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Openheartedness

"Are you an openhearted person?" When asked this question, most of us would readily respond, "Yes, of course I am!" We couldn't imagine our individual selves as closed-hearted. Being a closed-hearted person simply wouldn't fit into our self-image, our perceived, lived experience of ourselves.

As we journey through the average day, we think, feel, and experience ourselves as basically openhearted. Specifically, we could point to our dedication and behavior as welcoming and embracing of people who are hurting and suffering, who are seeking justice and peace, or who are wounded and distressed due to civil unrest, natural disaster, economic poverty, family pain. We may minister to youth, giving them hope, esteem, and skill to help better their lives. Some of us travel within medical settings, parishes, retreat centers, social services, or within initial formation or in administration within a Province or Diocese. If age and medical necessity has us retired from active ministry, we assist within the local community by offering what we have given our present life situation.

Certainly we who desire, devote, and commit our lives to assisting others must be openhearted. But are we really all that openhearted?

For the most part, it is fairly easy and congenial to be openhearted when we are in our formal ministry positions. People come to us for help, guidance, and assistance with their difficulties and life stresses. People in visible distress and pain with whom we come in contact within ministry or within local community engage us in such a way that we instinctively open up our hearts. Opening up the heart is part of being human.

In a sense, these people and their situations actively knock on our heart's door. In turn, we readily open up to them. We do this spontaneously while watching the evening news or reading the newspaper with their various accounts of disaster and human suffering around the world. It is within the fundamental nature of a human being to open to another's hurt and suffering. We interact with them through our compassion and empathy, as well as concrete practical assistance if possible.

Within the parameters of this reflection, the above can be referred to as "ordinary everyday openheartedness." This dimension of openheartedness derives from our fundamental humanness. We respond to people and situations that concretely come knocking on our heart's door, and we open up our hearts to them.

On the other hand, a wide-open and comprehensive open heart, that we will call "spirit-openheartedness," requires intentional cultivation. Spirit-openheartedness comes from ongoing cultivation of eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to feel. To see, hear, and feel the unease, distress, suffering, and pain of others (even when they are not concretely knocking at our heart's door) is what spirit-openheartedness is all about.

What does spirit-openheartedness look like? Spirit-openheartedness comes into play, for example, when a person behaves obnoxiously or just inappropriately for the situation. Though we experience his obnoxious and inappropriate behavior, we also see, hear, and feel his distress and suffering. We see through his inappropriate and unhelpful way. We hear the muffled and disguised cry of his pain as he purposefully runs his fingernails down a chalkboard and creates a piercing screech. We feel his constricting, agonizing self.

Spirit-openheartedness is not about doing anything about the person's unhelpful behavior. Rather, it is about being open in order to see, hear, and feel his pain. It is about remaining open to him as a human being rather than closing ourselves off to him and his behavior. Spirit-openheartedness is about experiencing the wonder of the person, the God-created person, within the context of the inappropriate behavior. It is not writing him off, tuning him out, or turning away from him.

Spirit-openheartedness acknowledges and does not ignore inappropriate behavior. More importantly, it sees, hears, and feels the person's unease, distress, and pain. Through spirit-openheartedness, we know that the person is doing her best given her pain and life situation. Even though her behavior is inappropriate and even harmful, through spirit-openheartedness, we remain open, receptive, welcoming, and embracing.

Spirit-openheartedness is much more than patience and tolerance. It is being aware, experiencing and acknowledging the other in her awesomeness, giftedness, and God-created beauty, even though she demonstrates off-putting behavior. She may be judgmental, harsh, and even abusive. He may be controlling, intolerant, self-absorbed, unaware, disrespectful, or aggressive. When we interact with others through spirit-openheartedness, it is like seeing, hearing, and feeling through the eyes, ears, and heart of God. We experience the other's hurt. In turn, this tempers and reshapes our movement from harsh judgment to gentle compassion. We are still called to hold people accountable for their unacceptable behavior, but we hold them gently within our firm hands.

For the most part, openheartedness comes naturally for most of us. It is part of being human. However, spirit-openheartedness requires intentional cultivation of eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to feel the cry of someone in distress and pain through the facade of his behavior.

Further Reflection

Given your life experience, what is the difference for you between ordinary everyday openheartedness and spirit-openheartedness?

Since spirit-openheartedness does not just come about on its own, how might you go about actively cultivating it?