

bread for the journey

In praise of hypocrisy

The word, “hypocrisy” is an interesting one—etymologically speaking.

It has a Greek root and was used to reference actors whose job it was to play the part of another. Daniel Day Lewis played Lincoln so well he actually took on Lincoln’s persona and even his voice. Lewis lived and breathed his role. Spoke like Lincoln spoke, thought like Lincoln thought. Good job.

Actors are hypocrites. It is their job to be hypocrites. Do it well enough and convincingly enough and you’ve made yourself a typecast career. Kramer will always be Kramer. And George will always be George. (Seinfeld fans remember.)

A good hypocrite makes for a good actor. We need more of them. Act the part assigned to you, immerse yourself in the role and you become the character you portray. Pharisees were not good hypocrites, because they did not pretend well enough to care for the poor and seek justice for the marginalized. Jesus would have commended them had they pulled it off. They did not.

Some of Jesus’ disciples “acted” so well and played their roles so successfully, they actually became charitable and merciful on behalf of the neighbor, as well as the enemy. Jesus once said it was no big deal to lay down your life for your friends. It is however, a very big deal to love your enemy—to the point of laying down your life on behalf of the enemy, which of course Jesus did.

It is all anyone can ask. Become the person you pretend to be. Act the part and play the role of a good neighbor and one becomes a good neighbor. When I first moved to the city of Chicago, I was repulsed by how messy it was. Standing at a bus stop was tantamount to standing on the edge of a garbage dump. So I took upon myself the role of a garbage man. While waiting for a bus, I started picking up trash that littered the area. Whenever I walked down an alley and saw a piece of paper, a can or some

litter that didn’t quite make it to a dumpster, I picked it up and deposited it in its proper place. I *am* the garbage man and maintenance worker of Edgewater. Pretending to be one has turned me into one.

At first, my heart wasn’t in it. Now it is. Clean up the city. Do my part. That’s what this old guy does while walking the alleyway to the street or walking the path along the lakeshore. Every good deed comes from a selfish place. Ah, there’s the rub.

My premise is this: our hearts are conflicted. The reformer John Calvin was more pungent in his assessment of the human condition. He said we are totally depraved—not absolutely polluted—but totally depraved. What he meant by this hard-nosed judgment was this: Our DNA is tainted. We are bent toward the dark side. There is rot at the core. We are not totally *polluted* but totally *affected* by a tendency to do the wrong thing and commit the selfish act. A drop of ink in a glass of clear water will totally affect its color but not totally pollute it. We carry the message to others for our own sake. We feel good when we do good.

Acts of charity, mercy and justice always come as a surprise because such acts do not come naturally. Narcissism comes naturally. Greed. Self-interest. Explain Cain. You cannot. I cannot. History proves the point. Look what humans have done and continue to do over the millennia. The surprise is not that acts of evil emerge. Our hearts are evil within. The surprise is that any shred of community, fellowship or loving bonds between people exists at all. The surprise is the smidgen of common decency in all of us. Drive Lakeshore Boulevard once and it will convince you. Mean-spirited speed demons abound. It is the German autobahn—Chicago style. Again, the surprise is Allstate’s “Mr. Mayhem” has not completely taken over the roads.

Why hasn’t mayhem completely taken over? Why the presence of any love and justice at all? What is the germ of recovery that makes it possible for a confirmed addict to come alive and stop using? For real? For good? What makes for lasting recovery in

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them or within us, for that matter? What makes it possible for us to be good guys at the end of the day, people who practice random acts of kindness and charity?

I will tell you. It takes practice to change a habit of the heart. Don't wait for a conversion experience to dawn upon you or a spiritual awakening to drop out of the clouds. That won't happen. Changes begin to happen as people become hypocrites. They fill their role as righteous persons and play their part as decent citizens. A recovering alcoholic feigns a sober lifestyle until he makes it to sobriety. A heart of change comes on the heels of changed behavior. As they often say in the program, "Fake it until you make it."

Ever wait for a change of heart before you started an exercise regimen? That doesn't "get 'er done." An exercise regimen begins to

take root when we get up and out and get moving. It is how a moral change of heart begins to take shape in our gut. Action is the magic word. True repentance and a broken heart cut its teeth on the anvil of action—which is a miracle from God in itself. A little hypocrisy goes a long way. Daniel Day Lewis will never be the same after playing the role of Lincoln. Nor will I after playing the role of a righteous man.

Changed behavior leads to changed thinking. It is the promise of the 12th Step of AA. "Having had a spiritual awakening *as a result of these steps*, we tried to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs." It's the Rosecrance way. 



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life's waiting



is a bi-monthly news and views letter from
Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Rosecrance, Church
Relations Coordinator. Bread for the Journey
is written on behalf of people who live with
substance use and mental health disorders.
Together, and by God's grace, we will try to
make a difference.

bread for the journey



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