

Chapel Words (October 3, 2009) “Falling into Holes”—Jim Holland

At this point in the year, many of the Grade 12s are already beginning to apply for university. One of the things they are often required to provide is a short autobiography.

The shortest autobiography I have ever read is one by Portia Nelson. It goes like this:

Chapter One

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.

Chapter Two

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place
but, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter Three

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
my eyes are open
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter Four

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter Five

I walk down another street.

There are good holes and not-so-good holes. There are holes that we dig to find treasure, and there are holes that represent our faults and failings. There are holes that can either trip us up, or swallow us whole; holes that appear on our path when we least expect them.

Sometimes life seems full of these holes, especially at the beginning of the year, when we are trying to start out fresh; to do things differently. We set off with new resolve, and the next thing we know, there we are in one of our old familiar holes.

Holes are uncomfortable places. We don't like to acknowledge the things about ourselves that are less than perfect. We don't like to pay attention to the fault that is in us. And so we often pretend that we aren't in a hole at all. The result, of course, is that when we come across the same hole again we fall right in . . . again.

Holes are opportunities for learning about two things in particular: awareness (that is, self-awareness), and responsibility. As long as we continue to find someone else to blame for our missteps, then we will remain unaware.

When we develop awareness of ourselves and are willing to be responsible for ourselves and for our actions and conduct, then and only then, can we begin to learn from our mistakes; and our mistakes are our greatest, most effective, teachers.

When we develop this level of awareness not only do we begin to avoid the holes in our path, but we begin to realize that we don't need to take the same path that we have been taking; we can begin to tread new paths. Only guess what? The new paths are going to have new holes. Because there is always something new to learn about ourselves and about life. We know we have gotten somewhere when we stop refusing to see the holes, and when we begin to see the holes as helpful signals to us of what we can change to become better.

The ultimate question, and one that takes a life-time to answer, is this: who dug these holes anyway? Who is it that is putting these obstacles in our way? The answer is stated very well by that wise and clever author of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, who writes: "The person who digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling." The person who has a very highly developed sense of self realizes that the majority of holes we encounter are ones which we dug ourselves. The thing about holes is that we all seem to dig and fall into the same ones.

We all know what it is to say stupid things; we all know what it is to make selfish choices; we all know what it is to try to take the easy way out; we all know what it is to give into the big sins: lust, greed, sloth, self-centeredness, etc.

And so we all should be patient with one another; we all should be able to assist one another in crawling out of the holes in which we find ourselves. Self-awareness is not something we develop all by ourselves. In fact, of all human tasks, developing self-awareness is one that we simply cannot do by ourselves.

On the show, "West Wing," there is a scene in which the character of Leo, the White House Chief of Staff, tells a story to his Deputy, Josh Lyman:

"This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out.

"A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, 'Hey you. Can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

"Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up, 'Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

"Then a friend walks by, 'Hey, Joe, it's me, can you help me out?' And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' The friend says, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.'"