

Truth, compassion must be yoked

Back when I was still teaching full time, I was, for a period of time, the acting dean at a theological college. In that role, I received a phone call one day from one of the local parish priests. The conversation went something like this:

"Are you the dean of theology at the college?"

"Well, I'm filling in for the dean who's on sabbatical."

"God, your students are a pain in the behind! They take a couple of courses, come back, and terrorize the parish! Nothing's ever right for them. They roll their eyes at everything: how we do liturgy, my preaching, the parish's priorities, at our ecclesiology in general. I don't doubt they're right most of the time, but that's not the point. It's their arrogance that's destructive. Don't you teach them any compassion?"

There's a challenge: Don't you teach them any compassion?

Truth must always be yoked to compassion. Growth in our lives (be it intellectual, spiritual, psychological, professional or moral) should not lead to arrogance, elitism or the false judgment that we, now so free and enlightened, are stuck among the ignorant and unwashed. Rather, any genuine growth should lead to a concomitant growth in compassion, respect, gentleness and the capacity to be more understanding of what's in



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In Exile

opposition to us.

Jesus said as much when he instructed us to speak our truth in parables, lest our speaking causes more harm than good. In essence, what Jesus tells us is that truth is not a sledgehammer, and simply having the truth is not enough. Our truth must be right, but so, too, must our energy. For the truth to set us free must come with an equal dose of compassion; otherwise, our being right will only lead to more divisiveness inside the community and lots of personal bitterness.

Imagine a marriage within which, at a point, one partner begins to grow in ways that the other partner cannot share. Often this leads to divorce or, more commonly, to a lot of resentment and bitterness in the partner who is trying to grow in a new way and now is left with the feeling: "I'm stuck with someone who doesn't un-

derstand or support what I'm doing and is an obstacle to my growth and happiness."

What's true inside a marriage is true inside all families, religious communities, parishes and circles of friendship. At a certain point, one member begins to grow in a way that becomes a threat to the others.

There is no fully happy solution here, but some of the tension can be undercut if there is an equal effort to grow in compassion. A little learning can be a dangerous thing. That's true for all of us and sometimes (perhaps most times) our personal quest for achievement, enlightenment, holiness, justice or straightening out the church is fraught with more than a little illusion and grandiosity, and we need precisely the type of grounding that a partner, a family, a parish or a circle of friendship is so willing to provide. And, while that's true, it's not the whole story.

Each of us, too, hears deep personal calls which, if not responded to, will leave both us and our Creator frustrated. We are being called always by God, personal charism, circumstance, injustice around us and the demons inside us to grow in ways that will not always please our partners, families, parishes, communities and friends. Not to respond is to incur the biblical wrath reserved for those who hide their talents; but,

conversely, to respond badly, with less than proper compassion, is to make our truth a sledgehammer that drives the community apart. It's a tough choice and we risk a certain bitterness either way.

A marriage partner, a family, a parish, a community or a circle of friends functions in a double way. On the one hand, it's a floor, a certain safety net that keeps us from ever falling too low. It protects us so we can't free-fall into any kind of major degeneracy. In every family and community there's a certain unconscious support that won't let you fall too low. But, there's also a certain ceiling, a roof, which defines how high you can grow. In all but the very best marriages, families, parishes, communities and friendships, there's an unwritten, unspoken, unalterable law: "You may grow this far, but no further!" And that's not always bad. While it threatens us with being leveled to a common denominator, it also, as we saw, challenges us not to grow in ways that are one-sided, half-baked and self-delusory.

It's not easy to grow and not cause tension. And so it's important that any new growth in truth radiates an equally new growth in compassion.

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Aging parents teach us how to live

I hate seeing people age, especially parents. I want to color the gray out of their hair and buy them a lifetime prescription for aging cream so as to erase, along with their wrinkles, my fear of being left alone in this world.

Young adults are entering that chapter in their lives when they must decide what to do if their parents are no longer able to meet their own needs.

Each generation has had to care for the one before it, of course. But since many young adults are prolonging the decision to start a family of their own, a growing number of 30-somethings are faced with the double responsibility of changing diapers and Depends.

"I thought the grandparents were supposed to be of help to us when we were raising babies," a disgruntled and exhausted friend said the other night as he flung himself on our couch after a full day of work, grocery shopping and helping his mom with a water leak.

Having lost our father in our ear-



Therese J. Borchard

Our Turn

ly 20s, my sisters and I constantly monitor my mom's health, discussing future options for when she is unable to bathe, eat and take care of the essentials.

Some of our parents are 60 going on 90, with many physical ailments. Some are as active and as mentally alert as they were in their prime.

We young adults can learn a great deal from our parents on how to age, which so often reflects how to live.

Research shows that those who stay physically and mentally active throughout their later years can successfully avert and overcome many

diseases and cancers that plague their inactive friends. An unofficial survey conducted by my husband and me proves this point. Among our older neighbors and friends who volunteer and work out and read and participate in community functions, disease and illness are virtually absent. But fatigue and high blood pressure and a list of other physical maladies immobilize those who have withdrawn from society, intellectual stimulation and physical activities.

I am inspired by those in their 70s, 80s and beyond who engage in life as fully as they did in their 20s and are uninhibited by their age to try new things.

Eventually, however, there is no escaping death and aging and gray hair and wrinkles. I fear the day I won't be able to worry about my mom and to hear her voice on the other end of the phone. Until then, I try to learn as much as I can from her lived experience.

Therese J. Borchard is a columnist for Catholic News Service.



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