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Getting it down to the Essentials

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Sometime after his 70th birthday, Morris West wrote an autobiography which he entitled, A View from the Ridge. By ridge, he meant the angle that 70 years of living had given him.

And what he offers is an exceptionally mature perspective on life.

When you get to be 75 years old, West says, your vocabulary should be pretty simple. You only need to have two words left: "Thank you!" Gratitude is the real mark of genuine maturity, of spiritual health. Don't ever be fooled about this.

Moreover, for West himself, gratitude wasn't easy to come by. His life, as his autobiography makes clear, had its share of hurts and rejections; not least by the church which he loved. So his story also highlights that gratitude is predicated on forgiveness, on letting go of hurts, on not letting the past bitterly color the present. To be grateful is to be forgiving.

And we all have hurts, deep hurts. Nobody comes to adulthood, let alone to old age, without being deeply hurt. Alice Miller, the renowned psychologist, puts it this way: All of us, from the time that we are infants in the cradle until we are self-possessed enough to write an autobiography like Morris West's, are not adequately loved, not adequately cared for, not adequately recognized, not adequately valued, and not adequately honored. Moreover all of us also suffer positively some rejection and abuse. None of us is spared life's unfairness. She calls this the drama of the gifted child, namely, the drama of being a unique, sensitive, intelligent, deep, and gifted person who in this life is never quite loved enough, recognized enough, respected enough, or honored enough, and who is sometimes positively rejected and abused. Small wonder that it is easier to be bitter than grateful, paranoid than hospitable, angry than gracious.

What can we do about this, beyond first of all admitting that we do nurse a grudge against life?

Miller suggests the most important task of mid-life and beyond is that of grieving. We need, she says, to cry until the foundations of our life are shaken. At a certain point in our lives the question is no longer: "Am I hurt?". Rather it's: "What is my hurt and how can I move beyond it?" It's like having been in a car accident and carrying some permanent scars and debilitations. The accident happened, the limp is there, nothing is going to reverse time, and so our only real choice is between bitterness and forgiveness, between anger and getting on with life, between spending the rest of our lives saying "if only!" or spending the rest of our lives trying to enjoy the air, despite of our limp.

An important idea within the Jewish and Christian concept of the Sabbath is the notion that, while the celebration, rest, enjoyment, and prayer of the Sabbath is largely for its own sake, these are also in function of something practical, namely, forgiveness. We are meant to rest regularly, pray regularly, celebrate regularly, and enjoy life regularly both because this is what we will be doing in heaven and because, by doing these, we might find within us the heart we need to forgive.

It's no accident that, often times, our vacations don't really do for us what they should: We get over-worked and tired and we look forward to a vacation, some time away to rest, to relax with friends, to drink wine and enjoy the sun. Then we take a vacation and do, in fact, very much enjoy it. Sadly though, within days or weeks after we return we find ourselves as tired as we were before the vacation. What happened? Why didn't our vacation work?

Our vacation didn't work because we didn't forgive anybody. We didn't let go of any grudges. The most tired and stressed part of us didn't get to go on vacation, didn't get to let go and relax, and didn't find itself warmed by wine and friends. It stayed cold, anxious, stressed, over-worked. There's a tiredness that cannot be cured by a good sleep, a good vacation, or by the right time with the right friends with the right wine, and it's the deepest tiredness inside us. It's the tiredness that stings because of hurt, that's cold because it hasn't been loved, that's calloused because it

has been cruelly cut, and that burns with resentment because of the neglect and rejection it has experienced. This is a bone, deep tiredness that isn't cured by a vacation, but only by forgiveness.

There is only one ultimate imperative in life: Before we die, we need to forgive. We need to forgive those who hurt us, to forgive ourselves for not being any better than those who hurt us, to forgive life itself for some of the things that it dealt us, and, not least, to forgive God for the fact that life is unfair, so as not to die with a bitter and angry heart.

Gratitude is the fruit of that struggle.

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