

“A Tale of Two Brothers” / Genesis 25:19-34 / 13 July 2014

It's kind of comic, this reading from Genesis. “I'm dying of hunger,” the older brother, Esau, declares to the younger. “What use is a birthright to me? What do I care about the ancient legal code that passes all of our father's possessions and titles on to me? That's decades away! My stomach is empty today. Just give me the lentil stew, and you can have my stupid inheritance!” Now, I'm a second son and a middle child, but if I ever stood to inherit anything—anything at all—and if I wished to trade that inheritance for something else, I'd drive a harder bargain than old Esau. I hope he enjoyed his pot of lentils. In the urgency of the moment, Esau traded his future happiness for short-lived gratification. Oh, Esau! What about tomorrow?

Long ago and faraway, in the mists of an earlier life, I sat at my desk and fretted over the finances of the private school, where I was an administrator. I remember the day well; it was oppressively hot and muggy, with the rainy season coming in. My office was patched together out of concrete and ornate polished wainscoting, like a main street bank. But instead of glass, there were sheets of fiberglass in the windows, like a New Delhi slum, and so in heat the room always had the sweet, rotting smell of a cabin cruiser. There was a knock on the door, and an unfamiliar student poked his head in. There were 800 students at that school, and it was a good sign if I didn't know one; it meant that that student stayed out of trouble and paid his or her fees. “May I speak with you, sir?” He was nervous and deferential; I felt an immediate kindness toward him. “Sir, I'd like to drop out of school,” he said. “I wonder if you could reimburse the money that I've already paid for second semester.”

Whatever kindness I felt toward the student began to evaporate. Money was in short supply at that school, and once a coin had already rung its jangling song of hope in our hollow coffers, I hated to reach in and give it back. But worse than that, this kid had just told me he was dropping out of high school. The student went on to explain. In two years he would graduate, but his family needed money now. His father had been missing for years and was presumed dead. He was the oldest boy, like Esau, and so the burden of providing for his mother and siblings fell to him. They'd hoped that he could finish school and get a good career as a civil servant. But it had become apparent that the family couldn't wait two years for a steady income. And so he'd joined the army. In a matter of days, he was going to a far corner of the country for boot camp, after which he would be deployed to the Nigerian border, where—unbeknownst to western journalists—the smell of war was always in the air, and for all I know it still is.

Nigeria! The ticking time bomb of west Africa! I happened to know that soldiers had hard lives in that part of the world. They stopped foreigners all the time, with alcohol on their breath, making up rules that you'd supposedly broken, making veiled threats in hopes of getting a bribe. Soldiers in that country, like most government employees, could go months without pay. They lived in cramped and squalid barracks where food was not provided, and when they weren't harassing innocent people at roadblocks, or dodging bullets on the Bakassi Peninsula, they were getting into drunken brawls with each other. Soldiers drank a kind of liquor made from the sap of palm trees, and it did some very strange and irreparable damage to many of them. You saw them wandering barefoot in the streets of large cities in their tattered combat fatigues, muttering to themselves. I told the boy as much, though

he was already aware. Then I had a secretary bring me his file, and we looked at his grades. He was a promising student. I told him that the military wasn't a good life for him, that he needed to hold on just two years more.

I practically begged him to stay. I insinuated vaguely that I might funnel some student aid his direction. All to no avail. His family's needs were immediate; they couldn't wait. And really, he was right: he could finish at the top of his class and still end up picking coffee beans for \$2 a day. Good jobs in the public sector were not awarded to the best and the brightest. You could only land a good job in that country if you knew the right people, or if you offered a handsome gift to the right person. It was the sad truth of that place.

Well, if you ever tried to save the world when you were young, then you learned the lesson sooner or later: You cannot save a person from himself. Not everyone wants the salvation that you offer. Not everyone wants your education, or your assistance programs, or your clean drinking water. You can't force people to make wise decisions for their future. It was probably a little bit manipulative on my part, and in retrospect, I regret it. But as soon as I refunded him the rest of his money for the semester—about \$60—I became formal with him. This time, I called him “sir” in order to underscore the fact that he was no longer our student. “Farewell, sir.” I said. “I wish you the best.” I meant to shock him by calling him “sir,” and it worked. I was angry at him for throwing away his potential and selling himself so short. But I'll never forget the way he hesitated in my doorway. He looked surprised, sad, torn. I immediately felt a rush of guilt for being such a jerk with him, but it was too late. I wanted to save them all, give them all a bright future, but he was gone—off the the border skirmishes, off to drunken knife fights, off to sordid roadblocks, reeking of palm liquor. I had lost one. He was off to what I was sure to be a premature death. I don't remember the boy's name, but it might as well have been Esau. Oh, Esau! What about tomorrow?

If the poignant moments of our lives live on forever—as I sometimes believe they do—if the moments of our lives belong not to time but to eternity, and they echo through infinity and repeat themselves evermore, world without end, then a part of me is still sitting in that airless room that smelled like some decaying yacht, and I am still watching the door close on one student's future, watching the door close on my illusion that I could save people from the systems in which they are caught, my illusion that I could save anyone from him or herself. In retrospect, I know that lofty ideals about education came easily to me. I could judge that student-turned-African-soldier because I was not hungry, and I did not understand real hunger.

Look at the believable characters in today's reading from Genesis. Good characterization is key to all great literature, and this story has it. Two brothers are complete opposites. They're twins in a time and place where the eldest son inherited everything as his so-called “birthright.” This story was meant in part to explain the kinship between the Hebrew people, children of Jacob, and their friendly neighbors to the south, the Edomites, who were believed to be descendants of Esau. I like Esau, the elder of the two boys. He reminds me of my own three brothers. He's straightforward and uncomplicated. He likes to hunt, to be outdoors, and he likes to eat. But Jacob, the younger twin—younger by just a hair—he's complex. The narrator depicts Jacob as “a quiet man who lives in tents.” Jacob is his mother's favorite, and he's home stirring a cooking pot while Esau is out stalking antelopes. The

Hebrew Scriptures have no superheroes. All the matriarchs and patriarchs are blemished, and Jacob is no exception. He knows his brother is shortsighted, that he lives for his stomach. And so when Esau asks for some of his lentil stew, perhaps on a whim, Jacob says, “If you give me your inheritance.” Esau accepts...because he's hungry.

Oh, Esau! What about tomorrow? Are we not the children of Esau, you and I? I'm not talking about how some of us aim too low in life. I'm not talking about how some of us settle for less than we should. No, I'm talking about how we, all of us, participate in big systems that trade tomorrow's bounty for a potful of lentils today. My student long ago traded a potentially bright future for a chance to make some money because, he said, he and his family were hungry. That's the case for so many people in our world who must throw their lives into mere survival, and so never blossom into all they might have been. Esau, too, claimed that he was hungry—albeit less convincingly. But you and me, are we hungry, really hungry?

At the Heinz History Center, in the Strip, they run continuous footage of a grainy old ketchup ad that was on TV back in 1987, the year I graduated high school. A kid (the actor who later goes on to play Joey Tribbiani, on “Friends”) puts an open ketchup bottle on the windowsill so that it will drip out into the street. He runs down three flights of stairs and buys a hotdog from a vendor. Just in time, a stream of ketchup starts flowing from the bottle high above, and he passes the hotdog under it. The moral of the ad—if ads have morals—is “Heinz: the best things come to those who wait.” Now, my laziest, most impatient self is glad for the plastic, squeezable ketchup bottles that we have today. I remember the old glass bottles, and they were bothersome. But in the long-term scheme of things, in the larger life of the world, I'm pretty sure the glass bottle was the wiser choice. Glass is not made of oil byproducts, and it eventually disintegrates back into sand. If it's not recycled, the plastic bottle can last 500 years. But in 2014, our TV ads don't dare to wax philosophical about patience. Patience is for people who are attuned to the beauties of subtlety, nuance, quality. We value convenience, perhaps above all else. And it's not just ketchup bottles. We get our news from clever media soundbites, and with these quick doses of highly edited information, we form our opinions and cast our votes, ignoring the real depth of issues on whose surfaces we skate. Loopholes, shortcuts, saving money, saving time, building the economy at the expense of the planet. Oh, Esau! What about tomorrow?

Ah, patience! It's the quality you appreciate in the driver behind you but deplore in the driver ahead of you. And yet, in this big traffic jam of the generations, we are—all of us—behind someone and in front of someone else. If we're truly grateful for the sacrifices of generations past, the generosity that handed down to us our knowledge, and our infrastructures, and our social and political systems, then wouldn't we invest just as selflessly into the world of tomorrow? Perhaps the truly hungry cannot afford to be patient. As many as 60,000 of the world's next generation—children—are marching toward our southern borders from Central America. We who are not hungry cannot understand or judge, but we can be compassionate. Let us not be lulled into complacency by the broken values of a throwaway culture. Let us not trade tomorrow's riches for a potful of lentils today. What does it mean to take the long view of things today, to live not for the quick fixes and easy answers of our age, nor for immediate gratification, but to patiently plant orchards that we know right well we will never eat from. In your relationships, in your physical and emotional health, in all the decisions you make, “What about tomorrow? What about tomorrow?” Amen.