

*Dual Citizenship: We Embrace Contradictions*  
1 Corinthians 1:18

I haven't talked with you much about the fact that after my husband Terry died I married again. It's a chapter of my life that I remember not altogether happily, so it's not a story I tell with ease. But all week I've had the sense that this piece of my life has some wisdom in it that's connected to this final message in our series on Dual Citizenship.

We married about three years after I'd been widowed, when my daughter Stacey was ten. There were many ways in which we were good partners. Each of us was immersed in work that felt like a calling, and we both admired and supported the other's work. Every night we'd have long, satisfying conversations about what we were working on and learning, the details of our days. I loved the companionship of someone who was mining his life for meaning, just as the early years of my ministry were inviting me to do.

Over the years of our marriage, what had been a sociable enjoyment of wine for him became first a useful way to unwind from the stress of work, and then a necessary way to get through the anxiety of every day. Without my noticing, he waded into the undertow that drinking can be, and he couldn't get out. When I finally realized what was happening—I found many empty bottles and the lies that hid them—he was already out in the middle of the dangerous ocean that is alcoholism, beyond all my attempts to reach him and pull him back in to shore.

But I tried. After I got over my shock and learned I could live with fear that sat like a rock in my stomach every minute, I went at this problem straight on. I confronted him, I argued with his denials, I pulled out evidence to prove he was lying. I cried and cajoled and made eloquent arguments about how self-destructive this behavior was. I offered solidarity: surely we could work through this together. We can beat this, I thought. I know we can beat it. We love each other; we're strong people; we are committed to life together.

I was wrong. I learned, slowly, that alcoholism is a terrible, powerful disease. That it takes love and strength and commitment and grinds them up into little pebbles, too small to stand on. It took me a few years to surrender, to admit that I couldn't clean up this mess the way I'd been able to take care of other things in my life. Finally I left that marriage, so that his disease wouldn't kill both of us.

When I left my home, I also left my job. I needed a new start, I thought; work I could throw myself into. If I couldn't fix his life, I could at least re-gather my sense of control over my own. This is how we recover from a fall, right? We stand up, dust ourselves off, and get right back on that same horse, or bike, or whatever it was that dumped us off before. I know how this world works.

So I took, quickly, another big job, in an organization that needed a lot of fixing. This I knew how to do. I grabbed hold of that work and I did it with relish, as though saving that place could

save me. I set my eyes on accomplishing big things. I used all my energy and passion and position to move that organization straight ahead, as far and as fast as we could go.

And then I hit a wall. It turned out that not everyone who worked in that place thought we were headed in the right direction. A small, powerful group of people objected, loudly. They pushed back, with passion that was just as strong as mine. I reacted not so differently from the way I'd tried to beat alcoholism. I went straight at it. I cried and cajoled and made eloquent arguments about how self-destructive their inflexibility was. I argued: we respect each other; we are committed to the same good work. Surely we can work through this together.

I was wrong. We couldn't.

Leaders—good citizens in this world—are rewarded for tenacity: setting a vision and forging straight ahead. Holding on tight, grappling with every opposing force that rises up, sweeping away doubts and insecurities. There's a slightly more spiritual version of that approach to life that's sometimes called "the law of attraction". You may know it; it got a lot of attention some years ago because of a best-selling book called *The Secret*. You draw the elements of a good life toward yourself, this law says—love, stability, health, the relationship you're longing for—by focusing on those things. If you want something good to happen, draw a picture of it in your mind and make it your intention. The universe is just waiting to cooperate with you, *The Secret* says. Fix a desired outcome in your mind clearly, and you can control what the finished picture will look like. You can change the reality of the world.

That's not the way things worked for me. In fact, the more I fixed a picture in my head and tried to arrange the people and circumstances of my life to fit into it, the more I struggled and failed.

In fact the way I've seen life work seems better explained by another pattern, something that has been called 'the law of reversed effort'. Here's how it sounds when a Zen master says it: "Muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone". Here's how a philosopher says it: salvation and security, even sanity, come when we recognize that we have no way of saving ourselves. Life actually works, the philosopher Alan Watts wrote, by a 'backwards law.' When you try to stay on the surface of the water, you sink; but when you try to sink, you float. If you try to hold your breath, you lose your capacity to breathe.

Here's how Jesus said it: *Whoever wants to save their life will lose it.*

Jesus' teachings were full of those kinds of paradoxes: words that sound to us like complete contradictions. *The last shall be first. Love your enemies. Blessed are those who mourn. You find your life by carrying the cross—the instrument of your own death.* His stories were full of reversals. A young man who loves his life and wants more of it is told to sell everything he owns. A two-penny contribution is called out and praised for its generosity. A shepherd puts at risk a whole flock of sheep to search for the one that wandered away. Jesus himself was what Richard Rohr calls 'a living collision of opposites': he was divine and human; he found the presence of God where others saw disorder and brokenness. He demonstrated God's power by turning himself over to a government that looked exactly like God's adversary.

So a life of following Jesus, imitating his actions, isn't likely to open up a straight path in front of us. The obstacles don't just drop away. Hardship doesn't melt in front of us. Prayer doesn't make everything we ask for happen.

But here's what will happen: no matter how fouled up and scrawled over our lives get, the presence of God will always show up; and it will work, invisibly, toward goodness. It will happen in mysterious, crooked, even irrational ways. It won't give us everything we've set our minds to wanting, or even what we strive for. But it will set the world right in some way that we never imagined, some picture we never even thought to fix as our intention.

Dual citizens—people who live fully in this world and who know that there is something more—know that reality will always hold contradictions, pain, real damage. Not because of somebody's mistake, but because good and bad live alongside one another. Every picture has in it both darkness and light. We can work for justice, and it will never be enough. Our lives are—at every moment—a mixed blessing. They bring us both joy and hardship. Dual citizens don't fight that reality. We find our peace in it.

How do you do that? Should we just let things happen, stop working to make life better? I don't think so. But we live knowing we don't have to—we can't, actually—wrestle the world into our picture of goodness. We trust that there's a bigger picture than we can see, a God who can take all those things that look like they're clashing, broken, just wrong—and incorporate them into wholeness and beauty.

How does that work? I don't know, but somehow it does. Here's the best description of it I've heard recently. These words were written by a man named Jerry Sittser, three years after his wife and daughter and mother were killed in the same moment, in a car accident.

*The accident itself bewilders me as much today as it did three years ago. Much good has come from it, but all the good in the world will never make the accident good. It remains a horrible, tragic and evil event to me...*

*Yet the grief I feel is sweet as well as bitter. I still have a sorrowful soul; yet I wake up every morning joyful, eager for what the new day will bring. Never have I felt as much pain as I have in the last three years; yet never have I experienced as much pleasure in simply being alive and living an ordinary life. Never have I felt so broken; yet never have I been so whole. Never have I been so aware of my weakness and vulnerability; yet never have I been so content and felt so strong. Never has my soul been more dead; yet never has my soul been more alive. What I once considered mutually exclusive—sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure, life and death—have become parts of a greater whole. My soul has been stretched.<sup>1</sup>*

That's the identity of dual citizens, to live as people who have learned from our own experience that goodness will come into focus again no matter how bad things get. To know that this is what God does: takes irreconcilable, opposite, even awful, things and weaves them together into portraits that are beautiful, graceful, good.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, p. 179

People who live like this is true, who trust it even when they know they're incapable of wrestling the world into shape—those may be the very people the world needs most right now. It doesn't even take very many them. Jesus talked about the power of small things: salt of the earth, yeast in dough, faith the size of a mustard seed. It's enough.

So let's be those people. Let's live as citizens of this world and another world we haven't actually seen yet. Let's encourage one another to trust that all shall be well—not because we make it so, but because God does. Let's make our lives and our voices a vector of unpredictability in the world.<sup>2</sup> We are holders of the promise...that in the midst of it all, everything is possible.

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin J. Dueholm, *Sacred Signposts*, p. 170