

# Along the track

## What Are You Carrying?

Some years ago a retired principal told me that he had lived with a remark made by a teacher when he was in his mid-teens. "Are you as stupid as you look?" the teacher asked him one day in class. It may not sound much but to a self-conscious teenager it did mean a lot. He carried that hurt and the anger for a very long time. We can be very cruel to each other – sometimes what we say can be much more hurtful than any punishment imposed.

Pope Francis reminds us: *"Needing to talk badly about others indicates low self-esteem. That means, 'I feel so low that instead of picking myself up I have to cut others down. Letting go of negative things quickly is healthy."* Pope Francis

The put down, the insult, the cynical or scathing remark is usually a way of trying to make us feel superior, particularly in situations where we may not be coping. In fact, psychologists suggest that what we despise in others may well be those weaknesses we most despise in ourselves.

But the put down for that principal was delivered to his face. Social media can be a wonderful tool but many who use it confuse freedom of speech with the freedom to be rude, crude, mean, hurtful or brutal, and very often take the cowardly way by being anonymous. It is easy enough to express rage or pass on some rumour or story when we don't have to do that to the person's face. I was in college with a person who was the master at giving nicknames. While they may have been clever and witty, ninety percent of them were hurtful. They were not designed to build the victim up but to put them down. But when others called him by a nickname, he became very angry and hit back.

Sometimes we carry a lot of anger inside of us. We can be bitter and resentful. There are still certain persons, incidents, and events in our lives that we haven't forgiven. We camouflage our anger at times, we bury it in self-righteousness. Sometimes the snide or the sarcastic comment can give us momentary satisfaction, but it isn't 'healthy'. Putting others down a peg or two might feel great, but that isn't healthy either.

Living with anger isn't healthy. We don't make good decisions from there. Honesty and humility should eventually bring us to admit this. Facing up to the fact that we all carry some angers is healthy. Facing up to the fact that talking badly about others says more about us than those who are denigrating. Facing up to this takes courage and honesty.

We can try to rationalise our anger, our conduct, the put downs, telling ourselves and others that our anger is justified. But self-deception is simply a way rationalising our own hurt. Perhaps we may have been unjustly hurt or offended, but harbouring the grudge and actively 'getting our own back' is, in the long run, just not healthy – physically, emotionally or spiritually.

St Paul wrote: *Do not be bitter or angry or mad. Never shout angrily or say things to hurt others. Never do anything evil. Be kind and loving to each other and forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ.* Ephesians 4:31-32

Criticism is part of life. If it is constructive criticism, we learn to grow through it and because of it. We learn to grow to accept who we are and what we might become through it and even if it may be unfair, if we learn to handle it without hitting back, that can also be a source of genuine growth, even if it is hard to do.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are at the heart of Jesus' message. It is not easy to forgive when you are being treated unfairly. How many times must I forgive - seventy times seven, Jesus says! In other words, just keep doing it. What an enormous change in attitude that requires. Big changes begin with small steps – take Jesus' example. When people came to him with a woman caught in adultery, they wanted to trick him, to corner him. He just bent over and wrote in the dust. So what is he telling us, give people room to move, to change, to reflect, to grow. And for our part, it is always good to pray for the ability to really feel for the other, to care for the other as well as ourselves, to be different than others but never destructive of others.

Regards  
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