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## **In Pursuit of Innocence**

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Annie Dillard once wrote this about innocence: Innocence is not the prerogative of infants and puppies, and far less of mountains and fixed stars, which have no prerogatives at all. It is not lost to us; the world is a better place than that. Like any other of the spirit's good gifts, it is there if you want it, free for the asking, as has been stressed by stronger words than mine. It is possible to pursue innocence as hounds pursue hares: single-mindedly, driven by a kind of love, crashing over creeks, keening and lost in fields and forests, circling, vaulting over hedges and hills, wide-eyed, giving loud tongue all unawares to the deepest, most incomprehensible longing, a root-flame in the heart, and that warbling chorus resounding back from the mountains.

One of the deepest underpinnings for morality and spirituality is innocence, if not its achievement certainly its desire. Just as a healthy child longs for the experience of an adult, a healthy adult longs for the heart of a child. To lose the desire for innocence is to lose touch with one's soul. In fact, to lose one's innocence is to lose one's soul. To lose entirely the desire for innocence is one of the qualities of being in hell.

What is innocence?

Dillard describes it as the soul's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. For her, innocence is the gaze of admiration, love stripped of all lust, something akin to what James Joyce describes in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when his hero, young Steven, sees a half-dressed girl on a beach and instead of being moved by sexual desire is moved only by an overwhelming wonder and admiration.

The late Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, suggests that, in the end, innocence is chastity and chastity is more than merely a sexual concept. For Bloom, there needs to be a certain kind of chastity in all of our experiencing, that is, we need to experience things only if and when we can experience them in such a way that we remain integrated. Simply put, we lose our innocence when we experience something in a way that "unglues" us, that breaks down our wholeness in some way. And we can become unglued in many ways - moral, psychological, emotional, spiritual, or erotic.

Bloom suggests that today most of us lack chastity and have already become somewhat unglued. This, he suggests, manifests itself not just in spiraling rates for suicide, emotional breakdown, and drug and alcohol abuse, but, and more commonly, in a certain deadness that leaves us "erotically lame", without fire in our eyes, and without much in the way of the sublime in our hearts and in our dreams.

But adult innocence isn't exactly the natural innocence of a child. For an adult, innocence can no longer be naïveté but needs rather to be something that might better be called second naïveté. It is post-critical. We must distinguish between childishness, the spontaneous innocence of a child which has its roots in lack of experience and naïveté, and childlikeness, the post-critical posture

of an informed, experienced adult who again has taken on the wonder of a child.

How did Jesus define innocence? He identified innocence with two things: having the heart of a child and having the heart of a virgin: Unless you have the heart of a child you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of heaven can be compared to 10 virgins waiting for their bridegroom.

For Jesus, the heart of a child is one that is fresh, receptive, full of wonder, full of respect, and which does not yet contain the hardness and cynicism that calcify inside us because of wound or sin. For him, the heart of a virgin is one that can live in patience in the face of inconsummation without demanding the finished symphony. It is innocent because it can live without breaking healthy taboos, knowing that, as a child, many of the things that it deeply desires cannot be had just yet. The child's heart is one that still trusts in goodness and the virgin's heart does not test its God.

In her novel, *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Laurence describes a woman, Hagar Shipley, who, one day, after overhearing a child call her an old hag, examines herself in a mirror and is horrified by what she sees. She scarcely recognizes her own face and what she sees frightens her. How can one, imperceptible to one's own self, change and become so different, so cold, so lifeless, and so devoid of freshness and innocence? It can happen to all of us and it does happen to many of us.

If we have ceased being the type of person with which the child within us can make easy friends, then perhaps it is time to pursue innocence as hounds pursue hares, single-mindedly, crashing over creeks, keening in lost fields, driven by a kind of love.