Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



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I have started this column three times. It is unusual for me not to have a topic in mind when I turn the corner on a deadline, but today I am struggling. It is not that I am lacking for a topic, actually. Several are vying for attention, but as I have sat to compose this column, each one of them has fizzled out.

My first attempt: the importance of civil discourse. I began writing about the increasing prevalence of polarized speech, not just in politics and sports (where we are probably used to it), but now even in school choice, scientific data and personal postings on social media. Disagreements become battle lines, and diverse viewpoints that used to broaden a conversation now serve to entrench positions instead. Right, wrong; good, bad; holy, evil.

The very rigidity that the Gospel tries to break through seems to be hardening all around us. Three paragraphs into this topic, I got so disheartened that I walked away from the computer and went for a two-mile walk, just to breathe normally again. I sat down and picked a different topic because nobody needs to read more of

anything that will raise blood pressure.

Second attempt: finding joy in the little things. This time I wanted to focus on the positive. What are the areas of life right now that shine little beams of light on an otherwise dreary landscape? Listening to the "Hamilton" soundtrack on repeat, making homemade chocolate chip cookies, taking a long walk on a crisp morning. This topic definitely made me breathe easier, but somehow it too petered out because it felt escapist. I can't bear to put something out there into the universe right now that contributes to either irrelevance or tone-deafness to the very real issues that are assailing us.

Third attempt: guardian angels. Today is the feast of the Guardian Angels, and I can think of no period of time in more need of angelic guardianship than right now. I started writing about my friend's experience in college when she believes she actually met her guardian angel (his name was Tom) and about the time my brother-in-law felt protected by his guardian angel at a particularly important moment. Again, these paragraphs just kind of faded away, not from lack of relevance or energy, but just because I couldn't seem to keep up the momentum.

So here I sit, typing at Word No. 405 of this column, and I am going to address the issue of apathy. (Both obvious and ironic.) I have noticed, more than anything else lately, that as we pass through Month 6 of this pandemic, many people are experiencing a sense of ennui. There is a listlessness to our daily doings, an ever-present question mark with which we are living that is becoming wearisome. Contributing to this feeling is the inability to make plans for holidays or vacations, weddings or graduations; the uncertainty of our government, our finances, our health; the lackluster tone that "free time" has acquired. All these things are taking a toll and we are doing the best we can to grapple with them without becoming depressed or anxious.

An unremarkable event from my teenage years rises to the surface.

I remember one afternoon, shuffling through the house, landing in the kitchen where my mom was making dinner, and standing with the refrigerator door open, uttering that oh-so-common refrain that teenagers say: "There's nothing to eat." When my mom protested that it was too close to dinnertime anyway, I wandered over to see what she was cooking, and it was equally uninteresting. Plopping down at the table, I paged through the catalogs that had come in the daily mail, sighing dramatically.

My mom, having a keener understanding of my feelings than I had at the time, said, "Why don't you go play the piano?" Nah. "There's time for you to take a bike ride before dinner. Get out there and do that." Don't feel like it. "How about you set the table for dinner then?" It's too early. "Virginia Marie, get up and do something. Take the dog for a walk or just run around the block for all I care, but get moving. You'll feel better and I won't have to work around you."

With no slight feeling of umbrage, I got on my feet and went outside. I didn't make it even past our front sidewalk before I plopped down on the steps and just moped some more. It was autumn, so the leaves were falling around me, and I noticed that there was a very neatly formed pile of acorns right there on the step.

One by one, I picked them up, throwing each one as far as I could to reach the houses on the other side of the street. I was so singularly focused on my acorn-lobbing that I hadn't noticed the squeaky sound coming from the tree above me, where the squirrel who had so laboriously gathered those nuts was voicing his complaint. He proceeded to pelt me with acorns from above, until I actually had to get up and run away from him. He then came down the tree and gathered up the remaining acorns, taking one last annoyed look at me, twitching his tail, and running back up the tree.

I laughed, I marveled and I found myself apologizing to that little fella for having inadvertently ruined his plans. He was mighty mad at me in the moment, but my guess is he recovered pretty quickly, went back about his business, and certainly never planned retaliation on my own stockpile of goodies inside (I gathered M&Ms.) He and I resumed our life of peaceful coexistence, and I went back inside to relate the story to my mom while setting the table for dinner in a slightly more cheerful mood.

I've never looked at an acorn pile the same way again.

The squirrel and I, three lessons learned:

1. We did not see things the same way, and we valued the same thing very differently.
2. I did not go outside looking to get pelted, but the experience did pop me out of my self-absorbed funk and give me something new to look at.
3. This memory returned to me today for a reason, despite the fact that I honestly don't think I've thought about it since it first happened.

Now, let's revisit those lessons in light of the first three paragraphs I tried writing for this column:

1. Looking at the same reality from two opposing perspectives: difference of perspective and opinion doesn't necessarily mean one side is right and one is wrong, one good and one bad.
2. Finding a way out of our downheartedness: Sometimes it takes something a little forceful to get us back on our feet, but the first step is to "get up and do something," even when — or especially when — we don't feel like it.
3. Celebrating a guardian angel: I don't believe that the 30-year-old memory of that squirrel came back to me today just out of coincidence. That memory held a lesson for today, for now. Thank you, Guardian Angels, for the gift.

All three original storylines can be strung together from a silly memory of my adolescence. But that's just me. Ponder for yourself today: how are you doing? What is it that you most need? And how might your own memory of things long past lead you straight to it? Let's make a pledge together: let's get up and do something today.

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