

## Noxious 'thoughts' 6 – Acedia

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During July, with the exception of last week, we've been reflecting on habits of mind that typically disrupt our lives and diminish our freedom. Fourth century desert monk, Evagrius Ponticus, discerned eight of these besetting thoughts (*logismoi*), and to date I've talked about five of them – *gluttony*, *lust*, *avarice* or *greed*, *nostalgic sadness*, and *resentful anger*. His sixth malaise, *acedia*, is a little tricky to translate, though the experience, I suspect, is known to many of us. It has frequently been rendered as sloth, which has the sense of laziness. This is part of it, but *acedia* also manifests as a kind of restless agitation; the inability to settle or stay with anything. The word *acedia* means literally 'lack of care' and feelings of boredom, lethargy, dissatisfaction, listlessness and despondency are very much a part of it. The Germans have a word *Weltschmerz* – world weariness, and this gives the sense of it too. A general sense of blahhh... of being stuck...

During the week, as I was thinking about to express this, I received an email from a man I met whilst walking my last Camino. He's Belgian, and I'd written to inquire if he was okay after the terrible floods. Here's how he began his reply:

*Hello Niels, There I am again ... no mail sent since you told me of your Tasmanian experience. Shame on me. Have I been ill? I don't think so. Did I have a lot to do last months? Not at all. Have I forgotten you? Certainly not! So, what was going on since April? Well ... uh ... how to say? I have been lazy, not just lazy, but really very lazy, so lazy that I became depressive, which made me unable to do something, and finally I ended in some spiral of laziness-depression. Of course, I examined this process asking myself what could be the reason of this almost total immobilization. Nothing special found, just a few facts, combined with troubles: getting older, which make me worrying about, for example, future Caminos; the selling of the flat of my mother, which causes some*

*troubles with my brother; the covid-story that made impossible, travel to France (where my girlfriend lives) and confronted me with 'the real life of the monks' – Oh God, why did you made me suffer such a long time? ... Everywhere, life is the same.*

My friend is speaking about *acedia* – the experience of life as tedious, the feeling of being paradoxically both restless and stuck – bored, unmotivated, dissatisfied.

John Cassian, another desert *abba* referred to *acedia* as the 'noonday demon', for often (as Evagrius also noted) it beset the monk in the middle of the day – when the desert heat was most oppressive, when the main meal of the day was still a long way off, and when nothing much seemed to be happening. It 'makes the sun appear to be slow-moving or even motionless, and the day seems to last fifty hours', Evagrius wrote. And, of course, the more you watch time, hoping for something to happen, the more dissatisfied you become. 'Akedia is a sort of asphyxiation or suffocation of the spirit that condemns those who suffer from it to unhappiness by causing them to reject what they have or the situation (work-related, emotional, or social) in which they live, and to dream about another situation that is unattainable', Enzo Bianchi writes. When you're struggling with *acedia*, the grass is everywhere greener than where you are. 'Those who find themselves in this condition easily fall prey to various fears...' they become inefficient in their work... impatient with others, and dissatisfied with themselves. It 'can, in fact, become a depressive condition in which subjects are tempted to break with their past – for example, by abandoning their marriage or religious vows, or by making another "change" – or even to consider suicide', Bianchi writes.

That sounds heavy, and it is! Indeed, Thomas Aquinas spoke of *acedia* as exactly that – a heaviness 'that presses down on a person's mind in such a way that no activity pleases'. At the same time, this 'languishing of spirit'

(Deuteronomy 28.65) is something that many struggle with. And perhaps, especially, in times like now, when Covid restrictions confine us (to our 'cells'), and time hangs heavy, and the Winter cold (and damp) gets under our skin.

I'm imagining that some of us can relate to this, and if that's the case, then how might we break with this pattern? Evagrius considered *acedia* to be the 'the last of the sins to conquer'. At yet, he also spoke encouragingly of the experience of being on the other side of it. 'No other demon follows close on the heels of this one (when he is defeated)', he wrote, 'but only a sense of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle.' So how do we get to the other side? How might we root out the noxious thought of *acedia* and learn, as Paul said, 'to be content in all situations'? What practices might free us from the compulsion (enable our repentance)?

Well, I have to say, there have been some novel attempts over the years. In one story I read, the 11<sup>th</sup> century Benedictine monk Rodulpus sought to defeat the noonday demon, to stay awake, by 'tying ropes to the ceiling of his cell, putting his arms through, and singing the psalms'. What do you think? Worth a try??

That may not quite work for you, but let me share some suggestions that can help.

According to Evagrius, it's important to be resolute and courageous. You 'must stand firm and refuse to leave the cell', he wrote to his fellows. Seated in perseverance, you must 'valiantly welcome all attackers, especially the demon of *acedia*'. Notice that, 'valiantly welcome', not resist. We can't overcome *acedia* by refusing to acknowledge it, we need to name it (like my Belgian friend) and respond. To prevent the mind from being overwhelmed (overcome) by the all-enveloping nature of its temptation, Evagrius recommends what we'd call *affirmative self-talk*. 'This is the time to divide our

soul in two’, he wrote, ‘one part is to encourage; the other is to be encouraged’. In other words, when you’re overwhelmed by listless gloom and agitation, imagine a second self, standing alongside as a friend, offering support. Too often the inner voice we heed in our slough of despond is the voice of judgement – *‘you’re useless... not cut out for this... it’ll never change, you might as well give up...’* It doesn’t help to heed this voice; we need encouragement and can give it to ourselves. Psalm 42 (v5) is a good example: *‘Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?’* the psalmist asks. And then adds: *‘Put your hope in God; for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.’* Psalm 91 is another example, *‘You who abide in the shelter of the Almighty’,* the psalmist says, *‘God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence... you will not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day; the pestilence that stalks in the darkness or the destruction that wastes at noonday.* In other words, *‘C’mon soul, you can do this, in God you can and will overcome.’*

Along with this, ‘it’s imperative to remain faithful in the little things’, Peter Cameron writes; in the daily quotidian routines. Evagrius had the same counsel: ‘Perseverance is the cure for acedia, along with the execution of all tasks with great attention’, he wrote. ‘Set a measure for yourself in every work, and do not let up until you have completed it’. Washing, vacuuming, writing that note, making the call; chop wood, carry water; wax on, wax off... *ora et labora* - prayer and work, work and prayer. Patient persistence and care in the ordinary helps us through the slough.

The key as we can see from both these practical suggestions is to remain present and purposeful. To overcome acedia, there’s no point running or even just dreaming of escape. ‘If a trial comes upon you in the place where you live, don’t leave that place’, writes one desert *abba*, for ‘wherever you go,

you will find that what you are running from is there ahead of you'. The solution is not to flee. And nor simply, to succumb. What we need is a change of perception, a new outlook, for in the end, that's what acedia is, a jaundiced, jaded perspective on things; a loss of appreciation for our life (it's gift quality) ... a loss of wonder, of gratitude – 'I don't care' (woteva). For our perspective to transform, we need paradoxically to remain where we are, to *abide* and *attend*; become more *present* to God who is always and everywhere present – the world charged with the grandeur of God (Hopkins).

The cure for acedia is the realisation that here and now, in this seemingly barren place, *God is*. 'Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it', Jacob said after a night on a rock (Genesis 28:16). The realisation of God's presence with them, in the cell, saved many a monk suffering from acedia, and it can save us as well.

If the insight of the monastic tradition is anything to go on, then almost all of us struggle at times with acedia – with the thought and feeling that life's a drag. According to the wisdom of the desert, the cure for acedia is staying put and sticking with it, embracing the here and now and doing the next ordinary thing, and all of it with a tender and reverent spirit – with care (attention). For surely *God is* in this place... and where God is, there's LIFE. Amen.