

Restlessness

During this last Christmas Season, I posted a meditation on two poems—one of which was written by George Herbert. Remember the first stanza of his poem, *The Call*:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life;
Such a Way as gives us breath,
Such a Truth as ends all strife,
Such a Life as killeth death.

I received several notes of appreciation for this poem of joy and hope. Two of you also wrote of your own respect for George Herbert, the English pastor and poet who lived from 1593 to 1633. You both pointed me to another of Herbert's famous poems, *The Pulley*. A pulley is a carpenter's device that acts to change the direction of a force applied to a cord or rope. This narrative poem uses this device as a metaphor to address twin themes: God's rich gifts to humankind, but also human restlessness. Here it is:

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,

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But keep them with ripening restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.”

Herbert tells us of the blessings God pours out to the men and women in his creation: The world’s riches, then strength, beauty, wisdom, honor, pleasure. Near the end of the poem, God blesses humans with the gift of goodness.

But after so many gifts, God decides to hold back one treasure. Rest. And that lack of rest, or restlessness, becomes the second theme of Herbert’s poem. In the language of the Bible, rest is a fulfillment word, like “sabbath,” or “seven.” All God’s gifts are ours to have, but without fulfillment, they are like an unfinished sentence. We are in the middle of a story to be completed. As I think about it, restlessness is part of that story, and it can have two sides. It can lead to fulfillment. But it can also lead to weariness.

Though we are all midway in our journey, we still experience the riches of daily life with the puzzles and challenges of God’s design. Restlessness can play a positive role alongside the gifts of curiosity and our yearning for insight. Restlessness guided by goodness leads us to fulfillment. It stirs us to use our freedom to find the meaning of nature and it drives us to active wisdom, kindness, and to realize the gifts of knowledge, truth, and science. It turns our eyes and ears to the love and truth of the Lord of Creation.

But there can also emerge among humans a different kind of restlessness. Herbert seized on this in the penultimate line of *The Pulley*. Restlessness that is not guided by “goodness” leads to “weariness.” It may be solitary and inward, or it may become a restlessness accelerated by ambition for power. It strives for a fulfillment through freedom half-read—that is, a freedom without obligation to love or truth.

Freedom half-read can cause harm to people near and far. Even faith is not enough to overcome a freedom half-read, because it is sometimes confused and makes faulty choices. It can become faith distorted, or the approval of religion we confer upon ourselves. Freedom half-read can lash out as angry

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political or religious expression, unrestrained by goodness or truth. By its nature, it bends our hearts and minds away from God's character. This self-designed freedom may last for days or even years. But sooner or later, it becomes what Herbert calls a "ripening restlessness" that leads to "weariness."

But even when we are not guided by "goodness" and fading to "weariness," the last lines of Herbert's poem catch us off-guard with a surprise of grace and truth put together.

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
if goodness lead him not, yet weariness
may toss him to my breast.

Weariness is not the last word. It is not end of the story, or the end of our journey. It can be the "pulley" that changes our direction and tosses us back to the breast of God.

This is what I call a middle-of-night fulfillment. The fulfillment we find by surprise with shepherds at the cradle in Bethlehem. The fulfillment that came three days after Good Friday's darkness at noon, when we meet the risen Jesus who knows how to find a startled woman at an empty tomb, and discouraged disciples locked in an upper room.