

Forgiveness and other acts of love.

Stephanie Dowrick, (1997)

We live in a narcissistic society. That makes the practice of fidelity – knowing how to be true to our own selves, and knowing we are capable of being true to others – exceptionally difficult. Narcissism and fidelity do not fit well together. We are subtly and not so subtly encouraged by movies, marketing, advertising and pop culture, which also permeate government and political rhetoric, to regard each other not as precious ‘selves’, deserving of respect and trust, but as objects of consumption. Greed is far sexier than gratitude; competitiveness is much ‘hotter’ than co-operation. Power and money are what *matter*.

Mostly we live in a heightened state of insatiability, wanting what we haven’t got, forgetting and discarding what we already have. Brittle, fragile relationships are normal, with each person watching their own back, rather than the face of the person they most want to love and be loved by.¹

Caring about people lovingly and well demands fidelity. ‘*Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much,*’ said St Luke.

To bring fidelity to life – taking on what it means to choose to be consistent, persistent, trustworthy, committed, truthful, loving, and delicate in your discernment between what matters and what does not – you need to be capable of vigilance; of staying awake to the subtlety of what happens between you and other people. This means caring about details as well as the big picture. It means learning that what may be a small thing to you may carry much greater meaning for someone else. Your own view may not change as you discover this, but it is usually possible to express your respect for a different view and to take this as an opportunity to deepen your knowledge of that person. Because fidelity also asks that you care about other people and yourself equally and simultaneously.

This is not so easy. It involves being ‘transparent’ to your own self-deceptions; taking responsibility for what your needs are; facing what is unpalatable about your intentions or behaviour. It involves developing the strength and clarity of mind to distinguish between intention and action, knowing that what you desire and how you act may sometimes need to be two quite different things.

It means acknowledging that the way you feel about someone may sometimes ask something difficult of you. It may mean, in thinking about yourself and those you love, that you must look inward sometimes, as well as outwards. It means taking stock often, and pausing.²

Fidelity asks of us that we have a sense of who we are beyond the easy descriptions of work, age, sexuality or marital status; that, through living observantly, we discover what our values are. And that we find ways to live out those values while always recognising through our decisions and actions that our values are meaningless when they don't take into account that others' interests are as important as our own.³

Jungian analyst James Hollis says that, 'While maintaining fidelity to outer relationships, we must become more fully the person we were meant to be. Indeed, the more differentiated we become as individuals [by which he means, the more you become yourself], the more enriched will be our relationships.'

Hollis' confidence that we enhance all our interactions with other people by feeling more at home in our own lives, and being more fully ourselves, is heartening. In my experience, it is also true. But what are we to make of his notion of 'the person we were meant to be'? The phrase is a loaded one and sits, waiting, at the heart of the questions of fidelity. *Faithful to what? Faithful to whom?*

'The person we were meant to be' seems to imply a deterministic view of human development that contradicts all I have been suggesting about freedom, will and choice. The idea of destiny is not simple, however. It raises the prospect that there is an essential meaning to each life and that the task of each life is to find and live out that meaning. Or find it *through* living it out. This may be an idea more familiar to those influenced by Eastern thinking than Western, yet psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl captured just this idea when he wrote, 'Everyone's task is as unique as (their) specific opportunity to implement it.'⁴

1. pp 74-75
2. pp 76-77
3. p 82
4. pp 90-91

*To be faithful to another –
whether a person, principle or divinity –
means being faithful to oneself,
transparent to oneself.*

Piero Ferrucci