But people seem loath to find much distinction between an explanation and an excuse.

In another study, where it was found there was a bias towards leniency for attractive people over less attractive ones, the one exception was where the perpetrator was perceived as having used their good looks or good fortune to help commit their offense. Then an even heavier judgment and sentence was imposed.

If all this scientific analysis sounds too heady, it may be interesting to note the mysterious illness that required Edward’s trial to be postponed turned out to be a serious *heart* condition, requiring surgery. And it doesn’t take much for me to make the *metaphorical leap* and ask if that whole mess has less to do with our heads, and more to do with *matters of the heart*.

Sure, a trial will provide a forum to present evidence and argue the facts of the case, in accordance with prescribed laws; by which the accused can be tried, his culpability determined, and a sentence imposed if he’s found guilty.

There was a (biblical) time when those of his ilk were simply stoned to death. Except in those primitive unenlightened days only women – considered possessions in a patriarchal culture – could ever be found guilty of adultery.

If all that sounds too arcane however, consider the recent case of the Afghan immigrant to

Canada convicted of murder in the “honor killings” of four female family members who had shamed him by their promiscuous Western behavior. The laws may have changed, but some of the cranial impulse responses may yet remain.

Consequently, as bystanders in the crowd, we will likely be able to follow as much of the minutia of the legal proceedings of Edward’s case as we wish; expressing all the visceral reactions our cranial lobes can withstand. But the heart of the matter may nonetheless lie altogether somewhere else.

In the end, John Edward’s faults and failures may have more to do with a broken heart; both literally and figuratively. In other words, there would evidently appear to be something fundamentally dysfunctional about the whole package that comprises the real John Edwards, and what makes him tick.

But the hardness of heart with which others may feel loath to extend to him much sympathy or understanding may say more about us, and how we handle our own sense of betrayal, and deflect our own shadow sides; lest all that be exposed to the light of day.

Here’s another old story that illustrates the point.

Biblical scholars generally agree the story in John’s gospel about Jesus’ encounter with the woman caught in the act of adultery was what is sometimes referred to as an “orphan” story. That is, while not part of the original gospel text, it nevertheless made its way into later versions of John’s gospel because it was seen as being similar to – and representative of – the kind of thing Jesus would have done and said in his repeated run-ins with the ecclesiastical authorities and their “testing” of his adherence to the Law.

The fact this story cannot likely be traced back to the actual words of the historical Jesus does not diminish the power of the story’s message in the least. On the contrary, it authentically reflects the incorporation of what was at the heart of Jesus’ good news message of what

was at the heart of his message for a second-generation Christian faith community. In other words, this orphan story was adopted by those who sought a way to distinguish themselves from the mob’s more predictable response.

So when the narrator of John’s gospel relates the story of an adulterous woman who is about to suffer the consequences of her loathsome actions he imagines Jesus’ response as being consistent with rest of the gospel’s narrative.

At the heart of this message, Jesus’ ministry was all about healing, restoring and reconciling; and in particular, when it ran completely contrary to conventional norms and the prescribed laws of his day.

Of the four canonical gospels, perhaps John’s gospel makes this contrast strongest, with his metaphorical Jesus, and a kingdom one step removed from both state/political authority and the hierarchy of his own religious roots; which, in the latter case, John refers to in the end simply as “the Jews.” The whole notion of who constitute God’s chosen elect has clearly broken all the bonds of nation states or religious heritage. The children of God become heirs by adoption, not divine right.

So in this very human drama that unfolds, before he addresses the one who has already been found guilty of her own particular offense, this Jesus character turns to the crowd, whose cranial “disgust” lobes must have been exploding. And, in response to the religious authorities testing him on what should be done with someone who had so flagrantly violated the ancient Law believed to have been prescribed by Yahweh and delivered by Moses, he says, “Whoever is sinless in this crowd should go ahead and throw the first stone at her.”

Only after everyone else has relinquished those stones in their clenched fists, and quickly withdrawn and slunk away, does Jesus turn to the loathed object of everyone’s projected disgust. He refuses to condemn her, but instead delivers those simple words of release, with the possibility of restoration.

When he tells her he will not condemn her, but that instead she is “free to go, and stop sinning,” he isn’t speaking so much from his head, as he is his heart. Because the brokenness that needed mending had little to do with the rules by which we separate the sinners from those who would feign to be sinless; and everything to do with our all-too-common faults and foibles.

As it turned out, at the heart of the matter, there was evidently enough as yet undisclosed faults and failures to go around for everyone who made a hasty retreat.

Moreover, while the crowd of bystanders may have turned and fled the scene, it was the *object* of their disgust that – in the end -- was the only one truly freed that day. The rest were left with only their loathing and their own self-incriminating shadows still intact.

... while the crowd of bystanders may have turned and fled the scene, in the end it was the object of their disgust that was the only one truly freed that day.

The Heart of the Matter

So what comprises the matters of the heart? The heart is that *essential* place that most reveals to ourselves, and to each other, who we really and completely are. It strips away all pretence and cuts to the chase. As it says in a Lenten bidding prayer I wrote many years ago, it is the chance to come with our “*fears and false pretence, and leave behind the mask of daily dread.*”

As such, it is a precarious place of risk and vulnerability, as well as redemptive possibility. It is a place of restoration, or even transformation. It is, in fact, the journey of dying to the old self, and being raised up again. It is the repeated story of death and resurrection.

So it is, in fact, the place where hopes and dreams can die. We call it heartache, or heartbreak. And it is a place where new dreams and new life are possible, with heartfelt hope. We call it Easter.

It is the place that most authentically expresses what is real and worthwhile. The *heart of the matter resonates* with that sense of what is true and what really matters in the end. Where the brain can register such common human responses as moral outrage and disgust, it is those other human impulses such as charity, empathy and compassion that can warm the heart, and even set it ablaze.

But here’s the thing: We seem inclined to steel ourselves against the unlikely prospect of the heart subduing what our heads might otherwise dictate. Stubbornness, resentment, envy, pride, avarice, even the quiet terror of our own secret shortcomings of a misbegotten self are enough to prefer *casting* stones, lest we drop them on our own two feet.

“Happy (or blessed) are the pure in heart,” Jesus taught. By which maybe we figure if the mere pretence of our own purity doesn’t initially qualify us, perhaps we can fake it till we make it.

Meanwhile, however, we remain susceptible to the spiritual malaise diagnosed time and again in the biblical story as having a *heart of stone*.

Time and again, Pharaoh’s stubbornness, his obstinate refusal to *liberate* those in *bondage* was described as his hardness of heart. He was plagued seven times over with his own self-inflicted destruction until his life was in shambles.

And once freed and delivered to a place of promise, the blessed of God were quickly prone to forget the same lesson them selves. With the deliverance of the Law by which they might order their lives, the underlying message upon which the law was based was to always remember the needs of orphan and widow and alien in your midst.

This was the oft-repeated code language, “for once so were you.” How to remember, and not forget? “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart,” the Torah taught, “and do not be stubborn any longer.” (Deut. 10:11-21)

In other words, soft and tender hearts are always better than hard ones.

In the gospels, one of the numerous confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities -- demarcating where the letter of the Law lost sight of the spirit of the Law -- had to do with the question of divorce. Accordingly, a note of dismissal satisfied the legal requirement, but Jesus takes the issue to the heart of the matter.

“Because of your hardness of heart,” he says, “this commandment was written for you. But in the beginning, at the creation ...” [Mark 10:5]

Obstinacy, however, is not the only symptom of a heart of stone. Fear can render the heart impenetrable to an openness to trust, or have faith.

After Mark’s gospel recounts the miracle story of the multiplication of the loaves to satisfy all who hungered, Jesus departs on his own, but later comes to his disciples who’d put out from shore in their boat. When Jesus approaches them as what they first perceive to be an apparition walking on the sea, he shouts out to them, “Take heart, it’s me, don’t be afraid.”

Mark continues, “And he climbed into the boat with the, and the wind died down. By this time they were completely dumbfounded. You see they hadn’t understood about the loaves; for they were being obstinate (optional common translation: ‘their hearts were hardened.’)” [Mark 6:52]

And, by the time John’s gospel tradition was established, the rejection of Jesus’ message and messiahship was confirmed in the hearts and minds of early Hellenistic Christian believers by what was perceived as fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecy:

Although he had performed ever so many miracles before their eyes, they did not believe

him, so that the word the prophet Isaiah spoke would come true: “Lord, Who has believed our message? To whom is God’s might revealed?”

So they were unable to believe, for Isaiah also said: “He has blinded their eyes, he has turned their hearts to stone, so their eyes are sightless and their hearts closed to understanding, or they would do an about-face for me to heal them.” [John 12:37-40]

The Bible is so often used as a rule book, to distinguish those who obey and believe and behave a certain way; in order to, say, distinguish who’s a Christian, and who isn’t.

But differently, one could say whole of the biblical tradition is actually a story about the matters of the heart. And at the heart of the gospel message is a tradition that reminds us time and again -- with very human stories -- what can turn the heart to stone.

One of those stories

My paternal grandfather was a quiet, soft-spoken man who I remember when I was a boy growing up in the fifties as someone who could also be stern and stubborn. He would probably have said he was merely principled.

A conservative Midwest capitalist who made a success of himself following the Great Depression, he regarded the rise of union labor and worker’s rights, along with Roosevelt’s New Deal, to be the utter ruination of the country.

So adamant was he about it that he stubbornly refused to carry a dime in his pocket, because it bore FDR’s image. So he retired as soon as he was able, to spend his remaining days watching ball games, reading the Wall Street Journal, and playing cribbage and golf.

Eventually, hardening of the arteries made it difficult for him to walk. A golf cart kept him going for a number of years, until his heart finally gave out at a respectable old age.

But that would not tell the whole story. Like any of us, he was a mixed bag.

My grandfather loved his family, and was always kind and generous to those whom he loved. I vividly remember sitting beside him on the piano bench while he played the only song he knew on the keyboard, *Little Brown Jug*.

He'd sing one nonsense verse after another,

*There was an old dog, and his name was Jack.
He sat right on the railroad track.
The train came by, and Jack flew high,
And flew right in the conductor's eye.*

*There was an old hen, and she had a wooden leg,
She was the best hen that ever laid an egg.
She laid more eggs than any hen on the farm,
And one more drink wouldn't do us any harm.*

Each verse would interspersed with the refrain sung in a deep boisterous voice, "Oh, Ho, Ho," he shout, to our delight, "you and me. Little brown jug, don't I love thee."

Yet if some of the other memories and family stories I could tell were judged by today's standards he would likely be regarded as a close-minded, strident partisan, bigot and a racist. Like everyone else, he was not only a product of his time and place; he was also a mixed bag and a complete human package.

So I share his middle name, William; and among my family keepsakes I have his gold pocket watch with his name and high school graduation date, 1908, inscribed on the back. If you look at old family photographs, some say I bear a striking resemblance to him.

And, in the larger scheme of things, together I suspect we bear a very human resemblance to just about everyone else. That would even have to include a former senator and once-presidential hopeful whose first name is also *John* (from the Greek, the name means 'man of God'). For, it's only when we feel inclined to forget how common our orphan stories are, that the heart tends to constrict and harden.

I suspect we bear a very human resemblance to just about everyone else. ... it's only when we feel inclined to forget how common our orphan stories are, that the heart tends to constrict and harden.

Several years ago now, when the John Edwards debacle seemed to follow what seems to be an endless parade of sex scandals involving national politicians and other celebs, I strove to temper those very human reactions of disappointment and disillusionment that were racing around inside the head. Then I sat down and actually wrote a letter to him.

Looking back on those words, I realize what is at the heart of that message hasn't really changed at all.

Dear Sen. Edwards,

I felt compelled to write a letter of encouragement, with the likelihood you may be experiencing little of it at this point ... I write to you out of my own experience, for whatever it's worth.

Any person faced with their own shortcomings knows that good people – even great people – often fail and fall from grace and the high expectation accorded them by others. But such failure is only truly consequential for those directly affected, and who matter most. With amendment of life, there is always a redemptive possibility that comes with getting right with one's self and those who still love us.

I have watched a crowd of bystanders comprised of a ravenous media and self-righteous critics dismiss you in caricature, throwing your words back on you as reflecting blatant hypocrisy. Beware of those other hypocrites, your former companions, who are legion; who hide their own human faults, while castigating others whose shadows have been exposed to the light of day.

I do not believe your once-duplicitous life invalidates the message and just cause you once advanced, and I presume still believe. Rather it is just the opposite. Now, more than ever, I hope you might one day strive to once again effectuate the kinds of needful changes that remain for the marginalized and disenfranchised among us. For you are now one of them.

There are those who will forever color anything you now say and do with a scarlet letter; and in the eyes of some you will never outlive the consequences of a sad chapter that is simply part of your story and who you are. With the many gifts and talents you have been given -- elected office will evidently no longer be your calling.

But it's also no longer about the old narcissistic you, or me for that matter; or even those who will stand far off and point a disdainful finger.

It's about the good fortune with which you now have been blessed to have your head, heart and hands truly in sync; I would still hope both for our common good and your own peculiar salvation.

With continued respect, and best wishes for you and your family ...

In the past, I've written such letters to others whose lives were in shambles. On occasion, I've subsequently learned and experienced how a few sane, heartfelt words amongst all the vitriol can sustain the hope life is possible after such a demise; as in, "You are free to go."

The *Time* magazine writer comes to a somewhat different conclusion at the end of the recent article mentioned when I began this commentary:

No matter how Edwards emerges from his own, very real criminal trial, he may not be destined to spend his entire life banished to the fringes of the national village. Paradoxically, the more his critics -- to say nothing of his prosecutors -- are seen to be piling on, the more our temporal lobes and prefrontal cortices may switch the

valence once more, turning even a deeply loathed perpetrator into an unlikely victim. It would be a slow and circuitous road to redemption and it's by no means guaranteed. But for a man who's justly fallen as far as Edwards has, it may be the only one.

Actually, I believe it has less to do with our hard-headedness, and more to do with our hard-heartedness.

Because the good news in this story, and every story like it, is that that "road to redemption" is of another sort.

It's a different path that leads to what ultimately matters most; those matters of the heart.

© 2012 by John William Bennison, Rel.D.

All rights reserved.

This article should only be used or reproduced with proper credit.

To read more Words & Ways commentaries, click on the Archives menu at <http://www.wordsnways.com>