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HEART-TO-HEART

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A Pastoral Letter From Richard J. Foster

RENOVARÉ

Dear Friends,

John Paul II has rightly diagnosed our society as a "culture of death." Because this is such a stark reality today, we who follow Jesus Christ need to use every possible opportunity to affirm life, and most particularly the preciousness of "that solitary individual," as Søren Kierkegaard so aptly put it.

You are reading this letter as the Thanksgiving and Advent seasons draw near which makes this an especially appropriate time for remembrance and gratitude, and in that spirit I want to tell you about three very special people. One of these individuals I have known a lifetime, one is new to the human family, and one I do not even know his name. Yet each one is precious and each one has taught me a central moral virtue that I want to highlight.

The backdrop for what I am about to share arose out of a decision Carolynn and I made about how to celebrate our thirtieth wedding anniversary. What would we do? I was thinking rather modestly of some flowers and dinner. Carolynn, on the other hand, was thinking in grander terms. "We are going on a vacation," she announced. "No writing. No teaching. No speaking. Just vacation!" And so we did. We got us a camping trailer (quite upscale, especially when compared to the old brown/green WWII tent we used in the early years of our marriage) and set out on something of a pilgrimage to Carolynn's roots in Kentucky and mine in New Mexico.

Joseph and the Virtue of Trust

First, of course, we have to stop by and see the grandchildren—Mariana and Joseph. (Oh, yes, we see their parents too!) Joseph is not yet a year old so he remains the focal point of attention. His quite "grown-up" two-year-old sister thinks he is the greatest. And I must admit she is right. He smiles. He giggles. He coos. He lies on his back, kicking tiny feet that have yet to find a reason for existence. He is a sandy-haired, hazel-eyed chunk—twenty-three pounds of beautiful baby fat.

On this trip I learn something important from Joseph. I learn about **TRUST**. This trust of his is quite astonishing to watch. Everyone holds him, touches him, tickles him. And Joseph simply takes it all in. He looks up into your eyes and trusts you. He has not yet learned that this world is filled with tragedy and sorrow. He has not yet learned to distrust everyone and everything. He has not yet learned about the world of words which humans use to distort and deceive and destroy one another. So he trusts. He trusts his mother who feeds him. He trusts his father who plays with him. He trusts his big sister who hugs him constantly. He trusts everyone.

Now, we who are wise to ways of the world know all about the limits of trust. We are, in fact, experts on the limits of trust. We know how malevolent our world truly is. We have a well rehearsed belief in "original sin"—if not from dogma, certainly from bitter experience. But, perhaps, just perhaps, we could use some instruction now and again in "original innocence." So Joseph becomes my teacher in original innocence, in trust. Joseph teaches me about God and about how to more fully trust God.

You see, for little Joseph everyone is good and out to do him good. So he trusts. For Joseph love is received freely and given freely. So he trusts. For Joseph all things good, all things loving, all things needful and right are his. So he trusts.

Perhaps this can speak a word to we who are jaded and suspicious and street-wise. In and through God the things which Joseph sees are the things which truly are. God is good and always out to do us good.

God is love and gives of his love lavishly. In God all things good, all things loving, all things needful and right are ours. So we, like Joseph, can live in trust.

The Fiddler and the Virtue of Contentment

But we have miles to go and places to see, and so, saying our goodbys, we are off. For some time we travel and camp in those magnificent old mountains of the Eastern United States. Being Western raised myself, all of my mountain experiences have been in the Rockies and the Cascades and the Sierra Nevadas. So I find great delight in the more gentle mountains of Appalachia, of the Cumberland Gap and the Great Smokey mountains.

There we meet a wonderful old gentleman. Relaxed. Serene. "At peace within and without," I think to myself. Though I never catch his name. he teaches me about **CONTENTMENT**.

He is sitting out on the "dog trot" and he invites us to join him and help him watch the sun go down. (For you who, like me, are city bred, a "dog trot" is a covered porch between two buildings designed to take advantage of the slightest breeze which might moderate the humidity. The name comes from the fact that the flooring is raised just enough to allow it to double underneath as a breezeway for the dogs.)

On his lap is a fine fiddle. (It is <u>not</u> a violin here.) He begins to play, and, my, can he play. I am captivated by his skill—rough fingers moving effortlessly and adroitly over the strings. I can tell from the way he holds his fiddle that he is self-taught, and, from the marvelous music he produces, that he is a master of the instrument. He plays on and on, one song joining another in an endless stream of melody. There isn't a song he doesn't know, or so it seems.

"How did you learn to play the fiddle so well?" I quiz, genuinely puzzled. "Oh, I picked up a little here and a little there." Then he chuckles, "The depression helped a lot!" At this he smiles ever so slightly, as if to capture some long ago memory. Quickly he changes the subject, "Played once for Oprah Winfrey when she came through these parts. Got her to dance to the tune, too. You know, she's a very talented lady!"

Silent until now, Carolynn speaks up, wondering if he knows any Christian songs. "Oh, lots of Christian songs," he responds in his unhurried Tennessee drawl. "What would you like me to play?" Quietly, even slowly, Carolynn answers, "Why don't you play your own favorite." (I listen to this exchange in astonishment. Gone for many years, Carolynn instantly takes up the lilt, the pace, the exact voice inflection of the fiddler.) He starts to object, "Oh, I have lots of favorites, lots of favorites . . ." His voice trails off, and I notice his eyes close. Those rough fingers begin moving silently over the strings. The bow in his other hand raises, and he starts to play. It is a tune I have never heard before. A backwoods, mountain tune, no doubt. A tune from a distant past. No words, just a tune.

I watch the fiddler closely. He is oblivious to me, to us, to everyone, to everything. He is lost in that tune. On he plays. A mournful tune, yet somehow comforting. He whispers a phrase which I don't quite catch. "The place where the soul never dies," is what I think he says, but the exact words don't really matter. Watching him play, I realize that he has passed beyond words. He is most certainly in that land across the Jordan, in that land where the soul never dies. I'm instructed by the old fiddler in contentment.

Ken Boyce and the Virtue of Courage

We must travel on. We are heading back now, stopping at the home of Ken and Doris Boyce—old friends who were like parents to me after my own biological parents had passed through the valley of the shadow. Thirty years ago they had prepared and hosted the wedding rehearsal dinner for Carolynn and me in their home. It only seemed right to be in their home again thirty years later. Actually we had planned to be with them at the beginning of our trip—on Father's Day—but Doris had gotten ill. So now we are hoping to connect with them on our return journey. We succeed.

Ken has always been a strong, burly kind of man. Retired now, he was for years a school principal—the kind of principal that, with one look, could strike terror and profound respect in students. And, I think, a special warm regard, for, with all his external gruffness, everyone saw in Ken Boyce a caring, deeply compassionate man.

Ken's physical toughness is compromised now after a severe heart attack and the onset of Parkinson's disease. Even so, when I step out of the car to shake his hand, I notice that he still has a grip that can crush finger bones. Under the threat of rain we set up the camper tent and hurry inside.

There is something quite wonderful about friendships that have endured the decades. Even if you have been out of touch for years, you are always able to pick up just where you left off. It is relaxed. It is comfortable. Ken and Doris teach us that "the quality of mercy is not strained."

They have recently moved into town from a farm they have lived on and worked since retirement. The move was a tough decision, for that farm was their "Promised Land" after a lifetime of work in the city. But the farm is now more than Ken can handle. They show us through their new home, and it seems like they've always lived here, and we feel instantly "at home." It's a parable of their friendship—this feeling of being instantly "at home."

Throughout our time together I watch him, this man who has been "father" to me. Every step, every bite of food, indeed, every physical movement is a chore now. But if Ken's body is less agile, his mind is even more sharp, more witty than before. His jokes warm me—even the old ones. Sometimes he listens as the rest of us talk. Then, at just the right moment, he will slide in a subtle pun or deft comment, and we are all doubled over in laughter.

But I see something in Ken that is more than the lively humor, more than the quick wit. I wonder at it. Always I have known Ken as a man of great faith and spiritual substance—my superior in matters spiritual. But something is different now, something greater, richer, fuller. It is as if the physical weaknesses have been counterbalanced by increased spiritual strength. His spirit has deepened, thickened. He seems to see things and know things that the rest of us can only glimpse from a distant shore, if at all. Physically, he faces an uncertain future. Yet he faces it head on and has only grown deeper, more godly, as a result.

Ken Boyce teaches me **COURAGE**. Actually, I mean more than courage, but we do not quite have a word today that captures the quality I am after. The old writers did have such a word—"fortitude" —but, unfortunately, it is not a word which "speaks" today. I suppose if you were to combine our common understanding of the word

OUR FINANCIAL GUIDELINES

- We urge everyone to give first to their local church (or wherever they are being nurtured spiritually) and to the poor before ever giving to RENOVARÉ.
- An accountant oversees our financial records in accord with accepted accounting procedures and the highest professionalism.
- We will live within our means. One thing we refuse to do is overextend and overspend ourselves and then beg for God's people to bail us out. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do. We feel it involves just as much faith to trust God for the money before a purchase as after a purchase. In fact, one way we discern God's will for the ministry of RENOVARÉ is through the financial support of his people.
- We believe in full disclosure at all times. Our financial reports are available to anyone upon request.
- We will receipt all donations.
- If we offer books, tapes, or other materials for a suggested contribution, we will receipt the amount given above the retail price of the product plus shipping and handling costs.
- When we make a purchase, we will pay the bill within thirty days. We refuse to subsidize this ministry on the backs of vendors.
- We will never sell or rent our mailing list.
- We are primarily a voluntary organization and as such we depend in large measure upon the sacrificial labors of many. If, however, we employ paid staff, they will receive equal pay for equal work.
- We will communicate our financial needs to our constituency as clearly and as truthfully as possible. We will not inflate or overstate our situation, nor create a crisis to boost income.
- We believe RENOVARÉ was initiated and continues to be sustained by God. While we are eager to follow the Divine whisper at every turn and work with all our might, it is God's business and not ours to prosper or end the work of RENOVARÉ. We rejoice either way.

“guts” with the full range of meaning conveyed by the word “persistence,” you might be getting close to what I see in this man with the titan soul.

I think about these things throughout the evening. The next morning I awaken early but remain still in our camper bed, not wanting to disturb Carolynn. Lying on my back, warm tears roll down my cheeks as I rehearse this wonderful friendship. People like Ken Boyce come to us only once in a lifetime. It is a gift of grace.

Ken has another appointment with the doctor and so they must go, and so must we. As we reluctantly part, I remind Ken that in our early planning we intended to be with them on Father’s Day. “Happy Father’s Day,” I say simply. Ken does not speak, but his eyes are deep wells—a mute language which says so much.

Joseph . . . the fiddler . . . Ken Boyce. Each one teaches me how to live better. And each one stands as a powerful antidote to a “culture of death.”

Peace and joy,

Richard J. Foster

P. S. In recent months God has been drawing us to think creatively about how our RENOVARÉ events might have an even greater impact upon the lives of many precious people. The end result of all these prayerful conversations and consultations is the hiring of Lyle SmithGraybeal to serve as “Conference Coordinator,” a position which will enable him to do on and off site advance work for our various RENOVARÉ events. In addition he will be helping us dream for the future—a Center on Spiritual Formation, perhaps? Lyle is now with us half-time and, God willing, will be joining us full-time on 1 January 1998.

I believe we are in a strong enough position financially to take this step, but it will stretch us. I estimate that Lyle’s labors will generate sufficient income to cover his salary within fifteen months. To help fill in the gap, friends of RENOVARÉ have set before us a $14,000.00 matching challenge gift. Therefore, every dollar you give to this work in the days ahead will be matched, thus doubling the good you do us. We believe this is a right and necessary step for reaching many more precious people. Will you consider a generous, sacrificial gift to this ministry now? Thank you.

RJF

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