

One reaction to hearing that anecdote might be, all things considered, that young man's landing in squalor and poverty was an appropriate and deserved outcome. He has, after all, put a strain on family finances by insisting that a significant portion of family assets immediately be made liquid and turned over to him. Then he turns his back on home and responsibility and goes off mindlessly to fritter away the very resources that could some day have provided him with a stable, coherent, productive future. It's because of his having done that that he has, for nearly twenty centuries, been known as the prodigal, immature and unstable son. Before just shrugging him off, though, as "one more of those young adult tragedies," it's probably worth looking into the story a bit more carefully and thoughtfully.

For example, the story says that he was the younger of the two sons in the family. In those times, the oldest son was the one who automatically was given "the edge" in life -- the eldest son, that is, because he was first-born, and inherited the preponderance of the family's estate at the death of their father. Where there were two brothers, as in this family, the rule of thumb was that the older brother would receive two-thirds of the assets while his younger brother would receive one third.

So, even had that younger brother remained dutifully and deferentially on the farm, following his father's death he would still have been at most, the junior partner, maybe director of operations or even general manager, but always under his older brother. For an ambitious person -- one with dreams of something more -- it would certainly have slapped a lid on his dreams. Is it fair, then, to consider as a character defect, this young man's wish to be his own person, his unwillingness to settle into a closed-ended future? Was it so wrong for him to want to use whatever resources that would accrue to him, to succeed on his own rather than permanently hanging around in the shadow of his daddy and his big brother? I don't think so.

So no. He decides that he would have to get away from here, go to the big city in the far country. There he would make some "good contacts," would dress for success, would lease an impressive chariot, would join the right country club, would buy a few drinks in the right lounges for some people who "knew some people" and who then would be helpful to him in getting to where important things were happening. And who could say, maybe with his farm background along with the money from his inheritance, a solid career might await him in grain futures or hog bellies or speculating in soybean oil? But opportunities like that don't come looking for a person. One has to leave home, has to be willing to take some risks, needs to do some improvising, and must make the right connections. Had that worked in his case, we'd be commending him, not calling him the "prodigal son." That for which he was unprepared, though, was that the big city in the far country was infinitely better at crushing dreams than fulfilling them. Quite unlike what he'd imagined, there he was seen as a rural buffoon, a naïve

yokel from the hills, a dingbat with a funny suntan but who, just now had some money. They'd see to it that he didn't have the money long.

Poor guy. He'd never known exploiters, users, con-artists so was pathetically susceptible to them. Shortly his money, his dreams and his self-confidence are gone. It brings on a devastating juncture. Even so though, he isn't beaten quite yet. Remembering that he has that strong background in agriculture, he answers an ad in the Baghdad Bugle offering an entry-level position in agri-business. Well, it's entry-level, all right. The job is in a hog lot, feeding hogs. So, he ends up in hog bellies after all, but he's filling them, not buying and selling them.

It has to be an identity crisis of stunning proportions. At home in a rural community setting he's never had occasion to question his worth, his innate ability, his talent, his judgment. And yes, at first in the far country (as long as he had cash) he had felt confident, competent and important. But now there is nothing and nobody. His dreams, his plans, his resources, his drive, his positive thoughts, his self-esteem, even his good looks have evaporated. The question hanging over him out there in that hog pen is: "What in the world will become of him?"

Variations on that experience of his are still very much with us! One place it can come about is in a new marriage. It can have to do, for example, with the couple that dives into the marriage mainly (if the truth be known) because they just don't want to be single. They've convinced themselves in any of several ways that "marriage is the answer," perhaps the answer to some aching loneliness or as a distraction from some recent rejection, or maybe as a means of validation, or possibly just the feeling that marriage is "overdue." So wanting it, needing it, hungry for it, how could their marriage possibly not succeed?

But then quite often and very unexpectedly, amazingly quickly the marriage turns out to be the "far country" where each other's heretofore unrevealed quirks perhaps, or maybe grueling financial troubles, or in-law problems, or previously unseen needs in one or both going unmet, or maybe just garden-variety communication problems that they had been certain "could never happen to them," do. Whatever it is that unravels, it ravages morale, makes a cruel joke of their dream and decimates what had been their glowing hopes. It's the "hog-pen experience."

The same thing can happen vocationally. She focused her dreams, her education, her expectations on a particular profession, a "calling" or an occupation only to have it turn out to be totally other than she had imagined it. She may discover, for example, that it's so riddled with politics that accomplishing much of anything remotely worthwhile is impossible. Maybe she collides with major changes that, certainly through no fault of hers, have made her dreams obsolete before she ever gets started. Sometimes it's that he, by his very nature, is without, it turns out, the needed patience or temperament to bring his dream to life. Here too, he or she ends up feeling utterly robbed of the future toward which he had striven and, yes, felt entitled. She feels robbed of the hopes that had inspired her – stripped

even of the meaning of those years of preparation. “Why me?” is the question on which she keeps choking.

And yes, one sometimes lands in the hog pens because of a personal mistake, a failure, or some serious naïveté. Whether that landing in the hog pen appears to have come about because of a cruel, random twist of circumstance, a mistake, naivete, denial or whatever, makes little or no difference. Identifying the cause won’t soften the disorientation, won’t arrest the hemorrhage of self worth, won’t reverse the evaporation of one’s at-homeness in life, nor make go away the flood of insecurity that is so paralyzing there in the hog pen. Worse yet, all of that feeds on itself. For you see, there in the hog pen, he doesn’t know who his friends are, whether he still has any friends, and if he does, what do they now think of him.

Her mind now ricochets back and forth between feeling horribly victimized while at other times feeling like she is the stupidest person on earth. Especially hard on her is recalling all too well what used to be her harshly judgmental opinion of other people who landed in a place or predicament much like this one in which she now is.

Whether it comes about like that or in yet some other way, that First Century young man in that story wasn’t the last to wind up in a hog pen. For you see, the hog pen can be any place where a former way of “being you” refuses to go any further, refuses to work any more. It’s any place where a dream that one would have sworn was beautifully well-conceived utterly fails to deliver. “So again what will become of a person?”

There are several possibilities. First (let’s be frank about it), he may suicide. The disillusionment, the embarrassment, the humiliation consuming him, if unchecked, can grow to where he no longer believes that he can (or even wants to) try to live with it or through it. He doesn’t believe that there is any life still left for him; becomes convinced that no real good is possible on the other side of this. He therefore just “wants out.” Every bit as tragic is what becomes of a number of others. They’re the ones who end up twisted by rage and chagrin into cynical, amoral, coldly pragmatic, conscienceless people. Having been so hurt by hope, having been made the object of snickering, seemingly having been scoffed at by life itself, having earned what feels like an advanced degree from “the school of hard knocks” they’ll not be caught hoping, trusting or dreaming again. Henceforth, their core principle for living is raw self-interest. Their cardinal rule: “Do it to others before they get a chance to do it to you.” From a spiritual standpoint, he or she has come forth from the hog pen having become one of the hogs. Still another option is one that this young man may have considered: making a life of dwelling in the hog pen. Having convinced himself that the world is, after all, nothing but a giant hog pen, he’ll adjust accordingly. He’ll expect nothing more, will stay out of everyone’s way, and will play it scrupulously close to the line, not doing or even thinking anything that might carry the risk of making

another mistake. Having thus withdrawn, at most he might happen to work his way up to “chief hog-feeder.” He has beaten his own spirit to death and is “dead behind the eyes.”

This story, though, presents powerfully the fact that there is an alternative to all of that. It begins where it says: “And then he came to himself.” Difficult as it had to have been finally to do so, he forced himself to look with utter candor at where he had been, where things were headed, what the dynamics were that landed him in his current predicament.

Swallowing great gobs of ego, he gives up looking for external things in which he can place blame for all that has gone badly. With painful honesty he examines the assumptions on which he has been operating – how he has arrived at them and with what he’s been propping up those bad assumptions. He goes back to probe the components of life in other times when he had felt most at-home in life, most understood, most accepted, and most relevant. Then breaking through what had to have been a stubborn wall of embarrassment, he begins giving birth to a new version of him. He begins putting one foot in front of the other to get back to being alive once more. “So if anyone is in Christ,” Paul states, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has been made new.”

Might there be some onlookers who would choose still to perceive him as a pathetic, flaky, unreliable, unstable failure coming home “with his tail between his legs?” Maybe. At times would there be the depressing sense that he was “back on square one;” and he’d have to fight off the temptation to beat up on himself for these last couple of years?” Probably. The road back might be a bit bumpy at points. Meanwhile, though, our Christian Gospel rings, sings, and calls to us human beings to claim the vision and muster the personal grace to recreate ourselves anytime we become stuck as was he.

Please then don’t, because of some habit of intransigence, or of keeping up appearances, or of those sick messages to ourselves to the effect that “it can’t work,” or “it’s too late,” or “I’m too old to change,” or “we’ve got too much invested,” or, most insipid of all, that “since everything happens for a reason this hog pen must be where you are supposed to be.” Hang on to this picture of this isolated, underfed, despairing, desolate son who there in the hog pen “came to himself” and came back to life.

With someone else, it would be admitting that he’s been seriously mistaken, for another: letting the embarrassing-but-saving-truth come out. It could entail joining Alcoholics Anonymous, or signing some awesome document, or the actual making of the appointment with the therapist or maybe seeing the attorney –“whatever.”

Just know, though, that your and my coming back to life from the “dead-ends,” is the clearest, most dynamic, most life-giving way in which we are touched, blessed, and nurtured by God. For heaven’s sake, when those times come, embrace them for dear life!!! That’s what’s at stake.