

## "ON COPING WITH FRUSTRATION"

### FRUSTRATION - MIDWINTER BLUES

Just about this time of year, regular as clockwork, there comes a period in which so much in life seems to go wrong. Perhaps there is a temptation to blame it on the weather for it always seems to hit us at midwinter - just when we have had about all the cold winter weather we want and we begin to long for the warm and wonderful days of spring. We feel depressed, frustrated, tired....at the end of our rope.

Here is the mother cooped up in her apartment with her children through the long winter months, suddenly hitting such a low point that her husband is concerned for her physical and mental well-being. She tries to explain that she has cabin-fever, that she needs a vacation from the family, that she needs more time with him - alone, that she needs renewal somehow from the daily routine of dirty dishes, diapers, and child care. Oh - for a week in the warm sun...

But in her frustration she does not notice that she is hitting her husband at the time when he himself is vulnerable. He, too, is having a hard time. He, too, is tired and overworked and depressed. He is still struggling to meet the pressures which the December Christmas bills have brought. Now he hears his wife complaining and pushing him for a vacation. All he can think of are those bills and he cannot understand how she could make such an unreasonable demand at a time like this.

Or - here is the invalid, bed-ridden for months, wondering what the future will hold for her. Or - here is a family facing how to live following the death of a family member and wondering how on earth they are going to get along. Or - here is the teen-ager or the college student caught in a world he did not help to make, with no idea of what he may do with his life and a deep feeling that his life is being manipulated for him and he has nothing to say about it. We could go on and name other situations - perhaps your own. But they are all characterized by one thing - the feeling that somehow right now we are bearing more than we can stand, and that we are tired, frustrated and defeated by life instead of really being on top of it.

Admittedly, there is a great deal at the moment to be discouraged about. The situation in Vietnam and in Korea gives us all anxiety with its implications, and frustration with our individual helplessness. The situation in race relations continues to fester without relief. The statistics on broken marriages and unwanted children are horrifying. To be sure, there is a great deal about which we have legitimate right to be pessimistic.

But I am not talking about those situations where there is legitimate cause for deep concern. This morning I am speaking more about what you might define as the "midwinter blues" - the kind of depression that comes to all of us when perhaps we feel as if we have lost something important out of life. Our sense of well-being is challenged. We feel down and depressed, but can't quite put our finger on the reason why. Our outer circumstances may be the same as before, but our feelings about them suddenly burst out. Perhaps we feel great waves of self-pity, and somehow it feels awfully good to let ourselves go and feel sorry for ourselves.

~~It's about these midwinter blues, if you will, that I want to talk to you this morning because I am convinced that they are an experience that is common to almost everyone of us.~~ All of us have those periods when we are "down". No one is immune from them. We seem to be more vulnerable to them at this time of year than any other. I think they afflict the spiritually mature as well as the spiritually bankrupt. The question is not "how" to avoid these midwinter blues, but "how" to handle them when they do come and touch our lives. How does one cope with the frustration associated with the blues?

### HONESTY ABOUT OUR TROUBLE

The first step in attacking the blues is to be honest about what is the matter. And this is difficult for most of us because we live in a world of such deception and sham that it is hard to be completely honest with ourselves about what we are really experiencing. Some may feel mistakenly that it is a sign of weakness to admit our real feeling. Actually, it is the only way to strength. If we are hidden from ourselves, it may be that talking with someone else will help to clarify and make visible what is at the bottom of our trouble. This is what friends are for; this is what counsellors are for - ministers, psychiatrists. This is part of what prayer is about. We need some way to say, "This is what I really feel". This is particularly true when our trouble is mental and emotional rather than physical. C. S. Lewis in his book on pain, says this:

"Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain - but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say 'My tooth is aching' than to say 'My heart is broken'. Yet, if the cause is accepted and faced, the conflict will strengthen and purify the character and in time the pain will usually pass".

It seems to me that the degree to which we can do something about the frustration and pain of the midwinter blues comes directly from whether or not we have enough courage and insight to be honest with ourselves about what is wrong. But such honesty is difficult because part of the reason we are in the doldrums is that we have lost the perspective that would help us balance things off. When we are down everything seems to go wrong and there seems to be so little hope or light for us.

But this is not really the case. There is always far more to the situation than we can see. The mother, for instance, caught in the apartment with her children with colds and flu and childhood diseases, needs the perspective of knowing that there will be other times as well - less demanding, more fulfilling - that these same children will one day be gone from her home and that there will then be a different kind of situation to face. But it is hard for her to see the whole picture at the present moment.

I think one of the main problems of the frustrations associated with the blues is that they tend to destroy our perspective, our sense of balance. I'm very fond of the story told about Charles Francis Adams, the 19th century political figure and diplomat who wrote in his diary: "Went fishing with my son. A day wasted". His son, Brook Adams, also kept a diary which is still in existence. On that day the son made this entry. "Went fishing with my father -- the most wonderful day of my life". There are times when we get so far down that we lose perspective about what we mean to other people.

Sometimes a friend who can listen and understand can help us see, more clearly than we can on our own, where our trouble lies. But whatever the form or source of your frustration, you can only deal with the blues if you are willing to be honest about what the trouble is - not outside you, but in your own feelings.

### BREAK THE PATTERN

The first thing then is complete honesty about our trouble. The second is action to break the pattern into which we have become locked or trapped. No matter how unyielding the setting may seem, it can be changed to some degree by manipulating the variables. There are some things we cannot change, but in most situations there are some conditions that can be shuffled, adapted or re-arranged.

I'm sure that most of us have had the experience of being in a meeting where things were not going well, where interest waned and people thought only of escape.

Suddenly somebody suggested that we all take a stretch, or that we open a window, or that we change any one of the things that helped lock us into the pattern of frustration. And somehow things got shaken up and we were able to make a fresh start.

This is what I am suggesting as one remedy for coping with our source of frustration - to find those places in our lives where we can re-arrange things. There may be some old habits that need to be broken. Perhaps we need to cut back on our spending. It may be that our established routine is limiting us, not providing us with time enough to read, or reflect, to think, to relax, to enjoy the quiet side of life. Or perhaps our routine is too rigid in not providing us with light moments for entertainment. I think there is no one of us who could not find places in his life where, right now, he could renew his being by changing some of his patterns of living to broaden and deepen his life.

There is a story about a stagecoach driver who made a round trip each day between two towns. On a certain morning half way along, the lead horse was frightened by a large piece of paper in the middle of the road. It was all the driver could do to keep the team from running away. On the return trip, he noticed at some distance the same piece of paper. Now he prepared himself. As soon as the lead horse saw the white object, his ears stood up; as he neared it, his body tensed in fear. At the crucial moment the driver flicked him on the tender part of his ear with the whip to avert a repetition of the event of the morning. The driver gave the horse something else to think about.

If you want to break the midwinter blues change something - whatever is easiest for you. What is the point at which you will flick yourself into new awareness?

#### MORE STRENGTH THAN WE THINK WE HAVE

A third thing to remember as we try to cope with the frustration of these midwinter blues is that all of us have more strength to meet them than we think we have.

When our being is attacked, we have a great many forces in us which can rise to its defense. They are physical and spiritual forces. We've often heard people say, "You never know what you can do until you have to do it and somehow the strength is there to do what needs to be done". This is how it works. Somehow most of us never completely exhaust the limits of our own endurance. We have more resources than we think we have, and we need to take some security in that fact. The outer limits of the human spirit are still a mystery, but they are far more extensive than we have thought.

And in addition to our own strength there is the re-inforcement of strength from beyond us - from other persons who care about us and from God who cares supremely. The real reason we are caught in the midwinter blues is not the external circumstances. It is because we lack that sense of well-being which comes when we feel cared about and loved by others. When we no longer feel that we are cared about or that we matter, we may become deeply frightened and disturbed and disoriented.

Howard Thurman describes an experience he had as a boy in one of his books. In the corner down at the end of the street, he noticed a large group of people gathering, with more and more persons coming. He went to see what was going on - what the commotion was all about. He writes: "As I got to the corner I saw that the center of attention was the strange and odd behavior of Kenchion Butler, a man who ran a barber shop. He was drawing a large circle around an oak tree. Each time he completed the circle he would then strike the tree with a huge cross-axe he had in his hands and call someone's name. He was clearly out of his mind. The sheriff had come to take him away to jail as a preliminary to sending him to the mental hospital - or as we said

at the time - the asylum. The sheriff couldnot get to him because of the ax in his hand. It was a game of waiting it out...."

"Then someone thought of Ma Walker, and they told me to go fetch her. She was a most unusual woman in our community, distinguished for two things: her personal care for all kinds of people, and her beautiful rose garden - dedicated to God. From her garden came roses for the altar table in the church and for funerals. I went to her house, told the story to her, and she came back with me. When she was within earshot of the group she called the name of the man with the tortured mind. There was just a slight hesitation in his step as he located her and the sound of her voice, but he kept walking. Meanwhile, she and I approached. The sheriff took his pistoal out of the holster and the crowd moved completely to one side, making way for us. I dropped back when we were at the outer edge of the group. Ma Walker kept on, repeating his name as she stood in his circular path. Then they met, their eyes held, she said simply, "Come Kenchion - you must go home with me" "And he did"

He goes on to say, "Here was a woman who had the quality of personality that could make the gift of reconciliation to another human being - what it does is to introduce harmony into another life by sensing and honoring the need to be cared for and therefore understood. This is the miracle".

This is an expression of the thing that I am talking about. We are able to be reconciled - that is, to become whole persons able to handle life when we feel the renewal which comes to our spirit from knowing that we are held in love in the mind and in the heart of someone that we care about. And when we know this, we discover that the frustrations of life - the self-pity which they breed, the suffering which we bring upon ourselves - can be challenged because when the blues have done their worst, they still have not touched the place which is the reality of our life..... the place where our lives are rooted and grounded in persons who care and in a God who cares for us and nurtures our spirits.

CONCLUSION Permit me to conclude with a paragraph from a letter written by a man who knew what the frustrations and discouragements of life were all about. He had just been through personal troubles and it seemed as if everything was finished, and he wrote:

"We should like you, our brothers, to know something of what we went through.....at the time we were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear, in fact, we told ourselves that this was the end...."

You might not believe that this letter was written almost 2000 years ago by a man named Paul. He knew what it was to experience the blues. But he also knew that this was not the ultimate reality about life. And when he wrote about that ultimate reality, he said this:

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any ether creature can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord"

PRAYER O God, we know that all things work together for good to them that love thee; we know that though we walk through days that are dark and grey, thou art always with us, and that there is nothing to fear but the loss of thee. Knowing this, O God, may we go quietly forward from day to day, not looking too far ahead, taking each step with the confidence that ~~we are~~<sup>what we</sup> are asked to do or bear, for that thou wilt give us the strength and courage we need. Amen