

## Marinating Prayer

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Sometimes it helps to live with a Gospel story for several days – to let it steep like a cup of tea! Then take a sip here and a sip there until the entire cup is consumed. That was the case for a psychologist during a seven-day retreat. He was meditating on the Gospel of Luke 15: 11-32. Many call it the *Gospel of the Prodigal Son*. Others emphasize the *Gospel of the Forgiving Father*. The retreatant considered it the *Gospel of the Big Brother* because his heart hooked on verses 25-32 of the story:

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Three times the retreatant read the story slowly and reflectively. Each time he experienced an immediate gut reaction that the big brother got a raw deal. On an emotional level he identified with the big brother – “BB” for short! He decided to script a dialogue between himself and the Big Brother trusting that the Holy Spirit would stir up points for prayer. Well! He got far more than he expected. He began to write out the dialogue but limited his sit-time to 15 minutes. Then he moved into the next part of his day and took the scene with him in his heart wherever he went: meals, exercise, liturgy, and sleep. When he felt moved to continue the dialogue he did and then, again, moved on with his retreat day(s). You might say that the Gospel of the Big Brother was marinating, soaking for three days. Bit by bit the following dialogue grew:

### A Dialogue between the Prodigal’s Big Brother and Me

- Me What are your thoughts about your brother now that he has returned home?
- BB He was always pampered, this was just the most public manifestation and on a grand scale. He rarely pulled his weight but he was the fair-haired child.
- BB He received inheritance, not because he worked for it and earned it but because my father gave it freely without strings. I’ve been working steadily all along, doing my

duty, motivated by duty, obligation, -- a contract expected of me as firstborn son. And now I realize that work or no work, my dad is going to give me all that he has when he dies. I never thought of it that way. It has everything to say about my dad; it says nothing about me or my work load! So why ought I to be working on the farm? Because of duty or because of love – to prosper the family name and claim, to bring pleasure to my dad to see his beginnings prosper; to see that he made a difference in this world; a gift to my father. *Perhaps the farm has something to teach me that I cannot learn as well elsewhere. (School of Holiness?)*

BB I am not always keen about farming. I prefer to play more. I could use a break now and then, too. But I fulfill my responsibilities and I don't even need – nor do I receive – discussion with my father. My father takes it for granted. You would say that it is a compliment to my fidelity that my father can plan on my participation. Maybe it is, but I still don't like being taken for granted. I want to be consulted, sought, taken into confidence.

Me Maybe that's because your dad really is not as hung up about your contribution to the business as you are! Or maybe your dad senses that your two hearts beat as one and so there is no need to talk about it. Maybe Dad perceives that you two are of one mind, in sync, on an intimate level that needs no discussion. He is not a mind-reader. Did you ever give him a hint about how you felt?

BB It doesn't 'count' with me if I have to give a hint. I believe that if he loved me he would anticipate my needs freely; not merely respond to my verbalizations. After all, my dad responds to anyone who brings a situation to his attention. That's business or charity; it is not intimacy in my book! I don't want to be "another anybody." I want a special place since I am his son, and his firstborn son, at that!

Me I hear you!

BB I've watched my dad agonize over my little brother since the day he left. He didn't really need him for the work; we managed. Dad missed his presence, his laughter, his walk, his stories at meal time. He worried about him and yearned to hear word that he was doing ok. It made me so angry. All this energy spilled out for an ingrate! He's probably having a blast and not thinking one iota of Dad, me, or home. *Does anyone ever think of me?* I hear what dad misses about my brother. What would he miss about me? Would he miss me except for the gap that my absence would create in the work-load?

Me Hmm. . . You view yourself as crucial to the family production. I wonder about that. You noted that the business managed without your brother. Might the same be true of you? You raise a good question, BB, when you wondered what your dad would miss about you. I do not know you so I cannot suggest what your dad would miss about you. But let me ask you, what do you think is "miss-able" about you besides your contribution to the family business?

- BB Well, I'm reliable. I have foresight and managerial / organizational skills. I am practical but also have vision and creativity. I am quick-witted. I have the power of endurance and I am a faithful person. And usually I am low maintenance!
- Me It is interesting that your description of yourself is expressed in DOING terms. You described your brother more in BEING terms. Presence versus Projects . . . I wonder, are your two descriptions accurate and totally self-contained or are they both merely the public face and both have degrees of the other hidden within? Are you actually tripping over, being blindsided, paralyzed by your shadow? Is that the source of your anger?
- BB And how do you think I felt when I found out second-hand – or a dozen hands later – that my brother was back and that my father was throwing a party for him? Don't you think I should have known that information *before* the servants?
- Me Quite frankly, I agree with your hurt. Hearing the whole saga after the fact, in the morning light so to speak, I wonder how your Dad let this develop that way. BUT your dad did NOT have cool reason. He was caught up in the PASSIONATE LOVE for the child that he feared was dead to him. He went with the passion – as he would have done for you if the situation were reversed. The reason that you cannot overlook this and embrace the spirit of reconciliation is that you do not have passionate love for your brother. Isn't that the truth? It does not come through that you love your brother, BB. You use name calling: pampered, fair-hair child – which reduces your brother to an object and reveals your prejudice and jealousy. Resentment, distain, disregard and disrespect ooze out of your comments. Your brother is a part of you – a part that you disown, discount, discipline, deny – but part of you, nonetheless! Do you will his death or his life? Love is in the will!
- BB Ofcourse I will his life!
- Me Then you need to embrace the little brother *within yourself* and integrate and allow your persona to come into balance. You might some day thank your lucky stars that “Little Brother” left home. You lost, denied that part of you long, long ago [*presence over production, laughter, story-telling, fun, adventure, speaking up for yourself, taking what you need, etc. . . .*] and you may never have come to recognize that fact except that it came to surface with his departure and return home. He, too, will need to face some facts and to grow and mature through this and “step up to the plate” more often – but that's his business. You stick with your soul and process.
- Me I don't know what happened between you and your brother and your father after the event. Surely your brother thought about you, too, when he was away. Did he? What happened between your two?
- BB My little brother was aware of my fight with dad. Hell! Everyone there heard it and I did not return to the party. After the party was over my brother came to my

bedroom and asked if he could talk with me. I told him that I had nothing to say to him. He asked if I would just listen. I remained on my bed face down.

BB He told me that during his separation he realized how selfish, childish, spoiled, and thoughtless he was. He said that during his time away he had a conversion experience, that for the first time he recognized how much of a TAKER he was and that I was the GIVER, the one who always set things straight at home and at work. He said he never felt that he could measure up or that he was essential at home and that he felt useless. He never considered himself miss-able! He was blown away when he saw that our father missed him. That caught my attention because it was my issue, too. Isn't it funny that I perceived him as the fair-haired child and he never viewed himself that way? He told me that he was 100% sincere about wanting to be a hired hand and that he totally accepted that he walked away from his birthright. He said that the party idea was NOTHING of his doings or desire. He said that he accepted as atonement and justice that he lost access to me as a brother and that he would be humbly grateful to have me as his foreman. He said that he wanted to apologize for all the hurt and inconvenience that his ingratitude caused me.

BB My eyes burned with tears to hear him think of himself as an "inconvenience." And I was painfully aware that "love" wasn't anywhere in the conversation. He didn't say it, but in his reality he never felt loved by me. And though he expressed admiration and respect for me and about me, he never said "love." I realized at that moment that we both wanted and needed the same thing – to be loved by the other as a brother; not a producer. And we both learned a new definition of love through observing our father's actions. I said as much and then we both sobbed aloud and hugged and even kissed each other. I told him that his bed was waiting for him and that tomorrow would be the first day of the rest of our lives as brothers.

It bears repeating that this retreatant was a practicing psychologist who was familiar with retreat experiences and praying with the Gospels. And so his conversation reflects educated vocabulary and ease of self-expression like: "manifestation, verbalization, public face, shadow, 'little brother within yourself,' integrate, persona . . ."

Regardless, I believe that many a person can identify with his feelings, hurt, complaints, rage, and blind spots. His dialogue could easily be a springboard for the prayer of another person and give insight to other praying-people.

This exercise does not report his "pop-outs" and the emotions that were embedded in his writing sample. The reader is quite capable of doing that! Nor does it share the prayer that evolved because he marinated this Gospel for several days. It holds sacred the private "I-you" conversation and divine intimacy that followed during his remaining retreat days.

Present to the adults the Big Brother dialogue as a tool for group discussion followed by time given to personal prayer.

- Read reflectively the entire gospel of the Prodigal, Luke 15: 11-32.
- Appoint a different voice to repeat the Big Brother's focus, Luke 15: 25-32.
- Have two adults prepared to read the dialogue aloud. One taking the part of "Me" and the other reading the part of "BB" (Big Brother).
- Safeguard 5-10 minutes for personal, silent reflection on the dialogue script
- Open the session to discussion.
- If time permits, safeguard 15 minutes for personal prayer. If time does not permit, advise the participants to let their thoughts marinate through the week and to take their feelings, opinions, and hurts into personal "I-you" conversation with Jesus.