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# LESSONS FROM A LESSER PAIN

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I have an idea for a book that sounds just crazy enough to be good. For about ten years now I have been trying to write a novel. Last year, I finally convinced a publisher to give me a chance. At our last meeting I said something like, "If you all are crazy enough to commit to it, I'm crazy enough to try to write it." (Perhaps too much honesty is not such a good thing at such times.)

Since that time I have been writing away in between trips. So far I've got about half of it done. But the novel is not the point. It is not the crazy book I referred to above. The struggle against interruptions is what has begun to fascinate me most. I'd like to write a book about *trying* to write a book, a book about the interruptions that happen and how much more meaningful they can be if you only have eyes to see it.

For some time I've been teetering on the edge of the conviction that God uses pain more than anything else to teach and shape us. One definition of "irritation" might be "a lesser pain." Interruptions represent what can be an extreme irritation. The succession of small hurts that continue to keep me from my "real" work have begun to profoundly affect the way I see myself and those around me. This sort of severe schooling is what the Lord is best at. Let me give a few examples from just this week.

On Monday we were supposed to turn in the tour bus we rent. Our agreement with the company says it must be cleaned before it comes back. Usually we simply pay someone else to do the job but this tour left us without the funds to pay this fee. No one was free to do the job except me. After all I only had this novel to write. And so on what was supposed to be my first writing day, I spent about six hours washing the outside, cleaning carpets, laundering sheets and making beds (12 of them!), all the while muttering under my breath that I had something else more important to do! This novel to write! I finished around nine in the evening, exhausted and without the energy to write into the night.

As I lay in bed, grumpy, *irritated*, the Spirit started the school lesson. Did I think I was too important to do the job I was clearly being called to do? How often had I taught about humility? What about the life changing lesson from heroes like Booker T. Washington about the dignity of common labor?

One after the other the questions came. When I finally drifted off to sleep, still aching from the work, my heart was in a different place. I was beginning to learn an important lesson from the irritation of the interruption that would never have been learned otherwise.

Tuesday morning, 4:30 A.M. Once more, this was to be a totally open day for writing, but then the phone rang. On the other end is the voice of the wife of one of my close friends. He is in the hospital. They are going into surgery in a couple of hours. Can I come and pray with them?

The whole of my spirit leaps at the chance. This is not an

interruption; it is an opportunity to be with two people I love at a time when I might possibly be of some use to them. But as I'm driving into town, from a small dark corner of my heart comes the self-centered voice whining, "But you were supposed to be writing..." This would not be so bad, but I answer with my own voice and in a huff say, "Well, yes, but..."

We sat together for about four deeply moving hours. We prayed and wept. We were simply *together*.

I returned home before noon, with plenty of time left to write but found that I was unable to do so. I was too burdened for my friend and his wife. What's more, I came home seeing my own wife in a new light. I couldn't leave her side for the rest of that day. The experience of the morning was too powerful a reminder of how precious she really is to me.

An extended time of prayer with loved ones, new eyes to see how precious the people the Lord has placed in my life really are. Is that not worth a few pages of an uncertain novel? The Spirit says, "Yes."

Finally, this morning... I fix breakfast. See the kids off to school. Come to my office. Start a fire. Turn on the computer, the entire day before me... The phone rings. It is the school nurse. My youngest son, Nate has come into the school clinic complaining of a headache and sore throat. Can someone come and take him home?

The night before Nate had rushed through a paper on Gettysburg. He had known about the deadline for days but had put it off till the last minute. On the way to fetch him, I begin wondering if this might be a smoke screen. After all, what is easier to fake than a headache and sore throat? As I make my way into the office my suspicions have grown to the point that I decide to confront him on the issue.

I speak to the nurse, then to the principal who calls Nate's room. I know better than to tell them about my suspicion. I don't

want to betray my son. Still, I'm ready to come down hard on him if I find out he's been pretending.

Down the long hall I see his familiar silhouette limping along. As he comes closer the pallor of his cheeks is unmistakable. He is a very sick boy. I load him into the car and we make our way home.

In the quiet car the hard questions are whispered by the Spirit once again: "What is really most important to you?"

"Can you not trust your own son?"

Lesson learned.

My mentor, Bill Lane, used to say, "Interruptions are my business." Only now does that lesson begin to really make sense.

The Lord is less interested in our gifts than He is in His own transformational work in our lives. If we have eyes to see it, He has a purpose and intention behind every interruption, no matter how irritating. In fact the most irritating interruptions contain the promise of the most important lessons.

Family, friends, illness, hurts, needs; all these and more can become the sources of irritating interruptions. Through them God is nudging, whispering, His severe lesson; that loving and listening and trusting mean more than papers and books and deadlines.

Jesus always made the most of every one of the constant interruptions He faced. Yet He never once seemed irritated. 

