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On Eating Disorders

*Vítor Westhelle**

Text: Ezekiel 37: 1-10

In the most dramatic of his many visions, the prophet Ezekiel is carried to a valley filled with dried bones. The vision conveys the desolation of the exiled people of Israel. Dry bones are the last of the remains of a living creature. All the signs of life are now only vague reminiscences inscribed in the bones. These bones were once bodies with flesh and blood, sinews, nerves and muscles and finally a breathing human being, and that means a spiritual being like you and I, for spirit is the very breath we breathe, *ruach*. *Ruach* in Hebrew means wind, breath, spirit.

Exiles are people cut from the ground of their existence like an uprooted plant left to dry and die under the sun. Exiles are homeless people that long for their place of belonging. They are like dry bones. It is to them that the prophet is commissioned to prophesy. And these words of prophecy are not words of divination; they are not about a lofty but elusive and improbable future that is to come. They are words that do what they say and say what they do, even if the prophet's audience is just a huge pile of bones.

Mind you that Ezekiel was not commissioned to carry those bones back and lay them to rest in their holy land. His prophecy was to restore them to life in the valley of death, to give them flesh and blood and declare them alive. And the prophet tells us: a rattling of bones was heard as they joined themselves, bone to its bone, sinews grew and flesh covered the bones, and skin came upon the bodies.

Yet they did not breathe, but this does not mean they were not alive or biologically functioning. No, the point is that they were not yet spiritual beings. That means: they did not have a voice. For all that it was worth the prophet had only convoked an army of slaves with no voice and no rights, still in a foreign land that had abducted them from their own soil, robbed them their dignity and killed their dreams and visions. That is what is called "mere life," barely functioning organisms recruited to be exploited used and abused as disposable bodies. Have you seen "mere lives"? They clean houses, work in farms and restaurants, do menial labor and leave their jobs when someone asks for documents. "Mere life" is when visions die, dreams are crushed, and the will suppressed.

A second act of prophecy is needed for life to be more than "mere life," more than barely tied to vital signs, a life with dreams and visions. So the prophet called upon the spirit, the wind from the four corners of the world to breathe unto them, so that as spiritual beings, they could stand even in a foreign land, the land of their exile. And by the power of the spirit breathing in them, they could stand on their feet; they could weave through their own words their visions, the words the spirit would allow them to utter with courage. These were the words that the wind in them in-spired, coming not from Jerusalem alone, but from the four corners of the world. And they became a people, a vast multitude with a spiritual life, with a spirituality.

But prophecy can only be done by those who already have their voice, those in

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whom the spirit dwells, those who have spirituality. They call things for what they are, and because of that they can envision what they are called to be. They see dry bones which was the condition of the people of Israel in exile. But the prophet knew that they were to be functioning bodies, merely functioning, but still so. And the prophet knows that prophesying is not fulfilled until the prophet is no longer needed, for then all and every one will have voice as the spirit prompts them to speak. Prophets are midwives of the dreams of others, they breathe upon others words that in-spire, that instill the spirit through which others gain their voice and dream their dreams.

Being a prophet, however, is not a profession, it is more like a confession that comes with a protest. Take Ezekiel. He had a profession. He was a priest, the only priest in fact among the biblical prophets that we know of. The rest of the prophets were in other trades. Yet prophecy also requires schooling, but schooling without standardized tests or a unified curriculum, but still a certain kind of schooling. Different were the prophets' schoolings. One walked around with a yoke on his shoulders, another was made to marry a prostitute, another had his mouth burned by a live coal, and some went through prolonged periods of fasting. But it was different with Ezekiel; his schooling was a strange dietary experiment that did not teach him words; he was made to eat them. This is why Ezekiel is the prophet whose words are embodied; literally so!

We are indeed told as to how Ezekiel gained a voice that kept on giving voice to others. God comes to him and gives him the scroll of a book with "words of lamentation and mourning and woe." We are not even told what this book is exactly about. We don't know whether it was canonical or not and we will never know because that book had a strange fate. *Habent sua fata libellii*, is an old Latin saying, that all books have their fate apart from what the reader thinks of it. And this book indeed had a curious fate, for God handing him this book said to Ezekiel: "Mortal, eat this scroll, and go, and speak to the house of Israel... eat this book that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it [says Ezekiel]; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey." (3:3)

How do you swallow a book in the first place and on top of it, a book full of lament and woe, bitter as Job or the book of Lamentations and have in your mouth the sweet taste of honey? Eating, ingesting and swallowing have the connotation of taking in something, embodying it, believing it. Ezekiel did exactly that. He not only did listen to spoken words, but ingested them, took them in, digested them and they became part of his own being. Ezekiel ate a book and was emboldened to prophesy; his body was invigorated so that he could breathe out words that he had not only listened to but words that were ingested and digested. Much before McLuhan coined the phrase, Ezekiel lived out what the medium being the message was about.

Prophets, at least some of them, eat books. And the books they eat are full of bitter lamentations because that is what the book of our lives tells about. But when it comes down to it, when they are ingested for what they are, the prophet knows of the sweet aftertaste that comes from trusting the one who gave the book, as the one who will restore the damaged life, the dried out existence, and the shaken bodies. Is this not what great works of literature do once you have tasted them? We read books that narrate human tragedy and misfortune, telling things as they are, and one does not come out of the experience of digesting them without the sweet taste of hope in the midst of dismal tribulations of the dried out bones they testify to.

So, my friends, try this dietary experiment: eat books. It does not matter which, but books that attest to dried-out lives, books that walk us through valleys of bones. Eat them. It does not matter whether it is Job or Becket, the Torah or the Koran, Psalms or the Vedas, Homer or the Beowulf, Dante or Marx, Martin Luther or Martin Luther King, Augustine or Darwin, Chaucer or Camus, St. John or Morrison. They are not going to come alive in you; you will be alive in them. Just eat them, and when you are in a valley of dry bones you will have words in your mouth that will cover these bones with flesh and blood. You will breathe upon them the breath of the spirit, through which they will tell their own story.