



Two Cups of Coffee

There is a story I love about a teacher who told showed his class a great truth with a jar full of golf balls, pebbles, sand and coffee. Here's how it goes:

A professor stood before his philosophy class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, wordlessly, he picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous "yes".

The professor then produced two cups of coffee from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar, effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed.

"Now," said the professor, as the laughter subsided, "I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are the important things in life -your God, your family, your children, your health, your friends, and your favorite passions: things that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. . . the pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house, and your car. The sand is everything else: the small stuff.

"If you put the sand into the jar first," he continued, "there is no room for the pebbles or the golf balls. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are important to you. Pay attention

to the things that are critical to your happiness. Play with your children. Take time to get medical checkups. Take your partner out to dinner. Play another 18 holes. There will always be time to clean house and fix the disposal. Take care of the golf balls first; the things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.

One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the coffee represented. The professor smiled. "I'm glad you asked. It just goes to show you that no matter *how* full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple of cups of coffee with a friend."

(This version harvested from Mary Lynn Plaisance, at <http://www.authorsden.com/visit/viewshortstory.asp?id=17493>)

That professor knew what he was talking about. The "holiday season" is upon us. Whether that means Thanksgiving and Christmas or Chanukah or Kwanzaa or Solstice or any or all of them, it is easy to get crazy and focus on the small stuff. Family traditions come into play and lots of emotion swirls around what's on the table. Cranberry sauce or not? Canned or homemade? One of those fruit Jello salads or lime Jello with nuts and celery or plain Jello or no Jello? White meat or dark? How do we cope with the vegetarian niece? Or the nephew who's allergic to wheat? In interfaith households, it can get even crazier with Christmas smack in the middle of Chanukah. Can we *serve* the Christmas Eve ham on the fourth night of Chanukah?

But, the truth is that none of that really matters. Those concerns are all symptomatic of something much deeper. It is our need to belong and to feel safe. Tradition is comforting because it implies that some things never change. No matter how unstable we feel, no matter how crazy life gets, tradition says that we are safe. Our traditions, with their comfortable fit like an old shoe, tell us that we belong – in our family, in our clan. This is true whether you expect to see tamales alongside the turkey, scalloped potatoes with the ham, or tofu surprise with the yam bake. It's not so much about the food on the table as the warmth in our hearts.

The warmth in our hearts comes from knowing that we are loved, we belong in our family or our group of friends; that we matter. And that others matter to us. It is important for all of us to have this reminder at this time of year. The focus so easily slips from the golf balls of love, belonging and safety to the sand of specific foods or gifts that must be bought.

I have less money to spend this year than I would like. But, I have more time. So, each of my five grandkids will receive a handmade gift. I can't buy them the video games or DVDs or fancy gadgets they want, which I would take great joy in providing. But, I can spend time creating something for each of them. And I

can think about and pray for the recipient as I make each item. When they open their gifts, they may regret that I haven't gotten the pricey whatever that they wanted. But, that regret will fade as they realize what they have received and try out the gift. They are still young and have not yet learned to count the price as the value of a gift.

I have agreed with many of the adults in my life to not exchange gifts. And I will be donating time, or services to charity in the names of others. Again, I haven't provided the pricey whatever, but I will have spent time doing something they would like to see done. I will give to their causes in their names. And they'll get little "in your honor" cards for Christmas.

Now, this makes for a busy holiday season as well. And I could get really crazy focusing on the gifts I'm making or the schedule of the donated time/services. I hope that I'll remember that the most important part of this season is the people I love. And I hope that I'll make the time for a couple of cups of coffee with a friend.

Peace and joy to you this holiday season.