HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

# Falling over and walking anyway

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*In this article, which was first delivered as a presentation to the Retreat Association in June 2015, the author interrogates our contemporary aspiration towards a 'balanced' life.*

*She argues that human beings are created with a natural eccentricity (as in the asymmetrical structure of the brain hemispheres), and that life is simply more messy than the ideal of balance allows for. Drawing on the range of innovative community projects she has worked with, she proposes that integrity is more important than balance, and needs to be sought by immersion in attentive conversations, between diverse people and between different aspects of ourselves.*

INTEGRITY • ECCENTRICITY • SPIRITUALITY • CHRISTIAN • BALANCE • THEOLOGY • RESILIENCE • EMBODIMENT • LISTENING • SOCIAL COHESION • DIVERSITY

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 105–113

ISSN 2058-5969

Funny how you recall the strange things your parents told you years after they've died. My Father was full of quirky sayings like, 'Drive a car as if you're wearing it', but one that I remember more than any other is, 'Walking is just a matter of falling over and putting a foot out to save yourself!'

The particular circumstances that caused this remark to be a recurring theme of my childhood are hazy. I was in the habit of falling over my own feet and my mother's advice to 'look where you're going' and 'watch your feet' was an act of multi-tasking that often escaped me. However, I suspect my father was not referring to my clumsiness, but rather to a deeper truth about life in general. He, after all, had been diagnosed with TB as a young man and although the new invention of streptomycin had saved him from the fate of many, he lived the subsequent 86 years of his life as if the next day was a rare and unexpected gift.

I compare my father's advice about walking with a competition I was watching recently on iPlayer in which superbly honed and toned dancers performed intricate ballet routines with seemingly effortless energy. If they were just falling over and catching themselves they were doing it with exquisite grace. And I reflect on our human quest for balance, the beauty of imbalance and the fragility of holding things together.

What is balance exactly? If we looked the word up in a dictionary we would probably start with a concept of weight, mass or density. The idea that if we put some stuff on one side of a set of scales then it would be possible to prevent it from tipping out by adding a similar amount of stuff to the other side. The nature of the stuff doesn't really matter, we could balance a couple of books with a bag of sugar or a pair of shoes with a rock, the effect would be an equilibrium where the two sides of the scales were supporting each other, suspended in a similar horizontal plane. Being 'balanced' is seen as a steady state, a point of tranquility and stillness.

This is an image that we can transfer to the inner workings of our mind. Someone with a balanced point of view can see pros and cons of arguments, can empathise with both sides of a dispute, can find the common ground between diverse people, is not disorientated by opposing thoughts. We imagine a 'balanced' person to be wise, still, reflective and gentle, bringing wisdom and due consideration to whatever presents itself to them.

I suspect that this is probably an illusion and, although we may aspire to such a zen form of existence, most of us will use a different language to describe the

complex, diverse and confusing experience that we call life. Mostly, things don't present themselves as a set of rational arguments, or straightforward decisions where we can choose one thing over another. We are much more likely to talk about 'spinning plates' or 'being stressed out'. Or, to go back to the first analogy, to feel that we are continually falling over and putting a foot out to catch ourselves – and not even managing to do that all the time.

With this in mind it was reassuring recently to be reading Iain McGilchrist's book about the brain, *The Master and his Emissary* [see Clive Marsh's review in this journal, p. 133, Ed.], in which it is revealed that we are complex organisms always endeavouring to find a balance between our left and right brains, inherently favouring one side over the other and learning to negotiate between our two hemispheres. And if that wasn't reassurance enough, McGilchrist also points out that the brain is, by design, asymmetric, with the frontal lobes overlapping beneath our foreheads. Praise God that we are created as unbalanced beings, inherently eccentric!

While this knowledge might be a liberation in understanding our own quirkiness, it is also a challenge to the paradigm of rationality that we have set as a human aspiration for Western cultures in which we have given ourselves the ideals of logic, clarity and clear choice. To understand ourselves as, by design, eccentric, as a people who are always falling over and putting out a foot to save ourselves, is to inject a note of grace into the way we view not only ourselves but society. There is a profound beauty in the fragility of eccentricity, of the creative design that has an asymmetry at its heart. It reflects the vulnerability of an eccentric Creator who has designed us in his or her own image. It is not simply that ordinary, rational people can succeed in the system and others are 'on the edge', but rather that we must expect life to spiral, and that the concept of absolute polarities, good/bad, light/dark, right/wrong, are probably an illusion. We live with messiness, confusion, complexity and controversy, both as individuals and as communities, and it is from within this very confusing soup of existence that we need to learn to walk. It seems that life is more of a balancing process than a balancing ideal.

Despite my adolescent rebellions, I have come to believe that my father was a wise man and known both at work and at home as a person of profound integrity. Maybe it was his own particular way of living, one day at a time, each day as a gift, one foot in front of the other, falling over and putting a foot out, that enabled such wisdom to flourish. But he wasn't a saint either, he definitely 'had his moments' and certainly in his youth the world had been a broken,

fragile and crumbling place in which illness could undermine every aspiration. How did he keep his nerve and hold things together?

For a number of years now, my work as a Methodist minister has brought me into contact with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, through a project in which I work alongside a professional counsellor. The project is called Women Breaking Free (WBF). WBF offers a safe space for day retreats at the Touchstone house in Bradford and in particular it works alongside people who have a dissociative condition known as DID. I am neither a counsellor nor a medic, but the way DID has been explained to me is in relation to traumatic experiences in early childhood when the brain seals memories away so that 'normal' life can proceed. It is only when these memories 'leak' into ordinary existence that flashbacks, absences or further trauma occurs. In extreme circumstances this separation of memories can also lead to the experience of separate 'others', and a person's sense of self and identity can become fragmented. It is not my intention in this article to discuss diagnosis or treatment of DID but rather to reflect on what people with this condition can teach us about integrity.

In my understanding, the role of the therapist or counsellor is to enable the various 'parts' of the person with DID to emerge, tell their story and then to converse or negotiate with the other 'parts'. That is, it is the intention of the therapist to encourage the various 'others', not to become 'one unit' but rather to be in healthy conversation together. With such help and given time, the inner parts of the self can begin to talk together and negotiate a way of being that is both safer and healthier. In other words, what is achieved is not a sense of self as an autonomous unit, but rather a way of being self as community. Not so much integration as integrity.

To give another example. For ten years of my ministry I worked with the Somewhere Else community in Liverpool, a church that gathers around the making and sharing of bread. Twice a week, a group of people would congregate around a large kitchen table to mix salt, yeast, water, flour and oil in sticky lumps of dough. The bread would be baked during the course of the morning and each participant would leave with at least two loaves, some for themselves and some to give away. This gathering of people who just turned up around the creative process was as varied as it was wonderful. Typically the bakers would include people with learning disabilities, carers, children, office workers, *Big Issue* vendors and others who were living on the street. Within this human mix, as in any such gathering, were members of the LGBT community, abuse survivors and people with various addictions, some visible others

hidden. The Somewhere Else community was always different, wonderfully mixed and usually chaotic; nevertheless we never failed to make bread.

There are many theories about the mission of the Church, strategies for growth and sustainability. Many came to Somewhere Else to ask for advice or even to find a blueprint that they could transfer to their own church. If their quest was to find a transferable pattern for church success, they would have been disappointed. What this bread-making community embodied more than anything was an ability to keep its nerve within the chaos, to allow people to remain themselves within relationship with others, to hold diversity creatively. The Somewhere Else community had for its mission statement 'We will stay in Liverpool city centre and make bread', and within the deceptive simplicity of its purpose it was a place that enabled sufficient focus to allow for true community to flourish – on a good day!

In its life around the bread table, Somewhere Else continues to embody a way of being prophetic community that inspires the wider Church but those who think it is simply about making bread will have missed the point. What this eclectic and ever-changing gathering of humanity is doing is maintaining its own integrity within difference. It is not being something that is fixed and others can join and conform. It is rather a fluid, organic, changing, struggling and honest engagement with what it means to be a human community, with integrity. A group of people who collectively keep falling over and putting a foot out to save themselves and in doing so moving together towards a new understanding of life and grace.

For me, this developing understanding of what it means to be a person of integrity is a source of increasing hope, both for myself and for the Church. It means that the discourse of 'inclusion' is no longer big enough to transform us as human beings called into Christian communities. It is not that the inclusion agenda is wrong per se but rather that it is not big enough. It does not shift the power from those who are already 'in' to the 'us' who together struggle within the imperative to love ourselves, God and neighbour.

As an individual it has changed the inner discourse with which I live. I am well acquainted with my inner 7-year-old who pops out from time to time to sulk or be subversive. I am also aware of my evangelical 14-year-old who believed in certainties and solutions. Often I have tried to suppress these voices, believing that the current me has moved on and is now wiser and more knowledgeable than the previous me. But, of course, to be a person of integrity means that I need to get to know and love these parts of me again and to allow

an inner conversation that enables these parts to speak with each other in ways in which each is heard and honoured.

In community, this sense of integrity calls us to keep our nerve among people who are different from ourselves and to open up safe enough spaces for us to listen lovingly and disagree well. This is particularly true in my current appointment as Team Leader at Touchstone, an inter-faith project based in the centre of Bradford, West Yorkshire. In a city where many are of Pakistani heritage, and in a culture in which there is overt fear of others and the perceived threat of extremism, terrorism and radicalisation, the need to maintain both personal and community integrity is increasingly important. Touchstone's mission is to live this inter-faith engagement creatively and with creativity. This is all about making safe spaces for honest dialogue, but this does not necessarily need to be head to head, but rather around some creative activity. As at Somewhere Else, the connection between people is best made side by side and difficult issues will then emerge into the middle of a room where they can be shared in a non-confrontational way.

The political discourse for such engagement is often described as 'social cohesion' but I am increasingly convinced that this language, like that of inclusion, does not take us far enough. Social cohesion may be about keeping the peace but it is not about making peace in the first place. For peace to happen, we need to get to difficulties and challenges and move beyond toleration.

If I return to the idea that we are inherently eccentric, that we are made 'off balance' and that the notion that there is a point of equilibrium and stability is probably a myth, then we can begin to see that the integrity of the city is probably more possible than the discourse of social cohesion might imply. It seems to me that, like the language of inclusion, the social cohesion agenda is too small to take into account the shifts of balance that we experience as individuals and communities in multicultural contexts. Social cohesion has at its heart the notion that we can somehow glue a city together to form an integrated whole, but my increasing conviction is that what enables cities as well as individuals to be healthy is the ability to converse with various 'parts' with honesty and relative safety. This discourse of difference is an intentional process in which it is necessary to open up safe enough spaces to talk of tensions as well as joys. It is only when such discourse is enabled that we will be able to live in creative tension within communities of integrity.

One example of how this might be possible has been experienced recently at

Touchstone with the Weaving Women's Wisdom project. Twenty groups of women of different faiths, ages and outlooks, both in the UK and Pakistan, have been discussing three questions: Who are the wisest women that have influenced me? What is the wisest piece of advice I have ever been given? Who are the wise women in my religious texts? Where do I access my own wisdom? In the light of these discussions, each group has been asked to design and create a rug and the subsequent pieces have been collated into The Carpet of Wisdom Exhibition that is currently touring the UK. Each of these groups has had to negotiate a range of convictions and beliefs, assumptions and prejudices, but through this creative process have produced something that is both beautiful and profound.

The Somewhere Else community and the Weaving Women's Wisdom project are both indicative of how intentional processes can enable both individual integrity and resilience. The notion of enabling personal and community resilience is a response to fears that are often below the surface. In inter-faith contexts these fears include fear of being thought racist, fear of being overwhelmed, fear of appearing stupid and so on. To be resilient human beings and people of faith means that we need to face fears, name them together and find the strategies to be confident enough to engage with people different from ourselves. These fears are not just issues 'out there' but part of our emotional response to difference.

In this endeavour to be resilient there is much to be learned from studies in how to increase the resilience of cared-for young people. It seems that a young person's resilience is greatly enhanced by a number of factors, in particular a community of trustworthy 'others', the ability to name and tell their own story and crucially a place that is safe enough to talk through issues and struggles. Through these insights, it seems possible to begin to see what would enable people of faith and faith communities to embody a faith resilience that would both strengthen individuals and church experience.

Recently a Touchstone colleague and I spent a week with a women's conference in Cornwall, teaching listening skills. Most of the women had been members of the Methodist Church for most of their lives. We did some basic exercises in which small groups of women gave each other their full attention for five minutes and while one member of the group was encouraged to tell a story. Most of the participants were reluctant at first, thinking that they could probably not talk for a full five minutes. In fact this did not present itself as a problem! What was remarkable, however, was the number of women who said

afterwards that they could not remember ever having been given someone's full attention for a whole five minutes before!

Not only is it sad that we are not giving each other time to listen to life-stories during our regular gatherings, but also that we are not, on the whole, enabling people to have the creative inner discourse in which their full integrity can be realised. Faith resilience relies on our ability to articulate our own life journeys and to locate them within the wider story of God. This does not happen by itself, but rather from focused opportunities to engage with the contradictory voices that form 'us' in the community of the self.

And this is not simply a mental exercise either. The 'us' to which I am referring are embodied human beings whose integrity and resilience require us to listen to and learn from our physical as well as our emotional selves. Maybe it is pertinent to remind ourselves that one of the distinguishing hallmarks of Christianity is that it believes in a God who became incarnate, embodied, suffering and loving, not as a remote being but as the creator among the created. This is why the communities of Somewhere Else and Touchstone are most effective when making bread or weaving rugs. It is in this very process of embodied activity that stories emerge and contradictory parts of ourselves and our life together are held in creative tension.

And so to some wondering.

I wonder how it would be possible for church communities to become more resilient?

Recently I had a lively conversation with somebody I bumped into at Islamabad airport. He was a taxi driver from Dewsbury who had been visiting his family and was on the same flight back to Manchester as myself and my colleague. Having helped us with some practical matters, he then felt it important to explain to us why it was crucial that we became Muslim. After a lengthy and somewhat convoluted explanation I began to lose patience and asked him to give me a summary in three sentences. He said he would if I would! I confess that I was not really listening to his three sentences but rather rummaging around in my brain to find three sentences which would best encapsulate why I am a Christian. Considering my sleep deprivation I don't think I did too badly: I believe in a God who is and continues to be present in the world; I believe that Jesus showed us how to live as God wants us to live; Christianity is the only religion that calls us to love our enemies and pray for those that persecute us – and peace won't come any other way!

I wonder what your response would have been? I don't think the taxi driver was particularly impressed, but it was good to have been put on the spot (afterwards!). If we are called to put our bodies where our faith is, then how do we give account of who we are and why we are doing it, in a way that is robust enough to maintain our sense of integrity?

In the light of the world's seemingly increasing desire to make us conform, I wonder how we can reclaim our delight in being inherently eccentric? I wonder what strategies we need to enable us to be resilient to live 'off balance'. I particularly wonder about how we Methodists can reclaim confidence in our non-conformity, not in the sense of giving up alcohol or dancing, but rather to be people that are resilient enough to question and challenge the dominant powers. I wonder how we can change the story that tells us that life is a rational, straight-line sort of a journey and to deviate is to fail?

And I wonder how we can make safe enough spaces to listen above, beyond and within ourselves with an intentional thrust towards transformation? How can we, with day-to-day grace, continue falling over and putting a foot out to save ourselves?

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