

Week 15: The Mess Will Set You Free!

The man was sifting through the debris of our summer yard sale when I introduced myself. He told me he was a Ukrainian immigrant and his family had been in the U.S. for several years. I asked him if he was happy here. His answer surprised me. “My children want to return to the Ukraine, because there is no freedom here in the United States. In the Ukraine, you can have a beer and walk across a field and no one stops you, no one tells you it’s not your field. In the U.S., you can’t do that. Everything is controlled. There is no freedom.”

No freedom in the land of liberty?

To be honest, his sentiments went in one ear and out the other. Until two days later, when an old friend was visiting. She had returned to the United States for a brief sabbatical from her work as a missionary in Guatemala. Having settled into the habits of Central America, she parked on the wrong side of the street, because it was more convenient. Within minutes, two police squad cars were at our curb and officers were knocking on our door. That doesn’t happen in Guatemala. Or the Ukraine, apparently.

It made me wonder, could the cost of our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness be an over-controlled land and a subtle loss of freedom? And, if this is true of our *land*, might it also be true of our *hearts*? Might the good life be costing us our *emotional* freedom, too?

I think the answer to that question begins and ends with our *shame*.

Life is chaotic and every mistake and problem and hardship rings out like a gavel—another verdict cast against our worthiness. We feel fundamentally lacking at our core. And we run from it. Indeed, we seek the *opposite* of it. For centuries, cultures have considered the opposite of shame to be honor. In these days, we consider the opposite of shame to be found in possessions, power, and prestige. But the opposite of shame is actually none of these.

The opposite of shame is *mess*.

The opposite of shame is the mess of life and the mess of our *selves* embraced with a radical self-acceptance and the grace of belovedness. The healing of our shame begins when our heart stops beating to the self-loathing cadence of “I am a *hideous* mess,” and begins singing to the redemptive rhythm of “I am a *glorious* mess.”

My son Aidan—who we sometimes refer to as the absent-minded professor—is often so preoccupied with what’s going on in his head that what’s going on in his life gets a little messy. Just after I talked to the Ukrainian man and my Guatemalan friend, Aidan walked out of his bedroom one morning, ready for school. Sort of. He

presented himself in the kitchen and looked down at himself. One foot was bare and the other had two socks on it. He looked up at us, a wry smile on his face and, shaking his head, turned back toward the bedroom, saying, “My brain, it sure is silly sometimes.” My heart cracked at the absolute *shamelessness* in his voice. A little boy, with a knowing smile, absolutely embracing his messy self.

Lopsided socks and all.

When we try to control and order and perfect everything, we may successfully hide our shame. For awhile. But we are also creating a delusion. Because real life is messy. It’s chaotic and tumultuous and uncertain and unpredictable and broken and, ultimately, fatal. And yet, it is also utterly beautiful. Not despite the mess, but *because* of the mess. And you are, too. You are the opposite of perfect. You’re a perfect *mess*. Quirks and failures and insecurities and triumphs and blissful moments and all. The whole glorious mess of you.

Does this mean we accept everything and never change anything about ourselves? Do we just walk through the world with two socks on one foot? Absolutely not. But it does mean that the sometimes hard and painful process of transformation can also be a *joyful* journey, because our lives no longer depend upon it. Because it’s all icing on the cake and we get to redeem it all with a wry smile, like a nine-year-old, shameless, little boy.

The Ukrainian immigrant at my summer yard sale, the Guatemalan missionary in my kitchen, and my two-socked son changed the way I think about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They helped me realize *life* is messy. *Liberty* is the freedom to embrace this fundamental reality. And happiness? Well, happiness is doing so *shamelessly*. And people who have embraced the mess—*shameless* people—start a lot of trouble in this world. They can’t be controlled or dominated by the threat and fear of rejection and humiliation. So they are absolutely free to love gracefully and to live fully with a reckless abandon. This makes the shameless people the true revolutionaries.

Do you want to join the freedom of a glorious, messy revolution?