

Be with You All

Samuel Wells

St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, United Kingdom

There are some things in every life and many things in some lives that cause us real, genuine, and in some cases constant distress. We may have a job we love and rely on and suspect it's going to be snatched away from us; we may have a brother we care about, and we sense he's going to be sent to prison; we may have a close friend, and we fear her increasing forgetfulness suggests early signs of dementia.

What these anxieties have in common is a deep-seated fear that what we value is in jeopardy and what we need is likely to run out. It's a profound mistrust that leads us to believe the things that matter can't be relied upon, that there won't finally be enough, and that we'll come to be isolated, bereft, vulnerable, and exposed.

Such apprehension leaves us prone to be manipulated by an advertiser who says, "Shouldn't you get insurance for that, to give you peace of mind," or by a politician who says, "What makes you think you can trust those people—they're out to steal your money, take your jobs, devalue your home." But it can also be exploited by a person who wants to become or stay emotionally close to you, who says, "Don't go there, don't risk that, don't explore this—because it might go wrong, could let you down, or be something you regret."

And our anxiety leads us in a number of directions that don't help us, but nonetheless come to characterize our life. One of those is envy. Envy names the way we cease to value what we have and know and come only to prize what belongs to others. In our anxiety we neglect to cherish what we are and have and brood over what lies out of reach and in our imagination constitutes a key that opens the door to where all the candy lies. Another such wrong direction is greed. Greed is the impulse to fear that we won't have enough and that what we do have is unreliable—a fear that urges us to accumulate what we don't need, can't enjoy, and will sooner or later undermine or displace what rightly belongs to us. What is Facebook if not a taking-comfort in many virtual friends as insurance lest the much smaller number of real friends prove inadequate in times of plenty or famine?

And a third direction in which anxiety draws us is endless deferral, which leads us to maximize our sense of power by surrounding ourselves with options and choices but never actually settling on one, for fear that in the death of the endlessly possible, we may experience the demise of our supplies of hope. When we say we are busy, are we really saying that in our greed we have drawn around us too many things, in our pride we have assumed that those things can only be done well by us, in our sloth we have not sat down and identified which are the most important, and in our deferral we have not wanted to let go of any of them lest one day we might come to regret it? Thus anxiety is the root of most of the deadly sins, transforming what we are and have from a gift to a curse and distorting our notion of God from a superabundant source of grace to an untrustworthy curmudgeon of scarcity.

And that's what's going on in the background when Luke tells us, "Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home." People sometimes get angry about this story. Most often

it's because they see in Mary a stereotype of the passive, submissive female and in Martha a type of the assertive, dynamic woman, and they're alarmed to find that Jesus praises the one and upbraids the other. But that's to introduce hurt and prejudice that isn't in the story. Gender stereotyping has done great harm in the history of the church and world over the centuries. But this story is more subtle than that.

What's fascinating about the story is that everyone's a transgressor. Martha's a transgressor by inviting a man into her home. At the beginning of the story, Jesus and the disciples are going on their way. But Martha doesn't invite the disciples back to her place; she invites only Jesus. Even in our relaxed and permissive times, to invite someone of the opposite sex on first acquaintance back to your pad might seem a bit forward. Just imagine how transgressive it would have been in Martha's day. But then Mary becomes a transgressor because, by sitting at Jesus' feet, she takes on the role of disciple, a status considered by everyone then and still some people today as restricted to men. The word *feet* is almost always in the Bible a euphemism for regions not to be talked about. Mary sitting at Jesus' feet at the very least suggests an intense level of proximity and intimacy. Martha's in no doubt that Mary's out of order, but not in crossing gender boundaries; her concern is that Mary's not showing proper hospitality. It's not clear whether Mary lives in Martha's house or not, but either way, Martha clearly expects preparing, serving, and clearing a meal for Jesus ought to be a shared project between the two of them. But then Jesus himself becomes a transgressor, not just by entering a woman's house, but by criticizing his hostess. He's got previous form on this: just three chapters before in Luke's gospel, he went to Simon the Pharisee's house and a woman bathed his feet with her tears and kissed them and anointed them and dried them with her hair. Simon derided Jesus for letting the woman do it, but Jesus pointed out that Simon hadn't exactly brought out the red carpet himself. Now Jesus dishes out the same treatment to Martha.

Psychologists use the term triangulation for what Martha's doing. Either Martha isn't making much headway in changing Mary's mind, or she feels the injustice of her situation deserves a wider airing. So she drags Jesus into it. I wonder how many times in the last week you've complained to a third party about a colleague or family member, rolling your eyes and expounding how intolerable it is that you have to put up with such burdensome, unreliable, and exasperating people in your life, when deep down you know that nothing's going to change unless you find a way to speak to your antagonist face-to-face. That tirade is exactly what Martha does. But she goes further. She actually implies that Jesus is ungrateful and insensitive; and not content to stop there, she orders Jesus about, as if he were a teenage child being dragged into a domestic bust-up. She's so angry with Mary that she can't bring herself to use her name: "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." What started as enjoying Jesus in an act of hospitality has turned into criticizing Jesus, bossing him around, and using him as a casting vote in a sisterly quarrel.

And Jesus is having none of it. He refuses to be dragged in as Martha's cheerleader, and ignoring Martha's rudeness, he takes her remarks at face value and tells her she's in the wrong. As we've seen, she's so many kinds of wrong. She's made Jesus a pawn in her game, she's overshadowed his visit with the anger of her own sibling dispute, she's told him he's unaware of and unresponsive to injustice, she's implied he has a soft spot for Mary over her, she's ordered him to tell Mary off, she's

failed to have the conversation she needs to have with her sister, she's demanded the whole world be more like her. But Jesus doesn't point out any of these wrongs.

Instead, gently repeating Martha's name (in contrast to the way she avoided using her sister's name), he talks about anxiety. Earlier we noticed how in our anxiety we lose sight of the value of what we are and have, and through greed or envy or deferral we scatter our thoughts over many things, thus jeopardizing, diminishing, or even losing what we are and have in our fear that we can't rely on it. For fear of the validity of the one, we obscure it with the false security of the many. Now listen to Jesus' words: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by *many* things; there is need of only *one* thing." Anxiety leads to many; truth leads to one.

There are a lot of things about Mary (at least in Luke's account) that we don't know. We don't know if she lived in Martha's house. We don't know if she'd been part of preparing the meal. We don't know if Martha had any historic reason to be angry with her. We don't know what her Jungian personality type was or where she was on the Enneagram. We only know one thing about her. She sat at Jesus' feet and listened. That was all Jesus really wanted. Martha's bluster, her busyness, her bravado was all a smokescreen, an anxious avoidance: deep down they were saying to Jesus, "Simply sitting at your feet and listening to you isn't enough. There needs to be more than that." That's what Martha really gets wrong. *She thinks Jesus isn't enough.* Mary says nothing, but her actions speak loud and clear. They say, "There's only one thing. And that's Jesus. And that's more than enough."

Why is Mary exalted? Because she imitates the action of God. In Jesus, God's whole attention is focused on us. Jesus isn't fretting and fussing about a thousand things. Jesus is God choosing to be wholly engaged with us. Martha says she's serving Jesus, but her notion of service is entirely on her own terms; she's not giving him what he wants. Mary's service doesn't look like much, but it's a statement of faith. Martha offers food; Mary shares communion.

Having established that being with is at heart a theological notion, I want now to demonstrate its breadth by displaying what it means in an ethical and missiological context. The following comparison of two accounts of constructing the Burma railroad in the Second World War offers profound contrasts. On the one hand is a person who could not allow anyone to be with him; on the other is one who found transformative ways to model participation with fellow sufferers.

Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* portrays the complex character Dorrigo, fêted by the media for decades as a war hero, his public acclaim only matched by the narrow road of his inner numbness and self-loathing. The heart of the book lies in the Burmese jungle in 1943, where Dorrigo is both the medical doctor and the senior officer among a band of a thousand prisoners being forced to work on the "narrow road" of the railroad, a project on which tens of thousands (one in three of those who were pressed into service) died. The men's lives are beset by starvation, cholera, and the sadistic violence of their prison guards. On countless occasions Dorrigo is asked by the Japanese camp commander how many of the men are fit to work. The truthful answer is always "None"—but that answer is unacceptable, so in the face of the commander's violent demands, Dorrigo finds himself daily responsible for adding the least likely to die to those least sick—and thus for sending to hard labor men who can hardly stand with illness, injury, or hunger; a duty for which he feels guilty till his life's end.

Two hideous incidents sum up the novel. In one, the prisoner who sears Dorrigio's soul the deepest, Darky Gardiner, is brutally beaten to the point where he drowns in a sewage trench. Everyone is powerless, even the merciless guards doing the beating. In the other, Dorrigio attempts to perform an amputation of a leg with none of the requisite anesthetic instruments or staff to help him: the effort is pointless and indescribably agonizing, like the whole torture of imprisonment in the jungle.

The experience is the making of Dorrigio and the breaking of him. His testimony is set alongside three others. Most significantly there's his own life after the war, in which he becomes addicted to infidelity in a flawed attempt to reignite the dynamism of an emotionally-evacuated existence, his constant, noble wife a symbol of the conventional life with which he can never again engage. Then there are the rag-tag soldiers who survived the enforced labor camps of Burma. "They died off quickly, strangely," the novel tells us, "in car crashes and suicides and creeping diseases." And then there's the ghastly camp commander himself, guilty of so many unspeakable crimes, who contrives to escape arrest, yet over the subsequent decades acquires a dignity not through repentance, but through destitution.

The lesson seems to be, the Burma railroad ripped the heart out of everyone who was there, those who died often horrible deaths, those who survived, those who ordered the deaths, and even those who became famous afterwards for their leadership and courage. The mockers surrounding Jesus as he hung on the cross said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself." It's an ironic summary of the whole gospel narrative. It's also a summary of the story of Dorrigio Evans, a man who survived the horror and made countless men's experience less ghastly than it would have been, but lost his soul and self-respect in the process. He had truly been with the prisoners; but he could never allow anyone truly to be with him thereafter.

The Burma railroad must rival the concentration camps of Europe among the closest renderings of hell the twentieth century produced. War can be a terrible perversion and mutilation of many lives; but for some people it can have an intensity, meaning, and purpose they never know elsewhere. The horror can break many people; but it can make some, and inspire or reveal a depth of character that conventional life might never expose. Dorrigio didn't choose to enter the valley of the shadow of tortured death in Burma. He survived the war but lived for decades with a numb self-hatred amplified by the paradox of public acclaim. Dorrigio's story is in many ways admirable but remains fundamentally sad: he's done great things but can't be with God, with others, or with himself.

A contrasting account comes from Ernest Gordon, a company commander in the 93rd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who at age twenty-four became a prisoner of war after the fall of Singapore in 1942. Like the fictional Dorrigio Evans, he was pressed into labor on the Burma railway. Like Dorrigio it was a harrowing experience. But unlike Dorrigio, Ernest was to look back on those years as the crucible of his Christian faith.

The atrocity of the guards was similar. Men died by bayoneting, shooting, drowning, decapitating, or being worked beyond endurance. Some were tortured by having their heads crushed in a vice; others were buried alive in the ground. It was futile and soul-destroying. But for Ernest, a lot of the problems lay closer to home. It was such a struggle for survival that the prisoners were quite capable of being almost as cruel to one another as their captors were to them. But then, starting with small acts of

kindness and thoughtfulness, emerged what Ernest Gordon came to call the Miracle on the River Kwai.

It began with Angus. Angus started looking after one of his fellow soldiers, letting him have his own blanket. He would pass across his meal ration too. The soldier recovered. No one thought it could possibly happen. But Angus paid the price. He died from starvation and exhaustion. He'd laid down his life for his friend. One evening the guards counted the tools and found one shovel missing. The soldiers were assembled and told they would all die if no one owned up. The guard lifted his rifle to begin the slaughter. Straightaway a man stood up and said, "I did it." The guard pummeled the prisoner with kicks and rifle butts until he was long dead. Finally the prisoners retrieved the body and marched back. Later that night a count was taken again: there'd been no missing shovel.

Ernest saw something extraordinary happening. "Death was still with us," he said, "no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip.... Selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, self-indulgence, laziness, and pride were all anti-life. Love, heroism, self-sacrifice, sympathy, mercy, integrity, and creative faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life, turning mere existence into living in its truest sense.... True, there was hatred. But there was also love. There was death. But there was also life. God had not left us. [God] was with us."

Ernest suffered pretty much everything the jungle could throw at him, including malnutrition, malaria, a tropical ulcer, and even the removal of his appendix. As a result, he was put on the death ward. There he was on the receiving end of the gentle care of Dusty Miller, a gardener from Newcastle and a Methodist, and Dinty Moore, a Scottish Roman Catholic. Their constant attention, their willingness each day to boil rags and wipe clean and massage Ernest's damaged legs, melted Ernest's agnostic heart and moved the spirits of many prisoners. He had met God. As he put it, "Faith thrives when there is no hope but God." Eventually Dusty and Dinty moved Ernest from the ward to their hut on higher ground, constructing a new bamboo addition for the purpose. One soldier sold his watch to buy the drugs needed to treat Ernest. To everyone's astonishment, Ernest started to recover.

This was the way not of clinging to life, guarding it or preserving it, but of letting hates, fears, lusts, and prejudices die. As Ernest said, "We were beginning to understand that as there were no easy ways for God, so there were no easy ways for us. God, we saw, was honoring us by allowing us to share in what it means to labor, the agony arising from loving the world so much. When finally the prison camp was liberated and the fear that the prisoners would be slaughtered by the Japanese proved unfounded, it was the prisoners themselves who persuaded the liberators not to exact retribution on the Japanese guards. Most of the officers in Ernest's section knelt down by the guards to give them water and food, to clean and bind up their wounds. "What fools you are!" an Allied officer called out. "Have you never heard the story of the Good Samaritan?" Ernest replied.

Ernest survived the war. He went on to become a Church of Scotland minister and for many years Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. In time he discovered the truth about his companions: that two weeks before VJ Day a Japanese guard, exasperated by Dusty's calmness in the face of provocation, crucified him. Meanwhile Dinty, the Scot, was already dead, drowned when his unmarked prisoner-transport ship sank under friendly fire.

Ernest's life and those of his colleagues illustrate that whether to regard oneself simply as a victim is one's own choice. One can live in bitterness, resentment, and fear, replicating to others such horrors as one has oneself received; or one can live in grace, mercy, gentleness, generosity, kindness, and sympathy. Dusty Miller was crucified by his captors, but died in faith, hope, and love. Dorrigo failed, in the end, despite his heroism, to be with God, with others, or with himself. Ernest, through learning to be with others, found all three.

When Paul concludes his letter with the words *be with you all*, he is using no casual words; he's citing the heart of the gospel. God in Christ is Emmanuel, God with us; Christ leaves his disciples with the words *I will be with you always*. What that means for our relationship with God is shown by Martha's sister Mary. What that means for our relationship with one another is shown by Ernest Gordon.