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4. Dumped Into the Drink: Discipleship

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4. Dumped Into the Drink: Discipleship

1 A river journey always holds the possibility of dumping into the drink.

When you launch the canoe, you are committing yourself to the river. You've dumped yourself, as it were, onto the current, and the trick is "to go with the flow". This surrender to the current of the river is a wonderful experience, but it also makes you vulnerable to the power of the current. The current of the river can overwhelm you, and literally dump you into the drink.

We had run what we could of the Graveyard Rapids on the Spanish River, when coming up ahead we noticed a ledge over which the water flowed quite smoothly. We were hugging the shore, and from what we could see there was a nice break in the ledge. Having run some pretty heavy stuff this looked a piece of cake. So we aimed for the break. Turned out, it wasn't as much of a break as it appeared; the bow went over but the stern got hung on the ledge, the water came in over the stern and poof! we were in the drink! Fortunately we were near the shore and the water, while swift, was shallow. That's where we made camp, and set about drying everything out.

It was then, of course, that we saw the portage path around the ledge. There was even a portage sign! Puffed up with pride at having managed the heavy stuff, we had ignored some basic whitewater procedures and had paid the price. Pride does come before a fall! We had dumped!

The river had offered to us the exciting freedom of its flow, and the refreshing freedom of its territory as it led us into the interior. We were therefore free to follow the quest, and to match and stretch our abilities against the challenges of the current. And we were free to overreach ourselves, even free to bungle. We could "go with the flow", but this was

unmistakably the special flow of the river. Our freedom was quite specifically the freedom of the *river*, and we had played the wanton with that freedom.

2. If Transformation is the discovery, through dying, of authentic freedom, Discipleship is the exercise of radical freedom.

“Radical” comes from a Latin word meaning “root”. So when we speak of “radical freedom” we are speaking of a freedom that comes from the root; it’s not just a vague notion or a petulant reaction to authority, but a freedom that emerges from and is an expression of a profound root. The freedom we experienced on the river is rooted in the river; it is the freedom which is specific to the river.

In Baptism we are set free into *baptismal* freedom. We pray in the baptismal liturgy,

God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we give you thanks for freeing your sons and daughters from the power of sin and raising them up to a new life through this holy sacrament. Pour your Holy Spirit upon [this person now baptized]: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence.¹

The freedom of the Christian is rooted in the work of God in Jesus Christ. It is the specific freedom that Christ won on the cross, which Luther liked to describe as freedom from the power of sin, death, and the devil. Baptism dumps us into that radical freedom. And therefore St. Paul cries to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” He goes on, “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters,” and adds, “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence...” (5:1, 13). Discipleship is the exercise of radical freedom.

3. The difficulty is that we do have our problems with freedom.

Look at two contemporary notions of freedom.

On a noble bluff above the Ottawa River looms that magnificent pile of worked stone we know as the Parliament buildings. With its striking Peace Tower, the complex recalls Westminster; with its steep copper rooves

and delicate trceries, it recalls Versailles. Its very architecture evokes some of the Western world's finest traditions of culture and the rule of law. Every time the great clock in the Peace Tower chimes the hours, it proclaims the profound principles of "peace, order, and good government". Freedom, accordingly, is that state of being which arises out of these principles of peace, order, and good government.

Below the bluff of Parliament Hill swirls the broad and raw Ottawa River. For years this river bore vast rafts of timber, harvested far upstream, to the mills at Hull, just across the river from the Parliament buildings. Beyond the river, beyond Hull, the Laurentian wilds shoulder into the horizon; in their tangle of streams and lakes, almost due north of the city, lie the headwaters of the Ottawa River. It is as though the Parliament buildings are turning their backs on the river and on the wilderness. And well they might, because for years Hull was the largest pile of lumber in the country, and for years that stack of logs and dreary mills was crowned by a huge, brilliant, neon sign advertizing toilet paper. If Parliament Hill proclaims that freedom emerges from peace, order, and good government, the neon sign proclaims freedom as economic success.

We juggle these two notions of freedom: (1) a state of commonweal, common well-being; (2) a state of economic success. For the sake of convenience let's call them "Peace Tower freedom" and "Toilet Paper freedom". When we examine the policies of government, the general attitudes of people, and the stuff we see on TV (particularly the commercials), we are forced to conclude that Toilet Paper freedom is the dominant notion. It is what people think of when they think of freedom: Freedom is economic success.

4. Let's follow that Toilet Paper trail for a moment.

At first it was a fur trail. The lower length of the Ottawa River became the famous fur trade route from Montreal to the Great Lakes and thus to the Saskatchewan and the Mackenzie. The Montreal fur merchants grew wealthy; but the men of the fur brigades killed themselves hoisting two hundred pound packs on the portages. And the Native peoples who harvested the furs contracted small pox and other diseases, while alcoholism and despair tolled the death of their culture. From the early 1600s until the late 1800s, notes Fraser Symington, smallpox decimated Na-

tive populations. In 1635 the Montagnais got it from the French at Tadoussac, and from there it decimated the eastern woodlands. "Within four decades [the Hurons] were destroyed as a nation and their remnants had scattered to sanctuary with far tribes. The Petun and Neutral nations, for all their relative inoffensiveness, suffered the same fate."² By 1738 Sioux, Cree, Piegan, and Assiniboine on the Plains were dying by whole villages. "Typhoid fever killed a third of the Micmac in Nova Scotia in 1746. In 1830 influenza swept through the tribes of British Columbia...Tuberculosis, the white man's plague, crept from lodge to lodge...And these catastrophes were only a few of many."³ Father Hugo Muller, a priest in the James Bay settlements in the 1970s, writes of holding in his arms a Native baby for Baptism and, looking down in the small face and into those dark eyes he is suddenly overcome by the "uncleaness" of his arms:

Never before
 have my arms felt so heavy,
 carrying not a baby
 but the burden of sin.
 Away from me, Lord,
 for I am a sinful man...
 God, I ask you
 to take care of Jacob,
 for we will not.⁴

Freedom as economic success enslaves the many.

Then the Ottawa River became the conduit for the lumbermen. In the early 1800s Napoleon prevented the British navy access to Scandinavian ports, and thus cut off vital timber supplies. A Massachusetts Yankee by the name of Philemon Wright, who had become acquainted with the Ottawa white pine forests standing 200 feet tall, saw his opportunity; in 1807 he got off the first shipment of Ottawa timber to England, and the lumber industry was born.⁵ We've done a good job of romanticizing the lumbering industry, and the dash and flair of driving the logs down in the spring floods. And it is true that many a settler in the Ottawa Valley was able to establish a farm only by working winters in the bush camps. But life in the squalor and isolation and danger of the bush camps, not even to mention the horrendous log drives in the spring, can only be called a violent form of exploitation. MacLennan notes that the large work gangs along the Ottawa were more often than not recruited racially. Certainly the men found some security in working with

their own countrymen; more than likely employers, well aware of the work conditions in the bush, also were shrewd enough to "divide and conquer". "The hardness of their lives, the quality of their food, their isolation from normal society, the absence of family life, the feeling that they were spending their strength for an old age of poverty and loneliness – all these things combined to make them permanently quarrelsome."⁶

Freedom as economic success enslaves the many. Toilet Paper freedom is, at best, only the illusion of freedom. For both the smug lumber baron in his pretentious house and the lumberjack in the barbarous shanty in the winter forest are equally trying desperately to stave off the ultimate realities of life. "As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came," muses Ecclesiastes; "they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment" (5:15-17). The Toilet Paper freedom we sell our souls for is an illusion of freedom, and so we are permanently quarrelsome. So much so, indeed, that we even quarrel with peace, order, and good government.

Along the Ottawa River, Parliament Hill and the huge neon sign for toilet paper articulate two opposing notions of freedom. Their relationship is an uneasy one. But toilet paper seems to have won out.

5. The Toilet Paper notion of freedom is essentially a notion that we can control and dominate our world and all life. This is a disastrous notion.

The First Nations people knew this traditionally. Certainly the Iroquoian peoples knew this. The Iroquoian peoples lived in Southwestern Ontario, along the south shores of lakes Erie and Ontario, and down the St. Lawrence River to Montreal. They told the story of the gift of corn.⁷

Gosadaya was a great hunter. Having travelled through the forest for three days he built a shelter and settled himself for sleep. That night he thought he heard the murmur of voices; then a tree fell to the ground, and then he heard other trees weeping. In the morning, placing some sacred tobacco on the toppled oak, he expressed his sorrow at the loss

of the chief of the tress, and appointed another oak to take its place. That day he hunted successfully, but he kept wondering about the voices he had heard.

That night he awakened suddenly. A man had entered his shelter. From across the fire he spoke. "My people are grateful for the chief you have chosen, and we will now bring you good luck. No falling limbs or tree-trunks will injure you, and we will frighten away dangerous animals who may stalk you." Then he vanished.

The next night Gosadaya again awakened. Across the fire stood a woman who spoke to him. "The Great Spirit," she said, "has seen your good deed and has sent me to marry you." Gosadaya accepted this word. They built a warmer shelter and his successful hunting kept them in comfort the winter through.

In the spring he took her back to his people, and, meeting in the longhouse, she introduced them to agriculture. She gave the people corn and beans, and taught them how to plant the seeds, care for the beds, and, in the fall, how to gather and store the harvest, and how to crush the grains to make soup and bread. The people were grateful for this new food which freed them from the threat of scarcity.

On a day when Gosadaya was away hunting, his younger brother appeared. His sister-in-law hospitably set before him some corn bread. He knew nothing of it, and scornfully flung it on the ground. Gosadaya's wife wept. That night she told him that because his brother had dishonoured the gift she had brought to the people, she could no longer stay. If he wished to see her again, she said, he must travel eastwards, listening at night for the cry of a baby and pointing an arrow in the direction of that cry. Eventually he would find her.

At dawn the people thought they heard rain falling; it was, however, the kernels dropping off the cobs until they were empty. In fear the men went out to hunt, but could find very little game. Soon the children were crying in hunger. Gosadaya set out to the east, each night guided by the cry of a child. On the third night his wife came to his camp, and he entreated her to return. She refused, but lived with him through the winter. In the spring she said, "Listen!" He heard, faintly, the sound of crying, seemingly coming up from beneath the ground.

"I must go to them," she said, "and you must go back to your people." Taking corn kernels she shook them until they shrank into a small

bundle which she gave to him. Then she was gone, and Gosadaya turned back. On the fourth day he came to his village. In the longhouse he shook out the bundle, and gave seeds to the women. Chastened by their misfortune, they prayed the Great Spirit to bless their planting.

Ever thereafter, the Iroquois celebrated a Planting Festival, a Green Corn Festival, and a Harvest Festival.

The story shows a keen sensitivity to the web of life in which humans live. The Iroquois were both a hunting and a farming culture, and so here is, first of all, a hunter who is "tuned in" to plants – trees, in this case – and sees it as his responsibility to provide for their governance. In return, the plants enter into covenant with him, pledging him their protection. (This is the motif of the vision quest, a rite peculiar to the hunting culture, here broadened to include plants.) The covenant deepens when the Corn Mother comes to him, sent by the Great Spirit, to marry him and thus bring the gift of corn to his people. The covenant is expressed by the marriage. (Note again the vision quest motif.) So the hunters receive the great gift of agriculture; they receive a sure source of food. Everyone is happy, and the covenant of mutual care between people and corn is carefully carried out. But then comes the day when the younger brother arrives, who knows nothing of this covenant. He is still the hunter. As a hunter he knows about the covenant with animals, but for some reason cannot, like his brother, envision a similar covenant with plants. So he despises the corn bread, thus breaking the covenant, and brings the disaster of famine. The Iroquoian peoples understood profoundly that they were bound into the total web of life, and that well-being was possible only by a harmonious integration into that web. To break from that web was not freedom, but disaster – for oneself and for one's people. To attempt to dominate and control the web of life is disastrous.

The notion that freedom is the ability to dominate and control the world and all of life is characteristic of the ideology of economic success, and it is disastrous because it breaks the web of life, the web of interrelationships. And thus it perverts identity, community, and future. Indeed, it destroys identity, community, and future.

"You were called to freedom," announces St. Paul. No wonder he adds, "Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence."

6. It is profoundly noteworthy that Jesus begins his ministry not by an act of domination but by an act of complete incorporation into his people: He is baptized in the Jordan River.

By this act Jesus, instead of setting himself apart from his people, instead of separating himself from the constraints of his community, immerses himself fully into them. There is no Toilet Paper notion of freedom visible here. St. Matthew tells the story in this way (3:13-17):

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Note what Jesus says: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." "The proper thing for us to do is to plunge me totally into the story of Israel so that I can live it out all over again, but this time around to do it right." Jesus sets out to re-live the story of Israel. Israel is the chosen people of God – not because they are such a wonderful people but because God loves them. "The LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone," are the words put in Moses' mouth in Deuteronomy, "and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples..." (Deuteronomy 10:15). This is a radical love; it is unconditioned love. Israel is to live as a child of this unconditioned love, in the ambience of this unconditioned love. Well, says Jesus to John, that is what I shall do. I shall live, in all the circumstances of life, in the radical freedom of a beloved child of God. I shall show my people how God has all along invited them to live.

So Jesus repeats the life of Israel, fulfilling it. In the Sermon on the Mount he enunciates that theme: "I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). To fill them full. Jesus' baptism launches him on that course. He is Israel, crossing through the Red Sea, and as God loomed as a pillar of cloud and smoke, so now the Spirit of God hovers over the Jordan like a hovering dove. Then he is Israel in the wilderness: forty days and nights that are forty years of wilderness wanderings. He is tempted to idolatry

by Satan as Israel was tempted by the Baal of Beth-peor (Numbers 25), but he does not succumb. And as Israel was fed in the wilderness, so angels come and minister to Jesus (Matthew 4). Then he is Israel again crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land, and, like a fresh Deuteronomy he re-interprets the Torah to Israel, now with a breath-taking freedom that erupts out of that unconditional and unconventional love of God. "You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...." "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Secure in this unconditional love of God Jesus moves about with remarkable – and annoying – freedom. He carries with outcasts, the unclean, the marginalized without sinking to their despair or their bitterness. He lives out that unconditional love by tending to the sick, the maimed, the unlovely, and by exploding the illusory self-perceptions of the respectable folk and the pious and the leaders. Like Israel, he encounters the sojourners and the foreigners and struggles with their place in the economy of God. The meeting with the Canaanite woman focusses the issue sharply. After all, the movement of Israel into the Promised Land under Joshua was a bloody and terrifying business. Kill! Kill! Burn! Burn! The inhabitants of the land were marked for destruction. So who is this Canaanite woman except one marked for extermination? But in conversation with her Jesus perceives that the unconditional love of God is far greater and wider than anyone had ever realized (Matthew 15:21-28). Like Israel he is again and again tempted to test God, or to compromise, or to be coopted, or to turn the edge of the prophetic sword. Like Israel he is overwhelmed by exile – ultimate exile – and, like Israel, is raised by the God whose love transcends even death and whose power brings life out of nothingness.

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan initiates a re-presentation of the life of Israel: a life lived out of the liberating conviction of the unconditional love of God, a life lived out with the breath-taking freedom of a beloved child of God.

7. So now here is our paradigm of discipleship: the exercise of the radical freedom of the beloved children of God.

A paradigm is something that “shows forth a pattern”. Christians, following the practice of the Jews, have always held the Scriptures to be the paradigm of God’s struggle with God’s people. Thus the story which the Bible tells is the great story of God, arching from Creation to Consummation. Jesus embodies this story, fulfilling it, that is, filling it full, revealing it fully, in all its dimensions. He embodies it, incarnates it. Because it shows the pattern of authentic human life, it is also *our* story. That is, it is the truest portrayal of human life under God. Our birth, too, is a miracle of promise and potential. Our birth, too, is a threat to every kind of Herod and a star of new hope for the world. Our exercise of compassion can redeem a life from despair and frivolity and ruin. Our struggle for justice can convict the proud and unseat the rich. Our death can be a sign of judgment and a fervent testimony of hope for the coming of the Reign of God. Henri Nouwen expressed it succinctly somewhere: “What is true of Christ, is in some way true also of us.” Luther expressed it even more succinctly: “We are called to be little Christs.”

8. Baptism launches us into that pattern and sums up that pattern.

Baptism, says St. Paul, is a joining of us to Christ so that we are buried into death and raised into new life (Romans 6:3-4). Jesus shows forth the pattern of life under God, and it is a pattern of dying to everything that is anti-God and receiving of authentic life from God. When one dies, one is radically freed. St. Paul writes:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:5-11).

That means we are radically freed: enslaved neither to sin nor to death nor to the devil. The post-baptismal prayer gives God thanks for this liberation: “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we give you

thanks for freeing your sons and daughters from the power of sin and for raising them up to a new life through this holy sacrament." From now on, discipleship is the exercise of that radical freedom, and the pattern for that is Jesus himself, the beloved Child of God, who incarnates the whole long story of God's will for Creation.

9. That's the discipleship Charlie learned to do.

Some years ago Larry Krotz, writing in the *United Church Observer*, remembered "Charlie's changed life":*

On Sunday night Charlie died. No one was surprised. In fact, we had all been waiting for it, waiting as he got weaker, waiting as his skin turned yellow, then green. Five years ago the doctors gave him two years to live. He was 46 then and waiting to get out of Stony Mountain Penitentiary near Winnipeg. His liver was shot, they told him, after a lifetime of booze and drugs, every kind of popper you can imagine. It had also been a lifetime in jail. Jails. In and out. The B.C. Pen., Stony Mountain, a whole raft of provincial correction centres. Charlie was one charge away from being written off entirely.

Then he decided to change his life. "I knew two things," he told me once. "I knew that if they gave me that parole I would never be back in jail again. And I knew that I was going to help somebody else. To make up for all that time in my own life that I'd wasted. Hearing that I mightn't have long to live was part of it. But for some reason I just knew that this time everything would be different."

On Feb. 4, 1979, Charlie Tann arrived in Winnipeg. He had two things: a promise of some help, as he should need it, from an organization called Frontier College⁸ which had a project with ex-inmates in Manitoba; and he had a plan. He was going to spend what was left of his life helping teenagers. He would find the toughest, most confused and embittered kids, the ones no one else could reach, and he would talk to them straight, so they wouldn't end up like him.

He went off to knock on the door of Don Gibson, then the director of the Manitoba Youth Centre in Winnipeg. "His enthusiasm was the main thing," says Gibson. "Some of the staff were wary, who was this guy and

* Reprinted by permission of *The Observer* and Larry Krotz: "Remembering Charlie's Changed Life", by Larry Krotz, *The United Church Observer*, October 1983, pp. 42-43.

why was he prepared to put in this amount of time, they wanted to know. But he was irrepensible; he was convinced he was going to do something positive."

Frontier College paid him a small salary, enough to keep the wolf from the door. He got a basement apartment in downtown Winnipeg and bought a huge, rattling, old Pontiac. His apartment and his car were soon full of the kids everyone had classified as delinquent. If they could get a pass from the Youth Centre but had no place to go, they would stay with Charlie. If they needed someone to go to bat for them – with a social worker, in court, with their parents – Charlie went. If they needed someone to call in the middle of the night, they called Charlie. If they needed a tongue-lashing because they'd slipped up on their promises, got drunk or got into some pills or some acid, they got that from Charlie too.

Before long Charlie became a little industry. He attracted a case-load of kids that was larger than he could handle. The provincial social services ministry and the John Howard Society of Manitoba took him and his program under their wing. His own life changed. He started doing things he'd never done before – going to the theatre and chamber music concerts. He got married.

He was always alert to what was the essential core of his life's reality – his short time....

I asked him, one day, feeling both tender and uninhibited (because Charlie could make you feel that way) what it was like living knowing he was going to die. First, he said, it meant that he never wasted any time. There were so many things to do, to see, to taste, to hear. And then he said, "You know, I'm not the only one who's going to die. You're going to die too. It's just that you don't know as surely as I do when."

When it got near to the end he had bouts of sadness, some depression, great pain. One afternoon he came to my house to get a book and he started talking about Neil, the man from Frontier College whom he credited with being an enormous support to him when he was coming out of jail. Then he referred to the dozens of kids who'd passed through his door in four years. "It would be really neat," he said, "if one or two of them could feel that way about me."

Charlie, I'm sure they do.⁹

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Notes

- ¹ "Holy Baptism," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 124.
- ² Fraser Symington. *The Canadian Indian: The Illustrated History of the Great Tribes of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1969) 107.
- ³ *Ibid.* 142.
- ⁴ Hugo Muller. *Waswanipi: Songs of a Scattered People* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1876).
- ⁵ Hugh MacLennan, *Seven Rivers of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961; Laurentian Library ed., 1977) 97.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* 98.
- ⁷ Adapted from Diamond Jenness, *The Corn Goddess and Other Tales from Indian Canada*, Bulletin No. 141, Anthropological Series No. 39, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1960) 1-3.
- ⁸ Frontier College is worth its own story. Its founder, a Presbyterian minister from Pictou, Nova Scotia, Alfred Fitzpatrick, was motivated by the Social Gospel to establish in 1899 the Canadian Reading Camp Association to bring literacy and education to laborers in isolated work camps of Canada. In 1902 he introduced the laborer-teacher concept which proved highly successful. In January 1919 the Board of the Association applied successfully to the Canadian government, and in 1922 Frontier College was granted degree-granting powers. Ontario opposed this, and the College reverted to its laborer-teacher role. It survived the Depression and the Second World War, turning first to the post-war immigrants and then to persons with disabilities, ex-offenders, prison inmates, and Native communities. In 1999 it celebrated its one hundredth birthday (James H. Morrison, "'Black Flies, Hard Work, Low Pay': A Century of Frontier College," *The Beaver: Canada's History Magazine*, October/November 1999, 33-38.
- ⁹ Larry Krotz, "Remembering Charlie's changed life", *The Observer*, October 1983, 42-43.