

# Along the track

## The Voices Within

Pixar's film called *Inside Out* tells the story of a young girl Riley who is uprooted from her life when her father starts a new job in San Francisco. At this difficult time, Riley is guided by her emotions - Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust and Sadness. It is a clever take on the importance of our emotions and the role they play in our everyday lives, inspiring us, warning us, advising caution, helping us to rejoice in the good things of life.

In the past, religious or spiritual formation had a less than subtle dose of advising us to ignore our emotions, to put them aside, not to trust them, sometimes even to suppress them. Yet emotions are an integral part of who we are as humans. When Jesus told us that he came so that we might have life to the full, that included our emotional life as well.

Being human is not as easy as it looks - we are inherently restless, anxious at times, never quite satisfied. At times we can feel in control, at other times vulnerable, powerless, dependent. Sometimes we can feel rejected, lonely, diminished, hurt, uncertain, at a loss, even threatened, confused, doubtful. On the other hand, we can feel a great sense of satisfaction, we can be filled with awe, we can be loving, compassionate, we can be filled with joy and even a sense of real contentment. When St Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God, he wasn't just talking about that muscle that pumps blood throughout our body but the inner person, our thoughts, motives, and desires, the things that urge us on, the deep desires that motivate us, the experiences we crave, the chase for the things we think will bring us happiness. And how do we sort all that out, how do we navigate our way through all that? By naming and owning our Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust and Sadness! Some psychologists add shame and curiosity to the list.

Virtually every experience evokes some emotion; in fact, it is our emotions that usually motivate us toward behaviour. The 'motivating us towards behaviour' is the key point. It is OK to be sad, or angry or disappointed or frightened or disgusted but staying with that emotion and doing nothing with it can be destructive. That's easy enough to say - depression, for example, can be a dreadful experience that lingers on and on. We sometimes need expert help to address such lingering forces. But in general terms, emotions protect us and ask something of us.

In another of his insights, St Augustine wrote that the question is not *whether* someone is angry, but *why*; not whether he or she is sad, but what causes the sadness; not whether he or she is afraid, but what is the object of the fear. 'To be indignant with the sinner in order to help with his or her 'correction', to feel sorrow for the

afflicted with a view to his or her release from suffering, to be afraid for one in danger so as to prevent his or her death - those are emotions which, as far as I can see, no sane judgment could improve'. (Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, IX.5)

In his book, *A Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser writes that grace is found in the tension rather than in the resolution of the tension. That's probably what Augustine is saying too. In other words, it is not a bad thing to be angry but just being angry doesn't do much for anyone or us. Why are we angry? Why does this person or situation create that feeling within, which of my beliefs or values is offended?

The gift of God's grace is found and is at work when we begin to unpack our emotions, to question why I am angry or sad or jealous. The gift of grace is not just something we have, it is active, it likes to be at work! Grace urges us on, it inspires, encourages, enlightens us in the process of decision-making. It is a bit like the sand in the oyster making process - the sand irritates the oyster, it causes a reaction. The result is a thing of great beauty. While respecting our freedom, grace is at work when we begin to react to our emotions - why am I joyful, angry, jealous and in our decision process which result from that questioning. It is a spur, an invitation to choose life, as it were, to choose those things which are life-giving, to make those decisions, large or small, which lead us to where we will find real happiness. 'What kind of person will I become if I continue doing this?' or 'Is what I am choosing to do, helping me to my act at my best?' If we consistently make decisions in that way, we begin to develop 'life giving' habits that we call virtues.

Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, tolerance, love, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and discretion are all examples of virtues. They don't just happen. Small decisions make habits, habits make virtues. And vice versa. Step by step, decision by decision we build these virtues in our lives. They help us answer the questions 'What should I do?' but 'What kind of person do I want to be?'

Regards  
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