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Commitment: An Exploration

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, breathtaking music evokes a tremendous desire and yearning for the redemptive power of love. Against the background of a somewhat failed love affair and the foibles of human nature, torment and bad behaviour are transformed into celebratory joy. Real life drama may not play out so magically, yet we have a sense the miraculous permeates our everyday lives in mysterious ways.

In his memoir, Michael Harding reminisces on the miraculous power of love. He recounts sitting in a hotel drinking coffee, overhearing an engaged couple as they prepare their marriage with the wedding planner. He reflects: *"Many years ago I'd promised my beloved the sun, moon and stars. We'd both fail. And then I failed, and failed again ... Because as life is lived out, the promises turn out to be less than what was dreamed of ... always failing, always deepening in love through failure ..."*[1]

Through adolesence and younger adult years, we filter, select and consolidate an initial constellation of values that define our identity *cum* personal integrity. These values become the launching pad for our life choices and commitments. Subsequent lived experience deepens, expands and modifies these values. We all recognise the crossroads of wild abandonment to 'other' – person, cause, ideal, God etc. as a developmental milestone. This may mark the loss of carefree innocence, but also a chosen obligation within the context of commitment. Some may come to this place of responsibility uneasily or reluctantly, through a more cautious route of testing the waters before committing. Even when commitment is secured, some have a fall-back option in case of failure – e.g. prenuptial arrangements, or 'dowry' in the tradition of religious life. Couples today sometimes live together and raise offspring before they

1 Harding, M. *Chest Pain*. Castleknock, Ireland: Hachette Books, 2019. pp 23-25

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commit. Formation for religious life/priesthood spans many years and stages to afford opportunities for 'real time' experiences and appraisal.

It is a paradox that the very tension inherent in the *permanence/forever* aspect of commitment may provide the best possible chance for 'the hundredfold'. Is it not a backdrop of failure that enables the fragile gossamer thread of love to strengthen and thrive? What follows explores some dynamics of commitment as applicable to every and any life situation, whether priesthood/religious life, single or married life.

COMMITMENT AND INTEGRITY

In this instance, commitment is understood as a two-way dynamic, a binding promise to an 'other' – person, cause, ideal, God etc. with agreed obligations, taking into account changing cultural, political, social and personal norms.

Clinicians identify '*commitment phobia*' as central to deferring longterm commitment, characterised by fear of losing oneself, or one's identity being swallowed up by the 'other'. This may lead to avoidance or brief serial relationships. Commitment is not a haphazard, momentary generosity. It is a covenant that asks us to live an intention, the train we board to travel on, the lens through which the pathway to wholeness and fecundity is navigated. While professed or embraced in a single act, renewal will be required, possibly many times along the way; It's an organic, often non-linear journey with challenges. As middle to later years approach one may spontaneously come to a crossroad signalled by a measure of doubt, discontent or disillusionment. Such crises may come to be viewed as potential opportunity or tragedy. If and when such existential moments beckon then one has to deliberate hard to refind direction: Do we renew, deepen, original commitment in the spirit of John 21 :18, yielding in faith *to "where you would rather not go*."? Or, perhaps the lived narrative no longer fits and other pathways must be explored? Or do we continue on – enduring the rest of the journey "*to come to know what hope his call holds …"* (cf. Ephesians 1:18).

Religious tradition/wisdom teachings remind us that bounded and bonded values consolidate core identity and strengthen personal/communal integrity. As such, commitment, our word of honour, is the means that leads to holiness (wholeness) and increased trust and respect with the passage of time and practice. This does not mean the tension of competing desires are thereby overcome. Rather, our character is strengthened by how we reconcile and integrate conflicting interests and contradictions (cf.

Ephesians 4:1) – as opposed to splitting off/estranging ourselves from the unwelcome, living out life's contradictions 'between two fields'. The metaphor of the cross characterises commitment: feet pinned down, arms outstretched to take the good and the bad and gaze turned upward for inspiration and tenacity. Again, the paradoxes which commitment presents need not be viewed as constriction, but rather, as on-going expansion and transformation.

FAILURE

As we advance in age and maturity, the 'fire in the belly' may cool, personal needs may no longer find a correspondence with primary commitment as before. There is no perfect match for desire and aspirations given the longings of the human condition. Infidelities or breaches can occur, slipping into incompatible ways that dishonour commitment, knowingly or unconsciously. Wavering self-esteem or lack of confidence also play havoc with personal integrity and character – the pillars that bear up commitment. One may look to untoward places for reassurance, may act in ways that are 'out of character' or alien; harmony and equanimity suffer, as does the desire for wholeness; e.g. a trustworthy person misappropriates charity funds, a generally kind and considerate person behaves in rude or an aggressive manner. As fallible creatures, mistakes, failings are never far away, as are contradictions and longings for what lies in the 'other field'. The Genesis narrative (cf. Genesis 3:1- 13) introduces an archetype of these themes: God provided for Adam and Eve to live wholesome lives. Interrupted by their poor judgement, they become aware of wrongdoing, feel exposed, cover their nakedness with fig leaves and hide in fear. The dialogue of shame and guilt follows.

SHAME AND GUILT

The human condition develops its own strategies for dealing with inner conflict, shame and guilt being the natural default for coping with failure.

Shame is how one feels - arising from consciousness of dishonouring one's self. *Guilt* is the sense of responsibility for an action or event, often accompanied by a felt need to redress what one has done or failed to do. It is a complex dynamic, and impacts self-esteem significantly. One way of understanding this intricate interplay of guilt and shame is the analogy of *good and bad cholesterol* – one may speak of the overlapping existence of *good* and *bad guilt.*

For example, when one acts against one's better judgement, shame is experienced with diminished self-esteem, followed by a

feeling of responsibility which urges one to seek to repair the flawed action. The very act of reparation defuses the charge of shame, restoring and strengthening self-esteem. Therefore *good guilt* is feeling a sense of responsibility, evoked by acting less than oneself, accompanied by the need to remedy failure through reparative action. The catalyst for *good guilt* is an inner sense of wrongdoing. We glean an expression of *good guilt* from the narrative of the prodigal son (cf. Luke 15:11– 20). He eventually comes to his senses of having failed his father's love and trust which impels him to return to seek his father's forgiveness and offer a plan for reparation. The bond of love between the father and son is renewed and strengthened and marked by lavish celebrations.

By contrast, we might act contrary to our integrity and feel little shame (latent shame) if our action is unknown to others. However, if this action were to be disclosed/exposed, we might be overcome by shame, with loss of self-esteem. *Bad guilt* is then set in motion by a niggling unease that we may be judged negatively or suffer the loss of trust and respect. Shame may persist hindering reparative action and eroding self-esteem. The catalyst for *bad guilt* is an inner sense of being judged adversely/a loss of positive regard by others, rather than a sense of wrong doing *per se.* In such circumstances it is not uncommon to weave anecdotes, in order to stifle shame; such stories tend to reassign meaning and distort the locus of responsibility for what we have done or failed to do, and distracts us from seeking to repair the impact; the alternative might be the threat of an overwhelming or paralysing sense of failure.

CHRISTIAN VIEW

'To err is human, to forgive divine' (Alexander Pope). Recognising and accepting that we are creatures who strive with fallible others, – under the gaze of a benevolent God whose Love accommodates what we cannot bear to speak of, forget, or hide in ourselves, – enables a turn around – even at our most powerless. This pathway to reparation is often a confusing ebb and flow of the *five Rs* – recognition, responsibility, remorse, reform, and repair. Zacchaeus exemplifies a model of reparation. In his moment of shame and sorrow he commits to make amends to those whom he cheated. (cf. Luke 19: 1-20). Saying *sorry* opens pathways of forgiveness, including the ability to forgive ourselves.

RENEWING LOVE

Human nature is complex, often difficult to fathom as reflected in the lament of Kahlil Gibran: *"I am a stranger to myself, and when I hear my tongue speak, my ears wonder over my voice ... My*

thoughts are strangers to my body, and as I stand before the mirror, I see something in my face which my soul does not see, and I find in my eyes what my inner self does not find."[2]

The Johari window[3] offers a way of understanding the self as posed by Gibran. It characterises the self as a single window with four distinct, bounded quadrants or panes: *known to self and others, not known to self*, *not known to others, and unknown.* This model of self awareness, often used to help us understand and improve interpersonal interactions, can help to draw the four disparate panes closer towards a less divided self.

Intimacy is often like boats gliding past each other in a harbour but never close enough to collide! Of particular interest for all of us is the hidden aspect (*unknown)* of ourselves – a Pandora's Box given its jack-in-the box activity of springing surprises when least expected – but also the place that holds the mystery of who we are in God's on-going revelation. The celibate life form has advantages and disadvantages, as has marriage. There is the advantage of time and space to develop an intimate relationship with God. On the other hand, in the absence of conflicts otherwise unavoidable for say married couples, the referenced window panes may not be sufficiently challenged. The following anchors might serve to steady and support in troubled times.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

As mentioned, it is not uncommon that passion waxes and wanes with passing years, in tandem with purpose and meaning. Needs and interests also change and may distract from the centrality of the relationship on which the original 'yes' of commitment was founded. In the Christian tradition we believe the call of commitment is a gift to be cherished, written into the plan of salvation (cf**.** Ephesians 1:3-14). Spiritual direction offers a wake-up call, a way of being attentive to God's activity in the bits and pieces of everyday life. Once the preserve of religious/priests, more lay people are engaging with the practice of on-going dialogue with God, noticing and responding to God's invitation/longing for a deeper relationship "*... to satisfy you with good things; your youth renewed like the eagle"* (cf. Ps 103:5).

'A THIRD EYE'

Supervision summons feelings of power-over or inspectorial. Can we to rename this valuable aid with a more user-friendly

2 Martin L. Wolf, editor, *A Treasury of Kahil Gibran.* London: Mandarin, 1991. p 330

3 J. Luft, and H. Ingham, *The Johari window: A graphic model of interpersonal awareness. Proceedings of the Western Training Laboratory in Group Development*. Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, 1955.

terminology? Lay or religious, celibate or non-celibate, we are all prone to blindness – our shadowed places. As such, self perception can be compromised, boundaries porous or weakened, with potential risk of breaches. We may, for example, deceive ourselves into believing we are helping someone when in reality we are satisfying personal needs. Power differentials in helping interactions, or any trusting professional relationship, may lead to boundary violations e.g. a doctor crosses boundaries with a patient, a counsellor forges a dual relationship with clients etc.
While prayer and personal reflection for some may provide a measure of oversight in general, this may fall short. Something more is required.

The metaphor of a '*third eye*'[4] may best describe the practice of supervision (individual or group modality). It offers a safe space to appraise self-care, examine the panes of our Johari window and identify nascent flash points ('red flags') that may compromise personal integrity, thereby safeguarding the interactional space with clients.[5]

COUNSELLING

We can all experience a sense of being held back at times; we know where we want to go/be, but cannot get there in spite of our best efforts. For example, a pastoral minister may have difficulty in saying *no* to ministry demands in the face of waning energy and neglect of the core practices of his/her life. Spiritual direction may have helped but with little lasting change, or even increased frustration. Supervision might have noted the pattern over time.

Talking to a counsellor, to help explore and unravel the experience of being trapped, may bring the *unknown pane* into view, discovering what is holding one back or what underlies overdoing. Any insight gleaned is not a cure, *per se*, but may expose a quagmire of roots to presumed simple dilemmas, providing initial tools for desired change. Change is never straightforward, but nonetheless, clarification a proactive step.

PEER MENTORING

The grass always seems greener in the other field! – regrets and resentments regarding the road not taken can emerge, naturally so, over time. There are gains and losses to *any* road taken. Opportunity-costing identifies the fact that not all roads can be walked.

4 Meg Sharpe, editor, *The Third Eye: Supervision of Analytic Groups.* London: Routledge, 1994.

5 cf. Johanna Merry, "Adults Complaints Guide". *The Furrow*, July/August 2019. pp 406 – 413.

A model of *Peer Mentoring,* founded on a sororal/fraternal spirit offers an opportunity for individuals, couples, religious, priests, persons in the secular corporate world etc. to pause on a regular basis to savour and share their lived experience. This model seeks to create a contemplative space for personal reflection and conversation with peers who share a common journey and who strive to live out of their professed intention.

CONCLUSION

Brendan Kennelly's[6] poem *Begin* speaks of that which cannot admit of ending, insists that we forever begin. The very fragility inherent in commitment may be its strength, the gossamer thread of Love that holds together the tension of strength and failure, unwavering in bearing the promise that - "*Love never gives up, and its faith, hope and patience never fail." (*cf. 1 Corinthians 13.7).

6 Kennelly B. *The Essential Brendan Kennelly: Selected Poems.* New York: Bloodaxe Books, 2011.

Hospitality. It is clear that the Christian tradition and the canon of scripture invite us to consider hospitality extended to outsiders as an essential dimension of our Christian identity. The Bible does not directly tell us what we must do, but it does provide us with reference points and evokes some fundamental attitudes to guide us in our relationship with others, telling us that what is at stake is ultimately our relationship with God: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). Biblical narratives vividly demonstrate that migrations are spiritual experiences and that God reveals himself in encounters with the stranger.

– Kristin E. Heyer, James F. Keenan, Andrea Vicini, eds. *Building Bridges in Sarajevo* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) p. 174.