

From the Pastor's Desk

Discharging Your Loyal Soldier

I have had two major conversions in my life. The first was in early college when I experienced an awareness of the presence of God in Christ and it changed my life. The second was a few years later when I came to understand that faith, no matter how strong, needed to be built upon healthy psychology in order to become an emotionally mature adult.

The first part of life is mostly about building an identity and addressing questions such as: "Who Am I? Am I valued and respected by my family (and later in life) by my peers? How do I deal with my fears? Who is God and why am I here? What am I suppose to do with my life? Will I be able to meet the challenges of adulthood? Perhaps you can add other questions or feelings you experienced.

The Importance of Rules and Authority*

During this time life is primarily about building our ego, i.e. the container that will hold who we are and will become. We need a very strong container to hold the contents and contradictions that will arrive later in life. A healthy ego is constructed in a loving environment where we learn impulse control, boundaries between our life and the lives of others and respect for laws and authority. We cannot flourish in early life without knowing proper boundaries and how to live within them. Without laws, human life would be anarchy and chaos.

Children need nurture, order and predictability to grow up well. Chaotic parenting will create chaotic kids. Kids who have not learned to live within limits will be in no condition to be successful parents later in life. German philosopher Carl Jaspers taught that learning to conduct one's life within the confines of clear boundaries produces experiences of dread, responsibility, guilt, and anxiety as the human mind confronts its restrictions so it can learn to move beyond them later in life. In other words, we need to learn how to cope with boundaries and limits in order to grow up and overcome them later in life. A child having a temper tantrum in the middle of a toy store because his parent refuses to buy a toy he wants will learn much about what it means to mature if the parent refuses to give in to his demands.

On the other hand, great damage has been done to societies and families where too much reliance was placed upon law, custom and authority. Most wars, genocides, and tragedies in history have been waged by unquestioning followers of authority. The anger and blindness it brings is devastating because it takes away necessary self confidence and self questioning, which is a characteristic of political and religious fundamentalism.

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In post World War II Japan, wise leaders were able to understand that many of their returning soldiers were not fit to re-enter civil society. During their training, they had learned discipline, obedience and to follow commands. In other words, they learned to be a “loyal soldier” for their country. But they needed other skills to rejoin their communities as effective fathers, husbands and citizens. So Japanese leaders created a community ritual whereby a soldier was publically thanked and honored for their service in the military. Then an elder would announce with authority: “The war is over now. The community needs you to let go of what has served you so well up to now and return as a father, husband, citizen and someone beyond a soldier.” Pastor and psychologist Richard Rohr in his work with men’s groups calls this process “discharging your loyal soldier”. He states, “Because no one shows us the stunted and limited character of the first part of life, we just continue with more of the same. The Japanese were wise enough to create a clear closure, transition, and possible forward direction.”

The loyal soldier is similar to the “elder son” in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, whose loyalty was to strict meritocracy and to his own entitlement. Jesus makes the same point in his story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, where the former who was loyal and obedient was chastised, while the latter was praised and accepted as right with God. This subverts our usual merit-badge thinking. Both the elder son and Pharisee were good loyal religious soldiers and perhaps what we were also taught to be. Yet, Jesus says both of them missed the main point.

The voice of the loyal soldier is the voice of all our earlier authority figures, which has got us through the first part of life, teaching us all the proper rules and traditions. BUT, he gives us so much security and validation that we may confuse his voice with the very voice of God. The loyal soldier cannot get you to the second part of life because he has never been there. He helped you make decisions that demanded black-and-white thinking; but you have to say goodbye when you move into the subtlety of midlife and later life. There is a deeper voice of God that we need to hear.

Discharging your loyal soldier can feel like a loss of faith, but it is necessary to finding authentic inner authority, or what Jeremiah promised as “the law written on your heart” (31:33). Normally, we don’t dismiss the loyal soldier until we are forced to in order to love a gay or lesbian family member or friend, or perhaps ourselves after experiencing a divorce or other challenge where we were considered to be a failure. We dismiss the loyal soldier when we allow love to overcome law, which was much of what Jesus’ life was all about. Jesus had boundaries in life and believed in law, but they were permeable, more of a picket fence than a cement wall. He saw people on the other side, identified with them and was compassionate. As we mature, Christian discipleship calls us to do the same.

* Adapted from “Falling Upward” by Richard Rohr, pp 25-51.