

DAY FOUR

Finding Balance

Coming Together in the Spirit

Humans are amphibians—half spirit and half animal.... As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation—the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.

—C. S. Lewis¹

Defining Our Thematic Context

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, which is an anthology of imaginary letters from Uncle Screwtape—an Under Secretary to Satan—to his nephew and novice tempter Wormwood, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to capitalize on the “troughs” and “peaks” of humans, “to make good use” of human undulation.

For me, coming to know Francis of Assisi was crucial to achieving balance in my own life. Francis sensed that I struggled with the balance between learning and loving, between scholarship and spiritual expression.

He penned a fatherly note to me, saying, "It is agreeable to me that you should teach the friars sacred theology, so long as they do not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotedness over this study."²

Heresy, I think, is often a question of balance. The word itself, from the Greek *hairein*, meaning "to take," suggests a dangerous tipping or "taking away" such a balance.

I spent nine years of my life preaching in Italy and France, gaining, I am embarrassed to tell you, the reputation of being "the hammer of heretics."³ My hope was not to hammer any person, but to restore spiritual balance by hammering home the truth as I understood it from Scripture and other sources of wisdom. I want to consider with you some imbalances that tempted our age and invite you to ponder those that tempt yours.

Opening Prayer

I reach out to you,
O Lord of leaps and bounds,
but I teeter,
I tremble,
I sway on the edge
of awareness.

I have learned of you.
I have met you.
I have known you.
I have loved you.

You wait for me
beneath the trapeze.
You hold the net of safety
in your strong and faithful hands.

You hold me up
when I fear to fall.
You hold me down
when I seem to float.
You stretch me taut
when I shrivel small.
You hug me close
when I fall apart.

You are mighty God.
I can fall
only into your arms.

RETREAT SESSION FOUR

In the Middle of Every Heart

Each person's center of gravity, the place where he or she is in tune with the universe, balanced and serene, is different. Musical harmonies shift from chord to chord. The same note cannot be sustained indefinitely. Spiritual balance is unique to each person and varies throughout the days of a person's life. Yes, we undulate. We are not all asked to balance on one toe like a ballerina or strike a perilous pose on the circus trapeze. Yet the same confidence, the same courage, the same inward grace is required.

"I am among you as one who serves."⁴ [Jesus] stands in the middle in every heart; he stands in the middle so that from him, as from a center, all the lines of grace might stretch outward to us who are at the circumference, revolving and moving about him."⁵

I can testify to this mighty power—these lines of

blessed grace—at work throughout my life, but wish now to focus especially on my preaching missions in France and Italy. There, my challenge was to strengthen people of faith to face the temptation to lean too far to the left or the right, even to fall from balance, to move from the middle of their hearts.

I am suggesting three such tightropes which faced us in medieval times. You may find that you have teetered on these ropes yourself. And I say to you, “Stay ‘in the middle,’ therefore, and you will have peace with your neighbor. If you do not stay in the middle, you will not be able to have peace....”⁶

Between Word and Work

The first undulation I wish to address is between word and work. Your modern musical, *My Fair Lady*,⁷ includes a song called “Show Me.” Eliza Doolittle, a woman of humble origins, (perhaps her accent is something like the Portuguese edge on my Italian) sings, “Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words!... If you’re in love, show me!”⁸ Eliza certainly didn’t want or expect total silence but rather a balance and harmony between what was said and what was done.

Eliza’s admirer Freddy was plying her with more of the aristocratic mumbo-jumbo that was supposed to be making such a difference in her life, but it appeared to be all talk. Eliza wanted a hug, a kiss—some evidence of Freddy’s affections. “Never do I ever want to hear another word. There isn’t one I haven’t heard,”⁹ she complains.

Toward the end of the twelfth century, the Waldensians, who sought to be poor like the poor Christ, took scandal at the behavior of the clergy, that is, the behavior of my fellow priests. The Waldensians had

raised a tune much like Eliza Doolittle's, saying, "Don't just preach the good word. Live it." They began with a straightforward challenge which the Church would have done well to acknowledge and address. Eventually, though, they severed their connection with the Church to express their contempt for ordination and for the Mass.

This was not the main heresy I was asked to counter with my preaching. Still I met many people who were thrown off balance by its assertions, just as these Poor of Lyon, followers of the French Valdes (also written as *Waldes*), were confused by hypocrisy in their priests. As I preached, "When merely the mouth of the preacher and not his life speaks, no fountain of water can come forth from the rocky ground. The face of the preacher is his way of acting, for in it is reflected his true countenance. This face must shine like the sun, that in our works all may see what we have learned by faith."¹⁰

So you can see that I *urged* priests to make their words one with their lives. I asked the same of myself and I ask it now of you who also preach a powerful message by your lives. I know it is difficult. Your words can run ahead of you. You may say what you wish was true, hoping to catch up to your words. Or you may say what you think will please someone or inspire a listener, even if you aren't able to act on it yourself. You confuse and contradict yourself. You can spread confusion among others.

So, are you to keep silence then? No, I simply ask you to speak the truth. Will you do it always? Knowing people as I do, I think not. But, you can begin first by attending more to the gaps between your own words and actions rather than to those of others. "First take the log out of your own eye"¹¹ or, should I say, from your own mouth.

Second, you can soften your assertions, not of eternal

truth, but of personal opinion and observation. You do not need to state your own opinions as though they have the force of law. In truth, you would do well to remember that they seldom carry such weight.

Third, you can remember that “[T]ongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”¹² Words are not always necessary. I once heard the wisdom, “Speak only if you can improve on the silence.” That might be too drastic a measure to imagine, but I’m sure you catch its spirit.

Perhaps you do not lean so much toward words. You teeter more toward impetuous action. It is not your mouth but your hands and feet that trip you up. I faced this challenge. I knew that people *might* listen to me, but could be *counted* upon to watch my actions. I once said, “The difference between saying and doing is as great as was that between creating and re-creating. Creation, in a sense, was simple and easy, for it was done by word alone, or rather by God’s will alone, for God’s willing is his speaking. Re-creation, however, was extremely difficult because it was done by suffering and dying.”¹³ It is this “suffering and dying” that people will expect to see in you if you are walking at all the tightrope of word and work.

Just to offer one example: Are you living and working in complete comfort? At whose cost? People walked days to hear me preach and in such numbers that I often spoke outdoors. I did not insist on pulpit or shade. I spoke in my clearest, strongest voice, teaching them the word of God and its challenges, encouraging them to be faithful, and I stayed to hear their confessions late into the night. I took no time for lunch, though people picnicked all around me. (What was I to say? “For your penance,

please offer a few of those grapes to your confessor"?) I did not want to keep people waiting. I loved them too much.

I would also urge people not to judge by appearances, but it is a great temptation. In considering your undulations, you do well to consider a balance between appearances and inward realities. Do they speak in concert or discord?

Do not look to my life, however—or to the lives of others—but your own. Bring your words and your work to the center and there you will find Christ who will hold you up as you find the balance.

Between Body and Soul

"Amphibians," C. S. Lewis says of us. Spirit, yes, but "bodies, passions, and imaginations" as well. We live in the land of physicality, but we thirst for the waters of spirit. For three years, my mission in France was to offer refreshment to the thirsty of soul but to announce also the mystery of the Incarnation. In tracing the story of Jesus from the heavens to the earth on which we walk, I wanted the people of Carcassonne, Toulouse, Albi, Agen and Razès to long to be like Jesus, who chose a body while honoring the soul. He expressed the struggle well: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."¹⁴ It is a question of balance.

My friends, the Cathari (from the Greek word for "pure"), struggled to understand this tension between body and soul. They concluded that good is spiritual and evil is material—and vice versa. Theirs is an appealing romantic spirit, also traceable in the troubadours and the courtly love tradition of bodiless affection. Some legends say that the Cathars guarded the Holy Grail, whose earlier keepers lacked the purity to protect the treasure.

It's possible that the Cathari emphasis on soul was a countermeasure against over-attention to the body, especially among those who were expected to show us the truth of the gospel. They went too far, which is the harm of heresy, a good point taken beyond its merit.

Franciscan Father Lothar Hardick explains the Cathari thinking well: "[The Cathari] held the view that all material, earthly reality was fundamentally corrupt and evil because it was created by an evil god. It was particularly in sexual production of life that they saw the real sin. Anyone who desired to be 'pure' would have to avoid all contact with anything that came into existence through sexual procreation.... The Cathari rejected all sacraments since these involved material things: bread, wine, oil, etc. And since, in their view, it was inconceivable that the spiritual nature of the Word could have united itself with an earthly body, they denied that Christ had been truly human. The Redeemer had assumed only an apparent body; his sufferings had been only apparent and not real."¹⁵

Thinking of this sort created a near resignation to evil among the Cathari of Southern France. If their lay preachers had spoken the truth, they were conceived in sin, their beautiful children were the offspring of sin, they were in constant need of food, warmth and love only because they were bodily sinners. And Jesus had *not* been like them "in all things but sin." Jesus was a stranger to their humanity.

Are the Cathari so far from you and your struggle to believe in God, to believe in Jesus, to believe that you are good, body and soul? Today, I feel certain that some of you think your body evil and your soul in danger. I say to you what I preached on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, "'Your life [body and soul] hangs before you' on the Cross so that you might see yourself as in a mirror,

examining and scrutinizing yourself in it.... If you pause to reflect profoundly, you will realize how sublime is your dignity, and how excellent your worth, which demanded so high a price. You cannot better appreciate your worth than by looking into the mirror of the Cross of Christ."¹⁶

Look again in this mirror. Try to imagine yourself as soul alone. Examine yourself. Saint Paul says to you, "[D]o you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?"¹⁷ and "[D]o you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?"¹⁸

See your reflection in the mirror. Is it a body only whose eyes look back at you? Is it your body to which you are attending in this retreat? Is your body asking for attention now? Do you need to grant its every demand? Can you deny its every wish? The heresy of today is, as it was in medieval times, to remain at either end of the tightrope—body or soul—rather than to attempt a marvelous balance and to live with the undulation.

Between Judgment and Compassion

Those the Church called heretics judged the Church wanting and had no compassion for the human weakness of its members. In turn, the Church often judged them harshly as well, failing to grant them a hearing or to acknowledge the flaws of the orthodox.

My preaching mission to France was not, however, a visitation of judgment. I sometimes spoke harshly of the clergy, I admit, but not of the people, the crowds. For them, I preached with love, probing every word of Scripture for messages to move their minds and hearts.

When they had heard the word of God's love for them, I offered to demonstrate the forgiveness of God through sacramental confession. I prayed, "Let us ask the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Son of the compassionate

Father, to fill us with His mercy, that we may show compassion to ourselves and to others; that we may judge no one, that we may not condemn anyone...."¹⁹

The role of a judge is to apply the law, to decide, to criticize or censure. In his memoir of childhood, Frank McCourt remembers much of censure and repression. I am glad that he also remembers a fellow Franciscan as a compassionate advocate, expressing sympathy, tenderness and clemency.

McCourt recounts his confession on his sixteenth birthday: "I did terrible things," he tells Friar Gregory. The friar responds, "God forgives all who repent. He sent His only Beloved Son to die for us." And Frank McCourt is moved to tell the kind friar a host of troubles—some sins of his own, some the sins of others, some simply the way of things in Limerick.

Father Gregory says, Would you like to sit and be silent, perhaps pray a few minutes?

His brown robe is rough against my cheek and there's a smell of soap. He looks at St. Francis and the tabernacle and nods and I suppose he's talking to God. Then he tells me kneel, gives me absolution, tells me say three Hail Marys, three Our Fathers, three Glory Bes. He tells me God forgives me and I must forgive myself, that God loves me and I must love myself for only when you love God in yourself can you love all God's creatures."²⁰

When I knew someone as Father Gregory knew young Frank, I always hoped to express God's compassion as well as God's judgment—which may indeed be one and the same. This was my sacramental calling—to express the balance. I, in turn, call you.

I believe that the balance here is in the conscious decision to be compassionate. In this retreat, I speak of Father Gregory, but I add your name as well. Why? I see

even more clearly that the forgiveness expressed by the confessor needs to be evident in your attitude and in your actions. In this way, you demonstrate that your debt has been lifted and you give hope to the rest. You see their debts, but you forgive them. Each one expresses this to the next and together you will dare to approach the seat of judgment.

To speak as our Father Francis wrote to me, it is agreeable to me that you speak, but be careful that your work expresses the Word as well. It is agreeable to me that you prize your soul, but take care to honor the created world in which you have been placed. Do not allow the light that is there to be extinguished. And, lastly, see clearly yet forgive generously. In the peaks and troughs of these undulations, you will ride the wave, finding the middle, a place in God's heart.

For Reflection

- *Consider your personal heresies. What are your own spiritual imbalances? When have you teetered toward the edge of excess? When have you failed in generosity?*
- *Consider the heresies, tensions or imbalances of the age. What words might collectively describe them for you—consumerism, prejudice, isolation, despair, pride? Others? Did Jesus speak to these tensions in parable? Do you have your own parable, a story which expresses the difficulty of finding the middle ground?*
- *In each of the three tensions named in this session, where do you find yourself? Which way do you lean? What can you do to achieve balance?*