

IT IS HARD TO SEE THE DRAGON
THAT HAS SWALLOWED YOU

I have been thinking all month about what I would say to you when this moment finally came. The thing is, it kept changing every few days, all month long. Part of the time, I thought maybe I should just wait for the moment and then say whatever came to mind off the top of my head. Glad I did not decide to do that. What comes to mind right now, off the top of my head, is “I need a drink.”

I have seen movies and read books from time to time that portrayed a minister standing before the congregation in shame and disgrace after some personal sin or weakness had come to light. (Do you remember Richard Burton in *Night of the Iguana*?) I never figured it would happen to me, but sometimes after seeing or reading such a story, I would get nightmares about it. It seemed like about the worst thing that could happen. But the way you folks have pulled together and handled things, and the way you have treated me – well, it does not seem like such a nightmare after all.

I have always secretly longed for some dramatic moment of success in my ministry – something, I suppose, to reassure me that the energy and effort were really worthwhile. Now that I have had the dramatic failure instead, I am not sure but what I was after the wrong thing. I am already wondering, should things get cold and distant again in the future: what will I do for encores?

Sorry I was not here to welcome Carol as our new Choir Director last Sunday. Hi Carol. I have been hearing good things about you. Church musicians, you know, spend more time than most folk realize trying not only to provide the best music they can, but also trying to choose appropriate music to match the theme of the service. Carol was already trying to find out what today would be like so she could choose some appropriate music. What could I tell her? I can hardly wait to see what the anthem will be.

A favorite old anecdote popped into my head. Back in the days just before prohibition, one Sunday a powerful hellfire preacher was pouring it on about the evils of drink. He got more and more eloquent as he got more and more excited. Finally he wound things up by saying that the authorities should pass a law requiring all liquor-store

owners and manufacturers of every kind of booze to take every drop of booze and pour it in the river. The congregation then rose to sing the final hymn, "Shall We Gather At The River."

It's an old hymn, and I could not find a copy to send you, Carol. You are on your own for next Sunday too. But after that, I promise to keep coordinated.

On the secular calendar, it says that today is Halloween. I identify with that. A crazy, ghoulish, happy day for me, since I get to come back and be among you. On the other hand, coming back before you as a marked alcoholic feels very Halloweenish indeed. Only, I do not get to take the costume off after the party is over. It is a title I am having quite a struggle getting used to.

On the church calendar, it says that today is Reformation Sunday. I identify with that too! And somehow the bizarre mixture of the two strikes my funny bone, as well as some very tender spots that nonetheless have considerable meaning to me. So I don't know what kind of a day you are having, but I am having a good day. A little strange, bizarre, difficult, wonderful – but a good day.

You have been super-great to Mariana and to me during this past month. I wish I could let you each know how much your letters and prayers have meant to me. I hope somebody told you why I could not respond to them before. I guess part of my sickness was the notion that forgiveness was okay for everybody but the minister. Apparently you do not agree with that, and I am very grateful. Personally, I still have trouble equating alcoholism with a sickness or disease, even if it is the number-two killer in the nation. Most of you already seem to have known that, even if I did not. I guess if you are sick and do not know it or cannot admit it, you are probably an alcoholic. Either that or a sinner. The two seem to have a lot of patterns in common.

Anyway, if there are visitors or returning vacationers here who do not know what I am talking about: The first Sunday of October, this congregation was surprised to see a stranger in the pulpit. Later in the service, Mariana stood up to explain that I was in the alcoholic treatment center at Cabrini Hospital and would not be around for several weeks. Most of you were somewhere between surprise and shock. You had not seen me drink very much. Matter of fact, I had not been drinking very much since I came to Mercer Island, at least not

in comparison to former days. In some of your letters, you wondered why I had not said something – shared some of the load like I always tell you to do. Hey, you think *you* were surprised? You should have been inside my head those first days I was in Cabrini! I checked into the hospital a perfectly normal, rational human being. Three days later, I was an alcoholic. My head is *still* spinning. Apparently “Denial and Defensiveness” is my middle name. “It is hard to see the dragon that has swallowed you.”

My first few days at Cabrini, I wrote my letter of resignation. It is still available whenever you want it. I kissed my old life goodbye and started making plans to follow the Way of the Tao. Then one day I did not get all my armor quite in place, and I started feeling your prayers. I used to be able to do that, but I had closed it out – at least the ones that had to do with me. Some of you mix your prayers with a lot of fear and sorrow, but behind that was some stuff I really needed, so I dropped a few more plates of armor to let more of it in. Things have been changing, happening almost too fast, ever since.

By the way, some of you also feel guilty when you do not pray as often as you mean to. I could pick up some of that too. But you do not understand that once you set up some of that energy, it is there for me to draw on. It’s like you open the channel. You do not have to kick at it all the time to keep it open. Anyway, then your letters started coming. A lot of them felt like the visible evidence and continuation of your prayers. Wish I had some way to tell you what a difference it made.

My head now knows that I am an alcoholic. But my emotions, at least the deep ones, cannot accept it. They wake up in the night, and even sometimes during the day, and scream NO! That is what I am watching and working on most right now, with the help of a twelve-step program. If anything in me gets through this period unbelieving, the chances are apparently about 100 to 1 that I will be right back where I started. So I am not trying to tell you anything this morning. Just trying to tell me.

I took my first drink twenty-two years ago – one quart of 100-proof bourbon. I must have been an alcoholic in some past life, and it has been progressing ever since. That first drink was an incredible experience. I had never been unable to control my faculties before. It was eleven o’clock the next morning, swimming in the ocean off Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, before I started feeling like

myself again. It had been a planned drunk – penance for having refused the wine of Christ’s communion. It started a new life for me of being more accepting and loving of other people. I lost the “virginity” of my self-righteousness. I would rather die a drunk than go back to the way I was before that day.

Anyway, I drank against all the “don’ts” of my upbringing and refused to pay attention to the guilt, knowing it was only my old moral pride. I drank claiming grace and the right to be human, and it was good for a long time. I also started a game with alcohol. I was fascinated by its effect. It could not do that to me! Often thereafter, when I could, I drank in a contest to see how long I could stay in control against the effects. I lost a lot of rounds. But inside, I also knew that I had put up a pretty good fight. It was fun.

In the early days, I also had many experiences of close times and good conversations with people who did not have much use for the church until after we started drinking together. Many of them became excellent members and leaders in the church.

Also, I did not turn into a beast, as I had been taught I would if I ever touched alcohol. I loved people more, God more, Mariana more. I had the same feelings I had had before, only they came welling up with beauty and power from somewhere within. I had the courage to share the things I usually kept to myself. People quipped that they could learn a lot from me in six months of counseling – or in one night, if they could get me drinking. The old Oracle Syndrome.

Looking back, it was about ten years ago that the pattern started changing. Sometimes I was not sharp and insightful when I drank – just repetitive, dull and argumentative. I began to be wary. I started pulling back, drinking only with a few I knew would not care (or remember) how I acted. I did not know it consciously, but I was on the run. How to keep drinking – but avoid the painful experiences and repercussions? Inevitably, that came down to drinking alone. And it took a lot of pain and shame to do that – and fear.

I did not move from California to Mercer Island to escape, at least not consciously. That is in answer to some of the questions in your letters. I was not asked to leave Redlands; I was begged to stay. Frankly, I kept wondering why I had been so close to so many there and so distant from most folk here. Often, I figured it was because I drank with the people there and had decided not to do that here.

Anyway, my pattern changed when I got here. I did not drink for six months. After the flurry of a new position wore off, I took to rewarding myself once or twice a week – one bottle of sherry or half a bottle of brandy in the late evening (looking forward to vacation breaks, when I could “do it right”). At the “intervention” that got me into Cabrini, most of the evidence of my problem was two years old or older. (Naturally I was saying to myself, “Why now?”) All, that is, except for one kind of evidence: I had changed. I was more and more closed off and alone. I was dealing with people, trying to care and be helpful seventy to eighty hours a week – but still alone. I did not want intimacy, friendship, closeness with anybody. Inwardly angry, bitter and discouraged, I went on working. My alcohol input was drastically reduced (both amount and frequency), but my head and heart were still getting more and more “alcoholic.” Do you know how it feels? I AM A LEPER – DO NOT TOUCH ME!

I took inventory, all right. All the time. And the reality was that I gave more than I got – with everybody. And everything would be fine if people would just listen and act on the wisdom I provided. That’s the real ugliness: PRIDE. Too proud to receive anything from anybody – even God.

Some of you wondered, “Why didn’t you pray, like you told us to do?” What do you think kept me going?! Only, I was not praying about what was under my cloud or behind my armor. I did not know how. It was closed off to me – off limits. I prayed for other things – for some of you, for purpose and guidance and wisdom, for the church – but not about my own need, because I could not face, see or admit it. You know why, of course. I am not an alcoholic; I am a Christian minister, and a very dedicated one too – even gifted in some ways. And since you cannot be an alcoholic and a minister at the same time, therefore I am not an alcoholic. Simple logic – that has cost me ten years of anguish. “It is hard to see the dragon that has swallowed you.” But for Mariana, it would doubtless have been another ten years.

Some of you obviously know it already, but others asked, “Why didn’t you just use more discipline or willpower?” If I did not have so much willpower – another name for it is “willfulness” – the disease probably would have been arrested long ago. But once inside the alcoholic pattern, willpower and self-discipline are turned to the needs of the drinking pattern. You do not use it outside. Drinking still seems like a harmless, and in fact beneficial, friend. In time, it seems like about the only friend you have left. Anyway, do not tell me about

discipline. Every day or night that any of you saw me without a drink in my hand, you were watching pure willpower in action. Then after ten o'clock at night, or whenever you did not need me for a while, that same willpower would say, "Good, that was for them. Now for me."

Anyhow, I seek surrender – again – like I had back when I took that first drink. Back to where I was twenty-two years ago, only for the opposite reason. And opposites have a way of being almost similar. I have not found it yet, but I seek it: the brokenness – or death – that leads to Life.

I have always walked with God, even through the last ten years. It is how I have survived. I just have a hard time remembering sometimes which one of us should go first. I have also learned, once again – with your help – that there is no justice. Thank God!

I don't know if any of you have comments or curiosity about any of this. If so, I wish you would feel free to speak it. I would like to get everything cleared that needs clearing, so we can move on – if that is God's will.