

Along the track

Anthem

We are by nature story people. We like hearing them and telling them. Stories tell our history and help explain what we believe and who we are, where our values lie. Some of us are good story tellers, others not so good but we still tell them anyway. But which are true, the stories people tell about us or those we tell ourselves?

Former Italian Olympic swimmer, Novella Calligaris offers this wisdom: “For an athlete, losing is crucial—it’s the moment when one truly reveals who they are: how they recover, what they learn, and how they define their next goal.”

That’s a surprise, isn’t it. What stories do we tell ourselves in moments like these, when things don’t go our way or we experience setbacks tell us a lot about ourselves? Leonard Cohen’s song Anthem contains these lyrics: *There’s a crack in everything, that’s where the light gets in.* In other words, imperfections and flaws in oneself or in the world are not necessarily negative, but rather, they can create opportunities for growth, healing, and understanding.

Some years ago, I watched an interview with an athlete who had just lost a crucial heat in the journey to take part in the next Olympics. The athlete dumped everything on the coach, laying the blame for the loss entirely on her. No room for self-reflection there, no opportunity for growth.

We all have flaws, we all experience setbacks, we have to admit that others are better at some things than we are. That’s life. None of those make us a lesser person. But it is how we deal with those things that is important. Jesus’ story of the two sons has a message for each of us. One son realises he’s been an idiot, he has squandered what he had been given, he is reduced to the lowest job around, he realises his need for forgiveness. The other son may have reason to be upset but he gets on his high horse and becomes very self-righteous. The one who admits “the crack” is the one who is gifted with the opportunity for reconciliation, growth, healing.

When we can’t see or admit our faults, we become defensive at the first sign of criticism, perhaps even hostile. But when we are able to admit our faults and imperfections, that’s when the light can get in. When we become aware of the cracks, we can also become aware of our need for God’s grace, which is so readily given. That’s the message of the story of the Prodigal

Son. Accepting our need for God’s grace can help us to laugh at ourselves and not take ourselves quite so seriously. It can help us to be more alert and sensitive to when we are making our mistakes. Being aware of our need for God’s grace can help us admit our mistake and offer our apologies. Being more sensitive to our need for God’s grace can help us to deal more graciously with other people’s faults and imperfections. That’s what the sacrament of Reconciliation is all about.

Grace doesn’t hide or erase our cracks and the imperfections, but it may help us in dealing with them. That’s where the stories we tell ourselves are important. Do we just blame the coach, or blame everyone else for them? When we are able to admit our faults and imperfections, Grace can transform us, it can shine through us. We can help us see that we are not the centre of the universe, that my opinion is just that and others can have them too. They deserve to be heard, as I do. We can more easily admit our mistakes and offer our apologies. We can deal more graciously with other people’s faults and imperfections. But if we let ourselves grow comfortable with the cracks, with our self-righteousness and intolerance, blaming others like the older son in Jesus’ story, we may find that we rob ourselves of the opportunity for growth, of friendship and even happiness. As the old saying goes, we can spend our lives cursing the darkness or we can light a candle.

Grace can come when there are no cracks too, but if stories do help explain what we believe and who we are, where our values lie, then what do the stories we tell ourselves in the hard times, tell us about ourselves.

Start again, don’t wallow in past mistakes or what has been. God knows us through and through and God understands us through and through as well, better than we do ourselves.

Regards
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