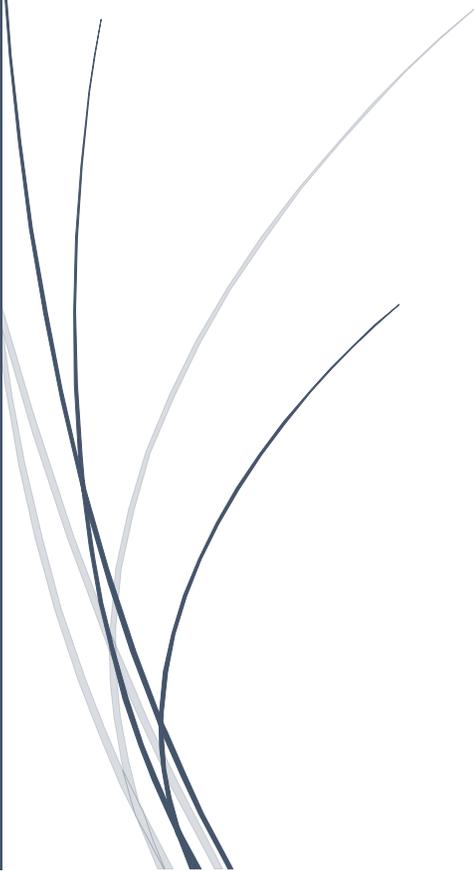




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# The Gift of Emptiness

Part 2 in the Series: "Gifts of the Dark Wood"



Pastor Brad

“Let me begin by telling you a little about yourself” –

- To one extent or another the following is true:
- You are self-conscious about your appearance.
- You feel guilty about things you have done or failed to do.
- You sometimes have a hard time accepting yourself or forgiving others.
- You are insecure sexually.
- You are a frustrated wife, husband, or partner, or you are frustrated NOT to be a wife, husband, or partner.
- You have secrets, which you might betray, or which might betray you, at any moment.
- However successful you are, you fail in ways that matter to both you and your loved ones.
- Beyond all this, your life is stressful, your happiness fleeting, your health insecure.
- You worry about aging.
- You sometimes worry about dying.
- More than once your heart has been broken by betrayal or loss.
- And however successful you may be, however deep your faith, when the roof caves in you shake your fist at heaven, the fates, or life itself.
- You beg for an answer to the question “why” – “why this? Why me? Why now?”

This list is how Eric Elnes opens the chapter on the Gift of Emptiness, in his book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*. It’s an excerpt from the preface of a book called *Lovecraft* written by highly successful minister and author, Forrest Church. The weird thing about that list is how accurate it is, but weirder still is how difficult it is to read it when I change all the “you’s” to “I’s.” ...

- I am self-conscious about my appearance.
- I do feel guilty about things that I’ve done or failed to do.

Notice I picked the easy ones....

Frank Forrester Church IV was the son of a senator, and one of the most influential ministers of our time; author or editor of over 20 books, Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, until late 2006 when he was appointed as Minister of Public Theology. He graduated from Stanford AND Harvard and was the father of four.

You would think a man of his brilliance, with this kind of success, would be exempt from these insecurities – these fears! But not one of us is exempt – not even when we’re walking straight down our life’s path.

Imagine what it would be like to be free – not free of our faults, but free of our fear of them. The thing that separated Forrest Church from regular people wasn’t the fullness of his gifts, but his fearlessness about his shortcomings. Few people have the courage to face their inner emptiness the way he did.

This is what the Dark Wood gift of emptiness brings. Strangely enough, from outside the dark wood it looks like a denial of self-worth and identity, but to those in the wood, it becomes a fulfillment of them. When we face those shortcomings head-on, accept them, and let them go, then we can begin to access the awe-inspiring gifts and talents with which we’ve been blessed. It’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.”

Elnes calls it a move from “fear to flow.” Flow, he writes, is what happens when you stop obsessing over your need to be right, or to be perfect, or to survive, and discover that you’ve been given unique gifts and abilities that bring you alive – and even keep you alive. These gifts are only accessible when we let go of our need for survival, rightness, and perfection. We can’t even see our gifts when our vision is clouded by fear, or self-loathing, or blame.

Elnes tells a story about a little frog that he spooked one day when he was walking in the woods. The real woods not the metaphorical one. He says that as the frog hopped away he performed a series of incredible acrobatics that would put *Cirque du Soleil* to shame! Over the twigs and rocks and sticks; twisting and flipping; you could almost hear the little guy shouting “yahoooo!” as he disappeared into the brush.

Leave it to a theologian to find a devotion in a frog, but what do you think allowed the frog to escape so nimbly? Of course, ‘fear’ comes to mind first but think about it: while fear probably triggered the survival instinct to get away, its escape was made possible by its natural, God-given abilities – it’s ‘frog-ness.’ The frog’s acrobatic escape was probably about 1/10 fear and 9/10 flow. Millions of years of evolution enabled the frog to do that naturally.

There’s one thing the animal world has over humans. If the ratio of fear to flow had been reversed, he would’ve responded more like a human – cowering and crying, “Woe is me, I’m too small and too weak to take on this giant!” He’d have shaken his little frog fist at ‘heaven, the fates, or life itself,’ – “Why – why this? Why me? Why now?”

Of course, we have to have fear to stay safe and alert. We also have God-given abilities to deal with whatever threats we may run into. But if we let fear take over in times

of peril, we may actually put ourselves at greater risk, even though we think we're being more careful. Like the guy entering the freeway who stops on the on-ramp!

Nelson Mandela said, "...courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it." Instead of obsessing over whatever we lack to overcome the danger, it's wiser and safer to set aside our fear and look beyond it to the source of our true power. Simple, right?

Chances are, unless you're operating on a higher level than the rest of us, you spend a lot of time focusing on and fearing your shortcomings – worrying about not measuring up. We think that if people knew who we "really are" they wouldn't like or respect us anymore – that's assuming they respect us to begin with! Maybe someone you knew confirmed your fears already by rejecting you – in your childhood, or just recently.

Most people think the same thing about God. If God really knew me, I wouldn't be worthy of God's love and affection. So we avoid a relationship with God because we don't want God to see our darker side, and we go to self-help seminars and we memorize affirmations, hoping that if we just believe the affirmations then our dark side will go away. But it never does.

Finally we reach a point where we can accept the full weight of our insecurities, we can give up – surrender. I can now accept the fact that under my own power, reasoning, and intelligence I'll never be able to stay on a true path. If I'm going to experience what it feels like to be fully alive, I'll have to depend on a power much greater than myself to make the journey with me.

In this chapter, I like Elnes' comparison of the cross of Jesus to a black hole in space, how it draws us – and everything -- to its center. I ask myself the question that many Christians ask themselves, "If I were alive back then, would I have crucified Jesus?"

My initial reaction is, "Of course not! I'm a pastor! I would never have sent Jesus to the cross!" But before the thought is even finished forming in my mind, I feel the pull of the cross. Maybe I wouldn't have been part of the angry mob at feet of Pilate demanding crucifixion, but even Jesus' closest disciples participated in one way or another. Judas was part of the innermost circle. The rest abandoned or denied him – or both. Am I really any better than Peter? Are you?

If Jesus appeared today I don't think I'd do any better. I'm a hard-working American. Oh, I'd probably be a sympathizer. I'm an armchair activist – a 'slacktivist!' I'd be an active commenter on the "Justice for Jesus" Facebook page. But I probably wouldn't make it to the rally in person. I'm too busy. I have a sermon to write, and a clergy meeting to attend, and I have to walk the dog and, and....

Now, scientists tell us that all the known laws of physics break down at the center of a black hole -- they call it the singularity point. All of us who find ourselves at the point Elnes

calls the “human singularity” discover that the laws of humanity, and even theology, break down in the same way, and they change into something we don’t understand.

This is the point at which we are most empty and yet, mysteriously, most suddenly filled. At the place of greatest despair over our abilities and ourselves, we discover a Presence who loves us beyond our wildest imaginings – who chooses relationship over perfection.

Most of you have heard this before. I was deep in the self-serving life of addiction and pleasure-seeking, and I ended up physically sick and emotionally destitute. Empty. I couldn’t find a single reason to go on living. I literally fell to my knees in a pile of empty beer cans and I begged God to take my life, because I certainly had no use for it.

They say you shouldn’t bargain with God, but something got into me. Spoiler alert: I think it was the Spirit. I promised God, “. . . if You fix this, I’ll go to church with an open mind, and I will seriously look into this whole ‘Jesus’ thing.” Nothing happened; no earthquake, no lightning, and no burning bush. But twelve years later, I’m here. God took my life all right, but not the way I expected.

The Dark Wood is more than just a place of darkness. Within it we find many clearings where light breaks through; where the sun gently warms our face, and the traveler is caught up in awestruck reverence. 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic poet, Rumi, writes: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

Proverbs 9:10 tells us that “the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.” But at the center of this “black hole faith” that the cross pulled us into, we discover that it’s not that kind of fear. It’s not the shaking in our boots, I can’t do this, kind of fear. It’s not terror. In fact, the Hebrew word for fear in Proverbs, *yir-äh*, is best translated as ‘awestruck reverence.’ It’s this kind of fear that we find at the center of our emptiness – at the clearing where the light breaks through. How can we not stand awestruck in the presence of One who sees our imperfections, our insecurities, and our guilt – indeed, our emptiness – yet chooses a relationship with us anyway?

What I thought was my worst, most desperate moment -- the place of my greatest emptiness -- turned out to be the safest most beautiful spot in the world.

It’s the *Unexpected Love* who loves us in spite of all our shortcomings and fears. Life isn’t over. It’s just beginning, and we find that the only thing we’ve really lost in the Dark Wood, at the center of this black hole, is our fear.