

Parable of the Aquarium

Philip Yancey

When I look out my window, I see a 12-story apartment building, all concrete and glass, with bicycles, barbecue grills, and lawn chairs propped up at random on its balconies. And also twisted metal aerials protruding from a video store, the aluminum vent from an Italian restaurant, and a web of black wires to bring electricity to all these monuments of civilization. We didn't choose this place for the view.

But if I turn my head to the left, as I often do, I can watch a thriving tropical paradise. A corner of the Caribbean has reproduced itself in my room. A glass rectangle contains five seashells coated with velvety algae, stalks of coral planted like shrubbery in the gravel bottom, and seven creatures as exotic as any on God's earth.

Saltwater fish have pure, lustrous colors, so rich that it seems the fish themselves are creating and radiating the hues, rather than merely reflecting light waves. The most brightly colored fish in my aquarium is split in half, with a glowing yellow tail portion and a shocking magenta head portion, as if he had stuck his head in a paint bucket.

I keep the aquarium as a reminder. When loneliness sets in or personal suffering hits too close or the gray of Chicago sky and buildings invades to color my mind and moods, I turn and gaze. There are no Rockies out my window, and the nearest grizzly bear or blue whale is half a continent away. But I do

have this rectangle that reminds me of the larger world outside.

Yet even here in the beauty of my artificial universe, suffering thrives as well. The spikes and fins on my lion fish are appropriately menacing; an adult's can contain enough toxin to kill a person. And when any one fish shows a sign of weakness, the others will turn on it, tormenting without mercy. Just last week the other six fish brutally attacked the infected eye of the cowfish. In aquariums, pacifists die young.

I spend much time and energy trying to counteract the parasites, bacteria, and fungi that invade the tank. I pump in vitamins and antibiotics and sulfa drugs and enough enzymes to make a rock grow. I filter the water and expose it to an ultraviolet light. Even so, the fish don't last long. Fish are dubious pets, I tell my friends; their only "tricks" are eating, getting sick, and dying.

The demands of aquarium management have taught me an appreciation for what is involved in running a universe based on dependable physical laws.

To my fish I am God, and I do not hesitate to intervene. I balance the salts and trace elements in their water. No food enters their tank unless I retrieve it from my freezer and drop it in. They would not live a day without the electrical gadget that brings oxygen to the water.

You would think, in view of all this energy expended on their behalf, that my fish would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow appears above the tank they dive for cover under the nearest shell. Three times a day I open the lid and drop in food, yet they respond to each opening as a sure sign of my designs to torture them. Fish are not affirming pets.

Whenever I must treat an infection, I face an agonizing choice. Ideally, I should move the infected fish to a quarantine tank to keep the others from pestering it, and also to protect them from the contagion. But such violent intervention in the tank, the mere act of chasing the sick fish with the net, could do more damage than the infection. The treatment itself may cause death because of the stress it produces.

I often long for a way to communicate with those small-brained water dwellers. In ignorance, they perceive me as a constant threat. I cannot convince them of my true concern. I am too large for them, my actions too incomprehensible. My acts of mercy they see as cruelty; my attempts at healing they view as destruction. To change their perceptions would



Illustration: Kim Justinen

require me to become one of them.

I bought my aquarium to brighten a dull room, but ended up learning a few lessons about running the universe. Maintaining one requires constant effort and a precarious balancing of physical laws. Often the most gracious acts go unnoticed or even cause resentment. As for direct intervention, that is never simple, in universes large or small.

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PRAYERS FROM THE ARK

Prayer of the Ox

Dear God, give me time.
Men are always so driven!
Make them understand
that I can never hurry.
Give me time to eat.
Give me time to plod.
Give me time to sleep.
Give me time to think.

Prayer of the Butterfly

Lord!
Where was I?
Oh yes! This flower, this sun,
thank you!
Your world is beautiful!
This scent of roses . . .
Where was I?
A drop of dew
rolls to sparkle in a lily's heart.
I have to go . . .
Where? I do not know!
The wind has painted fancies
on my wings.
Fancies . . .
Where was I?
O yes! Lord,
I had something to tell you:
Amen.

Carmen Bernos de Gasztold

MORNING PLEDGE

Some years ago I came across a most beautiful prayer. Although I do not know the name of its author, the words impressed me so much that I committed them to memory. They are my morning pledge to Jesus as I start my day. For several years I have recited it the moment I start the engine of my car, as though I could not dare to drive one inch without taking the Lord with me through the strength of this prayer. Now I repeat it even more often.

You say, how can one prayer have such an impact? Read these words, savor the meaning, and you will understand:

I will try this day to live a simple, sincere, and serene life.

Repelling promptly every thought of discontent, anxiety, impurity, and self-seeking.

Cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity, and the habit of holy silence.

Exercising economy in expenditures, generosity in giving, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every trust, and a childlike faith in God.

In particular I will try to be faithful to those habits of prayer, work, study, physical exercise, eating and sleep that I believe the Holy Spirit has shown me to be true.

As I cannot in my own strength do this nor even with the hope of success attempt it, I look to thee, O Lord God my Father, and ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The significance of prayer in my life transcends even the beauty of these words. As I reflect on how the Lord has worked in my life, I can only thank Him for hearing and answering my prayers. When I think of the hours I spend in prayer, the questions I ask the Lord and the concerns I present before Him, I sometimes wonder if He is not weary of listening to me. But when I see His answers revealed in such wondrous ways then I understand His words, "Ask, and it shall be given," and that He means for even me to do just that. The critical issue for me is to wait patiently on the Lord's answer and not the answer I want. His answer has always been better than anything I could anticipate, because my heavenly Father has the best answer at the best time.

Joan Fobbs

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