

Week 8: The Small Gate and Narrow Road Back to Your Truest Self

A few years ago, my oldest son woke up one morning with a large lump at the base of his skull—a swollen cervical lymph node. As I felt the bump, I also felt the sharp-tingle of adrenaline coursing through me. Swollen lymph nodes are scary, because they may be the doorway into an awful lot of pain and suffering.

I faked calm as I called the doctor and scheduled an appointment for mid-day. Like most Chicago pediatric offices in the dead of winter, the wait was long with red cheeks and runny noses and listless eyes. As we waited, Aidan speculated incessantly about spider bites and allergic reactions. In the frantic activity of thoughts, analysis, and confident solutions, I knew I was witnessing my son's best attempt to keep his fear contained to a quiet place inside of him.

As Aidan and I waited in the pediatrician's office that January afternoon, I pulled out a coin, hoping to distract him from his anxious thoughts, complicit in the game of avoidance. I was certain a little magic would do the trick (okay, pun intended). I laid my palms face-up, placing the quarter at the base of the index finger on my left hand. Then I quickly turned my hands inward, slapping them down on the table. The centrifugal force propelled the coin out of my left hand and toward my right, where I pinned it to the table as I slapped my right hand down. To the untrained eye, the quarter appeared to have travelled between hands by magic. My son was amazed, all lump-thoughts forgotten. But true to who he is, he would settle for nothing less than a complete explanation.

So I told him to watch the space between my hands, and as I performed the trick again, he exclaimed with joy, "I saw it! I saw the light shine off the coin as it flew across!"

Our pain is like that coin.

Our pain can only be glimpsed in the space between our actions and our thinking. Suddenly, I understood Aidan needed to have space to feel his pain. So we stopped, and we breathed a few times together, and then I asked him what he worried the doctor might tell him. And my so-young son uttered a word I didn't even know was in his vocabulary.

He said, "Cancer."

The quiet space between all of our physical and mental activity can hurt. *It can hurt so badly.* We all have quiet places inside of us, and regardless of how charmed our lives have been, we exist in a broken world, and our quiet places have been filled with all sorts of suffering. The worry of an existence that is mostly unpredictable and out of our control. The aching loneliness we feel in a busy, distracted world. The inevitable grief of lives touched by illness and death. The anguish of betrayal.

Helplessness in the midst of unspeakable injustice. The shame we hide away, as we compete for a sense of worthiness.

No wonder we avoid our quiet places.

Several months after Aidan was diagnosed with a minor infection in his lymph node, I was watching him play in a park while talking to a friend of mine. It was a glorious May evening—the new-green leaves were choreographers, directing the dance of light upon a field of newly-mown grass and a playground undulating with children like a beehive, all of it set to the music of kids shouting and laughing in the moment. I stood in the middle of all that glory, and my friend talked to me about healing from alcoholism. He told me that real healing in Alcoholics Anonymous doesn't happen during the 60-minute meeting.

The real healing happens in the fifteen-minute spaces before and after a meeting.

Because by arriving early and staying late, not knowing anyone and laid open by the admission of your addiction, you have to face your own loneliness, shame, fear of rejection, and vulnerability. You have to resist the urge to act busy and self-important by flicking through your smart phone and, instead, just sit there, completely open to the quiet space and how much it hurts to not belong and to risk further rejection. And of course, you have to endure all of it without taking the drink you usually take to escape it.

As it turns out, the healing is in the hurting.

Jesus said, “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.” As you can imagine, this has been interpreted in many ways over the years, sometimes to mean that only a few people reach heaven. But I wonder if Jesus knew what my friend knows, that the only path back to our soul runs through our pain. I wonder if Jesus knew so few of us rediscover the ember of God smoldering at the center of us because we move away from our pain rather than toward it, and the holiness hidden at the heart of us lies buried beneath that pain. Jesus also once described the kingdom of God as a treasure buried in a field. Maybe he meant our souls are a treasure buried in the barren field of our life, of our pain.

Are you ready to sit still, to cultivate stillness in your mind, and to watch that stillness be filled up with all the hurt of your history? Are you ready to witness all the ways you protect yourself with busyness and distraction and resentment and judgment and gossip and gripe? Are you ready to dig in the barren field of your shame for the treasure that is buried there?

Are you ready to move toward the treasure that is you?