

## COURAGEOUS LIVING, COURAGEOUS GIVING

Robert Fagles was a scholar and highly-regarded translator of Greek and Latin classics. In an interview conducted as he was finishing up his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, he remembered a line that he agonized over. And it wasn't just the best translation from Latin into English that he grappled with, it was also the meaning of the line itself.

It comes early in the first book. Aeneas and his small band of warriors have fled the burning city of Troy, their hometown, after losing a long, drawn out war. Then they endure a raging storm at sea and are shipwrecked off the coast of north Africa, near Carthage. After they finally reach dry land, Aeneas speaks to his comrades and attempts to lift their spirits. And he delivers one of the most famous lines in Latin literature. He says, "*Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit.*"

In the interview, Robert Fagles reads out his own translation, "A joy it will be one day, perhaps, to remember even this." Then he pauses and comments, "It is about loss, about overcoming the worst." But he adds that the word "forsan" which he translates "perhaps" may be the most important word. A joy it will be one day, perhaps, to remember this. "It may not be a joy to remember," he says. "It may be a bloody misery." (Chris Hedges, "A Bridge Between the Classics and the Masses," New York Times, April 13, 2004)

It isn't always a joy or even pleasant to remember hard times or the losses we endure, but psychologists and theologians generally agree that looking back and recounting our losses and shipwrecks, bringing those frightening and sad experiences to speech, naming them and claiming them—if it is done carefully and intentionally, it can have a curiously healing effect, even when the memory is miserable.

It makes me wonder, in ten years or so, how we will remember this year and our experience of pandemic, and the losses and misery we have endured. It may be that we are too close to the experience, right now, too caught up in just trying to make it from day to day, week to week, to think about how we might look back on this time. Maybe it takes all the physical, emotional, and spiritual energy we have just to keep our head above water. But it may also be that some of the choices we make now can prepare us for that time of recovery and recollection. It may be that our healing is built into our current misery.

And that seems to be what Paul is getting at in a letter he wrote to the Christian community in Corinth. A little bit of background will help us understand the situation Paul is writing about. Paul was something of a bridgebuilder between the early Christian churches, which were almost entirely Jewish, and the later churches, many of which he organized, which were predominately Gentile. And when the Christians in Jerusalem were struggling, he began a campaign, a fund drive, among the more western communities. In his first letter, he asked the Corinthians to set aside a bit of their savings on the first day of each week, and he would send a colleague to collect their offering and deliver it to those in need in Jerusalem.

Now, in this second letter, to encourage them to continue their support, he offers as an example the churches in the Macedonia region. It is a curious choice, because not only were these some of the poorer churches, but they were also among the earliest to bear the brunt of persecution by the Romans.

So, let's read what Paul writes about these courageous Christians. From the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, and I'll be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, called *The Message*.

*Now friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province. Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches,*

*pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.*

*This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives. (2 Corinthians 8: 1-5)*

So, these Macedonian Christians had gone through a period of hardship, what Paul calls “fierce troubles” or a “severe ordeal of affliction,” and it pushed them to the very limit. Sound familiar? But Paul notes that the hardships and the losses curiously brought out the best in them, “exposed their true colors.”

We have noted, early in this pandemic exile, how sometimes a crisis can bring out hidden reserves of strength, resilience, resolve, creativity, and cooperation. It can also bring out hidden reserves of courage. I think, especially this week, of the brave women and men who have put on a uniform, and, when our safety and freedom were threatened found the courage and resolve to place themselves in danger, to risk their lives for the sake of others.

Now look at what kind of courage is evoked in the hardships and poverty of those churches in Macedonia, that Paul is holding up as an example for us all to emulate. They found the courage to give selflessly and sacrificially for the sake of people they had never met in a part of the world far removed from their province. This first stewardship campaign had less to do with maintaining their own church and more to do with mission. These are the “true colors” that are brought out in them—the color of giving. And, Paul says, it wasn’t a reluctant, painful decision that they would look back on in years to come and regret. They found joy and healing in this sacrificial giving.

And just how did they come by such a courageous, generous spirit of giving? It comes, Paul insists, because of a choice they made to live courageously by giving themselves over to God. They chose to not let their lives be defined or dominated by their losses or adversity, but committed their lives and the life of their congregation to the work of God in the world. This courageous giving, Paul adds, flowed naturally and seamlessly from their prior and equally courageous trust in God to provide for their needs. It’s not that they embraced the power of positive thinking or denied that their pain and poverty were real. Instead they did what the psalm suggests—they waited for God even during their sadness and hardship and did not fear for their future.

And then Paul makes it quite clear that he holds up the Macedonia churches as a model for us all to emulate. He says,

*I’m not trying to order you around against your will. But by bringing in the Macedonians’ enthusiasm as a stimulus to your love, I am hoping to bring the best out of you. . . . Carrying out this social-relief work involves far more than helping meet the bare needs of poor Christians. It also produces abundant and bountiful thanksgivings to God. This offering is a prod to live at your very best, showing your gratitude to God by being openly obedient to the plain meaning of the Message of Christ. You show your gratitude through your generous offering. (2 Corinthians 8: 8; 9:12-13)*

Often, in a fearful time, our instinct is to retreat, to pull inside ourselves, and to take care of ourselves. And there is a certain wisdom in that. There is a reason why, in the safety

instructions before a plan takes off, they tell you that in the event of an emergency put your oxygen mask on yourself before you try to help your neighbor.

But in this letter, Paul also gives us a vision of giving as a courageous act of faith in God—that God will provide for what we need, and will see us through whatever danger we face or losses we experience. And that trust in God’s care for us is also the key that unlocks our own courageous generosity. It is a generous expression of God’s abundance rather than a fearful response to our own scarcity.

May we have the courage to live in that confident trust. May we have the courage to give with that generous spirit. And when we look back on this time in years to come, may we not forget this shipwreck, or deny the sadness, the stress, the anxiety that we are feeling now, but may we also remember with gratitude how it brought out the best in us, how our true colors emerged, our courageous living and giving.

May it be so.

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