

“Acedia & Hope”

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Excerpts from “Acedia and Me” by Kathleen Norris
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An Introduction to “Acedia”

Acedia may be an unfamiliar word, but that does not mean it has no relevance for contemporary readers. The standard dictionary definitions of acedia as “apathy”, “boredom”, or “torpor” do not begin to cover it. At its Greek root, the word acedia means the absence of care. The person afflicted by acedia refuses to care or is incapable of doing so. When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, acedia offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is there, yet can't rouse yourself to give a damn. It sets in motion the endless cycle of self-defeating thoughts and disconnects us from faith. It is that capacity of the human spirit to look out upon the world and everything God made and say, “I don't care”. Left unchecked, it can unravel the great commandment: as I cease to practice my love of God, I am also less likely to observe a proper love of my neighbour or myself.

When I first read the definitions of acedia given by the desert monks of the 4th century, I felt a weight lift from my soul, for I had just discovered an accurate description of something that had plagued me for years but that I had never been able to name. It started when I was a teenager. My time was filled with the tedium of a repetitious life, moving from classes to flute practices and homework, day after day. The bracing thought of adulthood as an opportunity was swept away by a burgeoning sense of helplessness and self-pity. The present moment had become unbearable, and I could conceive of the future only as more of the same, an appalling, interminable progression of empty days to fill. Acedia, feeding on a willing withdrawal from the pains and joys of ordinary life, was my enemy even then. But I had never heard of it, and I had little idea of how it would thrive in the rich soil I had provided.

Let us read responsively from the Psalms,

Psalm 69, which reflects the feelings of acedia. We will read verses 1 – 3, then 13 – 15.

Acedia is Different from Clinical Depression

While we may find it convenient to regard acedia as a more primitive word for what we now term depression, the truth is much more complex. Having experienced both conditions, I think it is likely that much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair that plagues us today is ancient acedia in modern dress. The boundaries between depression and acedia are notoriously fluid. I find that depression generally has an identifiable and external cause that acedia lacks. I can look at my life and see where the trouble is coming from. But acedia arises out of nowhere, as it were, emerging from my inner depths without warning, and without any reason that I can determine. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counselling and medication, acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer.

The word “healing” comes from the word meaning “entire” or “complete”, and signifies a restoration to wholeness. The healing of acedia comes, in part, through reflection on one’s life and honest self-appraisal. The ancient monks remind us to be suspicious of our motives. Questions of accountability that do not arise when I am depressed are essential to dealing with acedia. We need not give in to self-loathing or unnecessary guilt, for God has provided us with everything we need to cope with our bad thoughts and temptations. The corresponding virtues, or good thoughts, are always at our disposal. Bad thoughts come to everyone at one time or another. No one is exempt from anger, jealousy, greed, gluttony, lust, pride, acedia. Our job is not to deny them or run from them, but to make our way through to the virtue on the other side. The virtue of greed is a fearlessness concerning one’s future needs that translates into sharing what one has at present. Lust’s virtue is a self-giving love that can endure all things. Acedia’s virtue is caring expressed in thoughtful and timely acts that enhance our relationship with others.

Let us sing the 23rd Psalm, a psalm that affirms God’s caring, restoring presence. The lyrics are printed in your bulletin.

Healing Acedia

Healing can come through observing one’s life. The traditional practice of observing one’s thoughts as they arise and laying them out, rather than resisting them, bears a striking resemblance to a technique of cognitive therapy called “behavioural activation”. In this treatment patients acknowledge their thoughts and feelings as they arise, without judgment, and then let them go. You might, for example, drive out thoughts of vainglory with thoughts of humility, thoughts of greed or lust with thoughts of temperance. Where the monk would attempt to place “a psalm or a prayer alongside the thought” and thus seek to redirect his focus towards God, a therapist might ask us to determine how our negative thoughts promote negative actions. The goal of ancient and contemporary methods alike is to break the vicious cycle of persistent thought. Even as we suffer from this malady, Kierkegaard maintains that we are caught up in “the battle of faith”. When someone faints, he writes “we call for water and smelling salts; but when someone wants to despair, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility. Possibility is the only salvation... for without possibility a person seems unable to breathe”. When possibility bursts like grace into our lives, changing everything, we can declare that “all will be well”.

Let us read responsively from Psalm 86,
a psalm that is an affirmation of the author’s faith
and expresses hope in God Psalm 86, verses 1 through 8

Hoping in God

But we may well have to await upon God for healing. Waiting seems at odds with progress, and we seldom ask whether waiting might have a purpose in and of itself. Etymology helps us here, for when we look up the word “wait” we are instructed to see “vigour”. Waiting, then, is not passive but a vigilant and watchful activity designed to keep us aware of what is really going on. Isaiah evokes this radical waiting as a source of vitality: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles” (Isaiah 40:31). Such waiting is meant to engender a lively hope rooted in the physical as well as the psyche. It is an action, the “hop” contained within the word. To hope is to make a leap, to jump from where you are to someplace better. If you can imagine it, and dare to take that leap, you can go there – no matter how hopeless your situation may appear.

Hope may seem a flimsy thing in the face of acedia’s cold assurance that nothing matters and that waiting is unmitigated hell. But hope has an astonishing resilience and strength. Its very persistence in our hearts indicates that it is not a tonic for wishful thinkers but the ground on which realists stand. For thousands of years the psalmist and the prophets have been a source of strength for people facing plague, warfare, massacre, imprisonment, execution, and exile. This is the sort of hope that matters, for it can conquer not just acedia and despair, but death itself.

Above all, we are encouraged to enlarge our capacity for enjoying the good times in life and to expect the rewards will come after pain. “Don’t give in to your depression”, Andrew Solomon writes. “Don’t accept it as the norm. Dig up from somewhere within you the will to fight back”. This is sound advice. Starting with what you know of yourself, you can find what works and claim it. I am less likely to consult a physician than a spiritual director, and while I have used medications on occasion, I have found them less helpful than my lifeline of prayer and psalms. I have learned that nothing will erase my susceptibility to acedia, for it is a part of who I am. But this does not mean that I am helpless. I can look for the seed of hope in my despair, and pray with the psalmist in psalm 148: “Bring my soul out of this prison, and then I shall praise your name”. The monks and mystics of my faith all teach that persevering in a spiritual discipline, especially when it seems futile, is the key to growth. The fourth century monk Evagrius makes this intriguing suggestion for fighting bad thoughts: “When we meet with acedia, it is time with tears to divide our soul into two. One part is to encourage: the other is to be encouraged”. He recommends Psalm 42 as a way to “sow seeds of firm hope in ourselves”.

Let us turn to Psalm 42 and read it responsively. Hear within its words

how the psalmist’s soul encourages itself.