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## **The Challenge of Accepting Pleasure without Guilt**

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Many of us suffer from a certain inchoate guilt. Simply put, we struggle to healthily enjoy pleasure without guilt, to not feel guilty about feeling good, to not be apologetic about our good luck.

Instead we tend, however unconsciously, to associate depth and religion with what's grey, sad, broken, and melancholy. In the name of depth and religion we are stoic rather than joyous in our acceptance of pleasure. Many of us, I suspect, suffer from an existential incapacity to drink in life's more earthy pleasures in genuine delight. Instead we always nurse some inchoate guilt feelings about pleasure.

And so we have certain unspoken religious axioms by which we live: If it hurts more, it's better for you! Beauty is a pagan luxury. The Gospel calls us to an austerity of body and spirit. A truly deep person does not thoroughly enjoy a pleasure, especially a bodily one. Reticence and anxiety in the face of deep pleasure is healthy spiritually. Jesus' challenge was much more about renunciation than about drinking in deeply the life that God offers us.

But this psychological and religious inhibition exists in all cultures and is not a particularly Christian problem. Too many people blame guilt feelings on their religious training when, in fact, their roots lie far beyond and outside of religion. This isn't a "Christian neurosis"; it's a human one. In all cultures and in all religions, most sensitive adults suffer from a certain chronic depression, namely, they find it hard to simply delight in life without at the same time feeling the shadows around that momentary delight.

And so, like the people at table with Jesus on that night when a woman broke an expensive jar of ointment on his feet, cried on his feet, and dried his feet with her hair, pleasure does not sit comfortably with us. Rather, in the face of raw pleasure, we shift about uncomfortably and give reasons why it shouldn't be happening.

That's acceptable, but we should not try to rationalize this neurotic reticence in the name of Jesus, Christianity, religion, or depth of soul. We should not confuse Hamlet with Jesus.

In her first novel, *Final Payments*, Mary Gordon tells the story of a young woman's struggle with precisely this neurosis, an incapacity to ever delight in life. Suffering through a difficult period of her life, the grayness and joylessness of her life are re-enforced by her own interpretation of Catholic spirituality and especially by a woman she lives with, Margaret, whose austerity, piety, and lack of joy are too easily assumed to be depth of soul and commitment to Christ. One afternoon, after a bitter argument with Margaret, she stumbles out of the room in tears when a major insight breaks through:

*It is one of the marvels of a Catholic education that the impulse of a few words can bring whole narratives to light with an immediacy and clarity that are utterly absorbing. 'The poor you have always with you.' I knew where Christ had said that: at the house of Martha and Mary. Mary had opened a jar of ointment over Christ's feet. Spikenard. I remembered. And she wiped his feet with her hair. Judas had rebuked her: he had said that the ointment ought to be sold for the poor. But St. John had noted, Judas had said that only because he kept the purse and was a thief. And Christ had said to Judas, Mary at his feet, her hair spread out around him. 'The poor you have always with you: but me you have not always.'*

*And until that moment, climbing the dark stairs in a rage to my ugly room, it was a passage I had not understood. It seemed to justify to me the excesses of centuries of fat, tyrannical bankers. But now I understood. What Christ was saying, what he meant, was that the pleasures of that hair, that ointment, must be taken. Because the accidents of death would deprive us soon enough. We must not deprive ourselves, our loved ones, of the luxury of our extravagant affections. We must not try to second-guess death by refusing to love the ones we loved in favor of the anonymous poor.*

*And it came to me, fumbling in the hallway for the light, that I had been a thief. Like Judas, I had wanted to hide gold, count it in the dead of the night, to parlay it into some safe and murderous investment. It was Margaret's poverty I wanted to steal, the safety of her inability to inspire love. So that never again would I be found weeping, like Mary, at the tombstone at the break of dawn. ... I knew now I must open the jar of ointment. I must open my life. I knew now that I must leave. But I was not ready, I would have to build up my strength.*

Authentic religion brings us a double challenge: Be prepared to renounce life – and be prepared to enjoy it!

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