

Residential Schools: when humility goes awry

Biblical language is the deepest language of all. It is deeper than psychological or sociological language, or any other language. Biblical language is archetypal language. For example, you are feeling run down. Medical language says you have chronic arthritis. Psychological language says you are experiencing mid-life crisis. But biblical language says you're in Gethsemane. On a recent visit to a parishioner in hospital, when I asked her how she felt, she replied, "I feel like hell." This is the deepest, cut-to-the-chase language in all of us; it is biblical language. It is with this language that I share a few more thoughts on residential schools. Firstly, though, a reflection.

A number of years ago, with a couple of friends I was vacationing in Virginia. We were exploring the area around Jamestown, the first English-speaking settlement in America (1607) in what many call the birthplace of America. About a half hour's drive outside of Jamestown, we visited the Berkeley Plantation. The Berkeley Plantation played a key role in the American Civil War where that haunting bugle piece we know as "Taps" was first composed. This plantation was also the birthplace of two American presidents and visited by four others. It was here that bourbon whiskey was first distilled (1620), and it was also on the Berkeley Plantation that the first official Thanksgiving in American was celebrated in 1619 (Plymouth, Massachusetts was two years later).

Our tour guide was welcoming and very knowledgeable. She pointed to a corner on the property where historic graves marked the final resting place of the past owners of the plantation. When asked about where the 110 slaves, who lived and worked on the plantation, were buried, she said sheepishly, "You're probably standing on them." This was the most touching part of the whole visit for me. Presidents, "Taps", bourbon whiskey, Thanksgiving, and the graves of wealthy plantation owners were honored, but nothing earmarked the lives and final resting place of these 110 souls. When the official tour was over and we were allowed to explore the property at leisure, two biblical quotes kept swirling in my head: "**take off your sandals, for the place you are standing on is holy ground**" (Ex. 3:5) and "**rejoice that your names are written in heaven**" (Lk. 10:20). You may not have been deemed important enough to have your names recorded here on earth, but your names are etched forever in heaven, in the ever-lasting memory of God and can never be erased.

Thirty years ago, I remember absorbing-- not in a theology class but during a walk along the Rideau Canal in Ottawa with a trusted friend—some words of wisdom. It is advice that I have not always followed, but for some reason it has stayed with me and continues to form me when I allow it to. I paraphrase this priest's words: "Phil, I don't know whether you will be ordained a priest or not. Regardless, strive to become the best **human being** you can possibly be. This will be a lifelong labor. If you have any time left in your life (and you might not), then and only then, try to become the best **Christian** you can possibly be. This too will be an enduring task, your life's work really. After that, if you have any time left in your life (and you might not), then and only then, do your utmost to become the best **priest** you can possibly be." This friend continued, "Far too many of us priests set out to be the best priest we could be without first doing the necessary human and Christian development. We thought we could leapfrog those two essential

steps on our way to ordination. In our shortsightedness, we chose clericalism (I got the Roman collar, I'm here to be served) over serving others and, as a result, caused much pain."

When I think of those who were in charge of the residential school, it makes me wonder whether any human development or Christian development ever occurred. Could this be the latent cause of so much suffering? When we fail, even to this day, to do our "homework" (developing as humans firstly and Christians secondly) somebody else usually pays the price. In our quest to be spiritual, we can easily bypass what it means to be fully human. With each passing day, I am more convinced that Jesus did not come to teach us how to be more spiritual; he came to teach us how to become fully human. Nobody embraced their humanity more fully than Jesus did. That is why I can't give up on him. He is the model, the archetype, of what each of us is called to be.

Humanity comes from the Latin word "humus" which refers to soil, dirt, earth. Humility also arises from the same word. When we are not humble, we quickly forget where we came from—the earth; that's why we are called *earthlings*. We came from the earth (earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust), and we, upon death, will return to the earth. Yet, that is not the whole story. Our origin and destiny are the Divine. From the beginning of time, we are told this dust, that we are, is endowed with the very breath of God. This makes us holy, just as the Divine is holy. It is a dignity we cannot earn nor bestow upon ourselves. It is freely conferred on us by God at conception and is never taken back.

Jesus taught us humility, first in words, then by laying down his life in case we missed the obvious point. In Biblical times, and still down to this day, the drive in society is in the direction of "upward mobility,"—power, prestige, and popularity. However, the drive in Jesus always remained toward "downward mobility." Jesus looked after Good Friday, and the horror that came with it, while he left the glory of the resurrection to God, his Abba. He always took the lower road--the road of humility, the road traversed by women, the poor, the lepers, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the children, the powerless. It is that very same road he asked his followers to tread each time he said, "Follow me."

Noticing how people gravitated to the places of honour, Jesus tells them a parable at a dinner party. He says that when you are invited to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour. It may have been reserved for a more distinguished guest. Then, when you are asked to give up your seat, you will feel humbled (even embarrassed) as you are escorted to a lowest place. Instead, immediately entering the house, choose the lowest seat of all. Your guest will likely be so impressed that you will be invited to move up higher. The exulted will be humbled, and the humbled will be exulted. Arrogance, a sense of superiority, or entitlement makes us gravitate to the places of honour, while humility seeks the lower seat.

A couple of decades ago, teams of high school students from 20 different countries throughout the world squared off to determine who was best at mathematics. Each group of students, from all 20 countries, was given the same test. Before the results were made public, the American students were asked how they felt they did. With utter confidence they were sure they ranked #1 out of all 20 countries. They had no doubt, that when it came to mathematics, they were #1.

When the tests were marked and the results came in, America ranked #19 out of a possible 20. The American students could hardly believe it. It was humbling, to say the least.

When ignorance (you don't know) is combined with arrogance (you think you know it all), the result is usually a sense of superiority until you are shown the lower seat at the banquet. That is so crushing for the ego within each of us. Our collective ego as Church is surely being humbled at this point in our history. Our sin, vis-à-vis the residential schools, was the way we put ignorance and arrogance together and never questioned our self-imposed superiority. We thought we knew it all, that we were saving souls from eternal damnation, that we were doing God's work, that salvation came through, and only through, strict adherence to Roman Catholic teachings. All roads lead to Rome, but the only road leading to eternal life—"I am the way, the truth, and the life"—does not necessarily have to pass through the eternal city.

Now, before I throw too many stones at the Pharisees in Jesus' time and the architects of the residential schools (How could they have been so stupid? How could they have distorted religion so badly?), I have to look at myself. Am I living the gospel any better in my own life? Reading the gospels, it is like holding up a mirror. It's always me that I see. The question is: "Phil, what is this gospel passage calling *you* to be or to do, at this point in *your* life?" Enough with comparing myself to the Pharisees of old and feeling pretty good on balance. Enough with my futile attempts to appear righteous before God. So often the Good News of Jesus Christ feels like the worst news I have ever heard in my life. Why? Because it's firstly about me. Darn it. It is never about shaping up others who, from my perch, obviously need shaping up! It is so humbling to my ego to be called down from my roost, not unlike being shown the lower seat at a banquet. Yet, at the same time, it is so liberating to my True Self. My True Self does not have to have all the answers, does not have to prove its worth, and does not feel the need to impress anyone. It just knows it has an unmerited, standing invitation to the banquet. Wisdom and freedom break through, in our lives, when we accept the fact that we know and don't know, at every moment. And it's OK. It is humbling and liberating at the same time.

In my more humbled moments, I can hear the Crucified One saying, "I am dying to be with you," and then whispers, "Will you die a little to be with me?" It is then that I realize that what has to die is the imperial ego with me. My ego does not take well to such humiliation; it feels too much like dying...which it is. On the plus side, my little efforts at dying do put me in solidarity with the Body of Christ, all my brothers and sisters, who are carrying wounds I cannot even imagine. Maybe that is why the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples still bearing the wounds of Good Friday. He wanted to remind us that he still walks the earth in the wounds of each person, including ourselves.

I may never walk upon the unmarked graves of children who lost their lives at residential schools. I may never make it back to the Berkeley Plantation and walk upon the grave of those 110 nameless, African-American slaves. However, each human interaction I have, in the run of my day, can be a new invitation to take off my sandals and tread lightly, for I will be walking on holy ground. My salvation is forever tied up with my neighbour, even my enemy, as Jesus taught. If I cannot learn to walk with my neighbors, my walk with the Lord means nothing. I hate to admit it, but it's like learning to walk all over again. How humbling, yet, how liberating.

