

Issue #40
October 4, 2004

Deserts of Cleansing

The year is 1928.

The place, the Convention Hall in Houston, Texas. The occasion, the Democratic National Convention, at which Franklin Delano Roosevelt will deliver the speech nominating Al Smith as the Democratic candidate for President.

In 1921, at the age of 39 and well on his way to a successful political career, Roosevelt had contracted infantile paralysis—polio—and had spent the next seven years struggling to regain some strength in his withering legs. During those years of pain, and frustration over lost opportunities, he had spent much of his time at his Georgia Warm Springs Foundation—a spa he founded for the treatment of polio victims—trying in vain to walk again unaided.

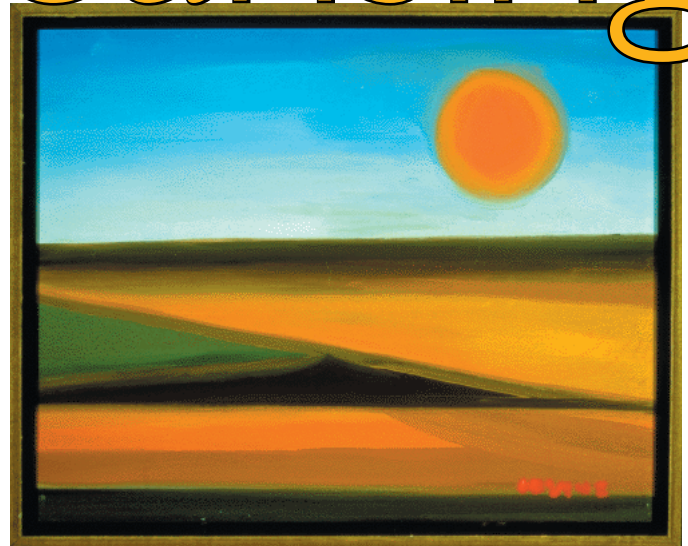
As they were for Winston Churchill in the 1930s, these were Roosevelt's "Wilderness Years"—days of withering disappointment, alienation, anger, questioning; days of wondering whether the struggle was worthwhile, or should be abandoned to live out the rest of his life (like his father before him) as a dignified country squire.

This—the convention of 1928—was his turning point. From here he would either be

catapulted back into public life or would be sent back to the relative isolation of his private life. It all hinged on his withered legs.

F.D.R. wanted to be President, but he was convinced that the electorate would never accept a "crippled" head of state. He must prove to everyone that his polio would not in any way limit his effectiveness in public office. He must *walk* to that rostrum, under his own strength, to deliver his speech.

He had painstakingly prepared. Roosevelt had developed and rehearsed a "walk" that outwardly depended only on a cane on one side and the support of one of his strapping sons on the other. Under his trousers, however, were heavy, painful braces that supplied the strength his legs no longer had. And what was to all appearances simply a considerate son guiding his father's arm, was really an essential support bearing all of



Roosevelt's weight as he shifted it from side to side.

And he did it. Amidst the cheers and adulation of the crowd he made it to the rostrum and stood there—his famous chin jauntily outthrust and his face beaming. A reporter in attendance that night penned his impression of the moment:

Here on the stage is Franklin Roosevelt, a figure tall and proud even in suffering, pale with years of struggle against paralysis, a man softened and cleansed and illumined with pain. For the moment, we are lifted up...

Roosevelt had come through his desert a better man than the one who had gone in. In 1921 he had been a pampered aristocrat heading toward (perceived) deserved success; now, after seven years of pain and struggle, he had emerged, like a phoenix out of the ashes, having learned patience and a compassion for those with less than he; to become, eventually, the specific leader that the depressed country so badly needed in 1933.

We all have our deserts. Some are brief, but excruciatingly painful; some are of longer duration, but relatively painless; and some remain for a lifetime.

Everyone passes through the desert, and fame or wealth or lineage is not sufficient to keep one out: Roosevelt, Churchill, Gandhi, Moses, John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, Jesus—each had to endure time in the desert. Like Paul’s mysterious “thorn in the flesh,” deserts can be defined anew for each person—the only commonality being that the desert is an experience that changes a life: for better or for worse. The desert is a crucible that burns away impurities, a knife that slices off excess, a scorching wind that blows off accumulated dust, a teacher that gives wisdom.

The unbeliever searches for a god who will rescue him from the desert, but the Christian knows a God who dwells there. The Christian’s hope is not that God will somehow rescue him from his personal desert; his hope is found in a God who is *in* his desert.

The Desert of Preparation

The apostle Peter reminds us that these times of trial and testing are a perfectly normal part of following Christ.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

(1 Peter 4:12-13)

Those who rebel against time spent in the desert are invariably those who think themselves perfect without God. It is the wise Christian that acknowledges his lack of wisdom; it is the understanding believer that

confesses his lack of patience; it is the true child of God that recognizes the failings of the flesh, and cries out for the painful and comforting correction of a holy Father.

But the desert need not always be a place of discomfort. There is no better place for communion with the Father than the barren wilderness.

For what purpose did Christ go up into the mountain? To teach us that loneliness and retirement is good when we are to pray to God... For the wilderness is the mother of quiet; it is a calm and a harbor, delivering us from all turmoils.
(John Chrysostom)

In the desert God strips away the many encumbrances we’ve piled upon ourselves. There He happily removes our burdens of self-importance, ego and conceit. There He reduces us to our essential self, bereft of all our comforting insulation—until, finally, we are left with no artificial barrier to stand between us and the Father, and we can at last find utter peace, contentment and joy in His arms.

The Desert of Testing

No matter what some evangelists will tell you, God the Father does not subscribe to the gospel of Success Through Easy Living. Quite to the contrary, His word is replete with stories of people He used mightily only after putting them through some very hard times.

As a child, I would accompany my dad—an electrician—on the job as he would wire houses. Over time, I learned to be more than a spectator; by observing what he did and the rhythm of his work, I could anticipate his needs and fetch the right tool from his toolbox. Meanwhile, I carefully observed his handiwork, noting how he drilled through the studs to run the heavy wire, how he quickly and efficiently stripped the insulation from the tips of each wire, how he masterfully bent and shaped the conduit that would house the wires.

Once in awhile, in the middle of his work, my dad would pause and hand me the tool. “You try it,” he would say. With youthful bravado I would perform the task, sloppily, a bit slower than dad, but it would be accomplished. If he was feeling especially patient, he’d point out how I could have done the job better. But each time I com-

pleted the assigned task, he would entrust me with a little more until, eventually, he could trust me to do the job without his supervision. Each test was necessary for each greater level of responsibility.

God’s testing and trials are more easily experienced—even welcomed—when we see them as coming from a loving Father wishing to draw us closer to Him. His ultimate purpose is not pain or discomfort, but a life brought more closely into the pattern of His Son.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

(2 Corinthians 4:7-10)

The Desert of Correction

The loving parent disciplines the child for the child’s good; even harsh, unflinching discipline is sometimes necessary. But the loving parent is also grieved over the corrective steps, and can’t wait to draw the child back into his arms. Correction is never the goal; correction is only the means to the goal of repentance and change.

There is no more loving parent than our heavenly Father. He never does anything that is not for our own good. While earthly parents may expel their child out of anger or spite or contempt; while earthly parents may punish their child for the sheer delight it brings to their selfish little lives; while earthly parents may brutalize and pummel their child into whimpering submission, even death—while earthly parents may do all this and more, our heavenly parent never treats His child in this manner.

God the Father corrects us out of love—a love superior even to that which we have for ourselves. He disciplines us out of the high standard of His love for us.

The most crooked tree will make timber for the temple, if God be pleased to hew it.
(Thomas Fuller)