

Faith beyond resentment: Introduction

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Introduction to the *Faith beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*
(London: DLT, 2001, pp. ix-xv)

“How” Joseph must have thought, as he donned his Egyptian vizier’s robe, “am I going to enable my brothers to share all this abundance which has been given me? They think I’m probably dead, and effectively that’s what they wanted. They are a long way away, and even if, by the sort of miracle usually confined to Bible stories, they were to wend their weary way across the desert from Canaan to Egypt, they are probably still just as jealous and fratricidal as ever they were, and thus would be frightened of me. They would think me likely to be plotting revenge and so wouldn’t open up enough to be able to receive all the things I want to give them. To tell them that we were wrong is to play tit for tat. Not to tell them anything is to treat them as incorrigible and deprive them of the joyous breaking of heart which will enable us to become real brothers. What on earth am I to say?”

I am not sure that any lesser starting point is worthy of gay people who are becoming able to speak the gift of faith. The position of the effectively dead man who, after losing any belonging, after struggling through an unsatisfactory apprenticeship and a prison sentence in a realm he did not know, without any support from his own, has found himself given a position of such favour and abundance that his task is to imagine generosity for others. This is what I mean by calling this book “Faith beyond resentment”. Joseph exercised Pharaoh’s generosity as though he had never undergone any of the experiences which led him to his position. He was so entirely free of any sort of resentment that he was able to imagine an entirely generous and sustained programme for the reconciliation of his brothers, and act it out in such a way that they were eventually able to get the point, overcome their fratricide and be reconciled.

In the pages that follow, it is to just such a making available of abundance from a complete lack of resentment that I aspire. And yet the reality falls far short of the aspiration. I don’t suppose that Joseph was free from resentment as he was sold into slavery by his brothers. He had time for meditation as he was dragged off to Egypt, meditation which could easily have turned into bitterness, resentment and despair. He had cause for more of the same when his seemingly safe job got turned into a trap by the wife of his master Potiphar. And in whose entrails would the worm not have turned during a long and undeserved jail-sentence? Yet it was in the midst of these experiences that Joseph developed an awareness of being loved such that he recognised that none of the people against whom he might justly feel resentment were really worthy of his dedicating to them that weight of emotional involvement. And he moved beyond even that, to a position of such freedom that he began to be able to plot not vengeance, but sustained forgiveness as the gift of humanising others.

The reason I have called these pages ‘fragments’ is that they inhabit the process of losing resentment. The freedom from resentment which I have described is aspirational, but the process of losing it is real. The chapters upon which you are

embarking mark my failure to write the book which I once planned, a symphonically elegant treatise on the unbinding of the gay conscience. I have instead been given to dwell within the process of the unbinding of that conscience. Each chapter is perhaps a pit stop on the camel route to Egypt, a few hours stolen from my duties in Potiphar's mansion, an idling away of time in prison.

'Fragments' is a pretty word — the sort of word that theologians and others like to use out of a certain professional modesty. It is the same with titles beginning 'Towards a ...' (new understanding of this, radical rewrite of that). But the word hides something which is not pretty: it means things broken. Broken words. A broken ability to find sense. And professional modesty is merely playful if the brokenness is not real. To come across broken pieces and try to put them together is one thing. To discover oneself among the broken pieces which are being put together is quite another.

These pages are written out of brokenness. This is something for which neither my theological training nor my pretensions of literacy could have prepared me. If I had escaped being broken, I would indeed have written my 'symphonically elegant work on the unbinding of the gay conscience'. And it would have been raise. There is nothing elegant about inhabiting a space which has historically, socially and theologically been regarded at best as risible and at worst as evil. Any elegance in the pages that follows is, I fear, a sign of a failure to inhabit that space and speak from it. to let go of a residual veneer of sophisticated denial, to allow words to arise instead from the unspeakable, the unacceptable, the abominable. To speak prettily from a space that is littered with murder, with suicide, and with lies is perhaps simply presumptuous. And yet not to speak at all, not to try to do homage to the wastage and the pain by stammering the forgiveness that those deprived of words cannot articulate, even when, time after time, I miss the pathos and the depth of the forgiveness that is required, is to render too much tribute to despair.

The background to these texts is not that of a lifelong struggle with the oppressive force of Catholic teaching. I was brought up in a conservative middle-class English evangelical Protestant environment. The gift of Catholic faith, which I received at the age of eighteen, was never a movement towards the exotic, the liturgical, the aesthetic. It was, and is, the gift of enabling me to be wrong, and not to worry about it, of letting go of being right so as to receive being loved. I have never experienced Catholicism as itself creating the great annihilation of being which has accompanied same-sex desire throughout the monotheistic world and beyond, however much Catholicism has pandered to, succumbed to and institutionalised the forces of that annihilation, and however little it has been brave enough to resist them when it should have known better. Until I received the gift of Catholic faith I dwelt in that annihilation wordlessly, imagelessly. I experienced it as a void created and maintained by silent voices of righteous hatred. For hatred can only create a void; and hatred is incapable of being wrong. But my void was that of the thoroughly English, respectable, hatred which seemed normal as I grew up in the 1960s and 70s; and it was this that formed the being which faith has interrupted unalterably. For while hatred itself is incurably righteous, even self-righteous haters like myself can be given a heart.

Not only did the gift of Catholic faith keep me from killing myself, but little by little it has given me the tools, the structure and the words with which to sink into, to inhabit,

and to begin to detoxify, at least for myself, and I hope for others, the great annihilation of being. This gift has made it possible for me to begin to discover what it might mean to be rejoiced in as being gay, and how to love and share a dignity which the centuries have denied us. A discovery which will, I suspect, become more and more common. So you will not find a protest against the Catholic faith in these pages. Though you may find yourself sharing my amazement at how all the deepest and most resilient elements of the faith seem to point in exactly the opposite direction to that so tensely insisted on by the stewards of its formulas.

What I want to share with you is a story neither of protest nor of heroism. It is something much more like an unfinished journey into discovery of being. A journey in which Catholic faith provides the wherewithal to make the discovery possible, both because of and in spite of its own structure. Various gifts have contributed to turning this hater, who could so easily have become a self-hating clergyman, or a closet homophobic politician, into the author of these pages. After the gift of Catholic faith, there was the gift of being associated with a religious order which took me in when I was on the brink of despair, taught me theology and gave me the basic theological tools which set me free to discover that faith is not given us so as to enable us to 'belong to the Church' but so that we may understand and love being human. Then there came the gift of the thought of Rene Girard, which has given me the structure and eventually the courage to reimagine the Christian faith in what turns out to be an unexpectedly orthodox way. It is his thought, which underpins all the chapters of this book, which allowed me not to be frightened of dwelling in the space of the hatred from which I had always run away. Not frightened, because becoming aware that by dwelling peacefully in this space, the Word would come. Then, as courage grew, there was the gift of being repudiated by the religious order with which I lived. It was in the midst of this repudiation that I discovered that God has nothing to do with religious violence. It was time to let go of the shelter to which I clung and dare to be what I had never dared to be all along.

Even after the repudiation I lingered on for a few months, which was when I received the most destabilising gift of all. The death from AIDS of the man I loved. More shocking than the speed and surprise of his death was the realisation which dawned on me in the days immediately after it, that there was nothing evil or distorted or silly or pretend about the love between us. It was the real thing. And that meant that I had no shelter, could not consent to cowardice any more. Could not be complicitous with the denigration of love. Had to move forward.

These pages start here. They have been written over the six years that have passed since Laercio's death. These are years in which I have stumbled, at first with dismay, and gradually with delight, into adult life, into being unemployed, trying to find work, holding jobs and losing them, having a bank account, falling into debt, working my way out of it, attempting to settle in a country, being unable to, trying again. They are years in which I have tried to learn how to be faithful to a theologian's vocation without any institutional belonging, academic or ecclesiastical. Years in which I have tried to imagine what it is to exercise priesthood in exile. That is another reason why I can offer you only fragments: in six years I have moved countries seven times, and have had access to my own books only for one eight-month interlude. The result is many fewer footnotes than is normal in a book of theology.

Of the ten chapters, seven were written for specific audiences, and the remainder were

either written or adapted for this book. I have kept them in roughly the order in which they were written because I hope that you will detect something of progress in them, something of a gradual daring to sink into and personally to inhabit texts and experiences which it is too easy to read from outside. Something of a development of voice. I have divided the chapters into two parts. The first contains a series of attempts to dwell in biblical texts in such a way that they fuel imagination and spark off recognitions which enable us to engage in a re-creation of being. The second part emerged as I began to dare to think that I must learn to speak for myself, something which I suspect is going to be increasingly important for theology written by gay people as our consciences do indeed become free. The uncertain tenor, the tentative nature of these rehearsals of a voice will be self-evident.

What do I hope you will get from these pages? I hope that you will find your faith less easily scandalised, that you are more easily able to relax into being loved, that you will become more aware of the earth-shaking mercy behind God becoming incarnate and dwelling among us, a mercy whose implications maybe it is especially gay and lesbian people who can make alive at this time.

When, in this book, I say ‘Catholic’ I’m not sure whether I mean ‘Roman Catholic’ or simply Christian. When I say ‘Church’ I am not sure whether I mean ‘juridical structure’ or simply ‘God’s faithful people’. When I say ‘gay’ I’m not sure whether or not ‘lesbian’ is included — and sometimes whether or not ‘straight’ isn’t included as well. In each case, I am complicit with my belonging, and the limits of my freedom from circumstance are for others to discern. My rare uses of the word ‘homosexual’ appear almost invariably in inverted commas. There is something ineradicably ‘they’-ish about the word, and these are ‘we’-seeking pages.

[...]

These pages are dedicated to the memory of my friend and classmate, Fr Benjamin O’Sullivan, monk of Ampleforth Abbey who died by his own hand in 1996. May his prayers bring something of his infectious joy to those who most need it, and most home that these pages will not disappoint them.