Hearts at Work

A Column by James Tipton

"…in respect to fellowship…."

In a rather fine film, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, Capt. Jack Aubrey, played by Russell Crowe, master and commander of the British ship Surprise, has orders to chase down and capture or destroy a much larger French ship in the lonely waters off the coast of Brazil in 1804. A young midshipman named Hollom is a misfit among these rough and sometimes difficult-to-discipline men. Late one night the lonely and disconsolate Hollom lifts up a cannon ball, cradles it against his stomach, and jumps into the deep blue.

The following morning Capt. Jack calls his men to the upper deck for a short service. Setting aside the Bible offered to him he says simply but eloquently: "The simple truth of it is not all of us become the men we once thought we might be. We are all God's creatures. And if there are those among us who thought ill of Mr. Hollom, or spoke ill of him, or failed him in respect to fellowship we ask Your forgiveness."

“In respect to fellowship,” is there any among us who has not failed others? Or thought ill of others, or spoke ill of others? Only yesterday, while leaving our bi-monthly Ajijic Writers luncheon, I was reminded by someone for whom I have the highest regard of the Buddhist commitment to: Right thought. Right speech. Right action.

Yet how easy it is to ignore those who, like Midshipman Hollom, do not “fit”. How easy it is to laugh at them, to scorn them, to scoff at them, to put them down, to turn our backs when they want to be with us, as if the limitations or failures we perceive in them are of such magnitude that at least for the moment we might ignore our own limitations and failures. Indeed, when seen in a higher light than that of ordinary day, those opening words of Capt. Jack Aubrey fall like a hard rain upon all of us: “The simple truth of it is not all of us become the men we once thought we might be.”

In literature the Misfit is not the same as the Outsider (Mersault, in Camus’ *The Stranger*, for example) or the Hero (Odysseus in Homer’s
The Odyssey
, for example), for both the Outsider and the Hero do not define themselves in terms of what others think of them or how they are accepted. But true Outsiders and Heroes are rare. Misfits are common, and most of us have experienced being misfits,
not fitting in
the way we might hope to fit in.

Often in literature and film, the idea of the misfit is dramatized through appearance. The hunchback in Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is deformed, grotesque, laughed at, considered a fool. So ugly that shortly after his birth he had been deposited on the steps of Notre Dame where he was raised by a tormented and sexually repressed priest. I like the 1996 version in which Mandy Patinkin plays the hunchback Quasimodo; Richard Harris the Archdeacon of Notre Dame, Dom Frollo; and a very young Salma Hayek the gypsy girl Esmeralda, who with no effort at all bewitches everyone. Quasimodo, the monstrously misfit, becomes the hero, swinging down on the bell ropes to rescue Esmerada as she is being led to the gallows after being falsely charged with murder. I like equally well the 1939 version with Charles Laughton as Quasimodo and Cedrick Hardwick as the Archdeacon, and the 19-year-old Irish beauty Maureen O’Hara as Esmeralda in her first American role (she had just completed her first major film in England a few months earlier—
Jamaica Inn
—also with Laughton).

In the old fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*, the “misfit” is a beast, literally, and yes hideous, but

we come to realize his heart is bigger than any of the hearts around him. Beauty slowly discovers she loves him, and finally, as he is dying, she kisses him,
expecting nothing in return.
With that kiss the beast comes back to life, now transformed into a handsome prince, and they live happily ever after.

The truth hidden in this story is this: we discover that when we can love, *expecting nothing in return* , our lives are transformed. What we formerly saw as ordinary—or in the case of this old story even far worse than ordinary—suddenly is transformed into something magnificent. The old black and white film version directed by Jean Cocteau,
La belle et la bête
(1946), is worth watching. The
belle
, the beauty, is initially horrified by
la bête
, but as she gives him more and more of her attention, more and more she begins to see the remarkable soul beneath the grotesque exterior.

All whom we meet, including misfits, have remarkable souls, usually deeply hidden. By giving apparent misfits our *attention* (complete attention being symbolized by the kiss in *Beauty and the Beast*),
their world (which we suddenly realize is our world as well) becomes a bit more beautiful. Like Capt Jack says, “We are all God’s creatures.”