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GOLDEN CALVES

"Where there is no vision, the people perish:" (Proverbs 29:18)

A visionary is a person who has a vision, is able to communicate it and lead others towards it. A visionary leader is willing to sacrifice much to attain a goal and is also capable of inspiring others, often asking much of them.

Many of us heard that Steve Jobs died last Wednesday. Jobs was the truly visionary leader of Apple, Inc. He led the world, especially the younger and urban world, into the new land of digital community. His influence was huge and the products he helped create are ubiquitous. One eulogist wrote that it is impossible to walk 100' in any a modern city without bumping into someone with an Apple product, be it an iPad (29 million), an iPod (315 million) and iPhone (129) million or a Mac Computer (113 Million). I switched to a MacBook about 4 years ago and was immediately taken by its creative playfulness and smooth looks. It is not only user-friendly, it is user-pleasing.

As a visionary, Jobs understood that leadership meant anticipating what people needed or wanted before they knew it themselves. *"It is not the consumers' job to know what they want."* He was an innovative risk-taker who relied heavily upon intuition and could be tyrannical in getting to where he wanted to go. Steve was not perfect.

But he had many followers and fans. To some he was a dynamic father figure. Admirers and employees of Apple around the world are mourning his loss. One of the most touching tributes at the spontaneous memorial sites are real apples (mackintosh?) with bites taken out of them.

Many of these same mourners are anxious about what or who will come next. Grief is compounded by fear. Who will lead us now? Where has our "father" gone? How will we continue what Steve began? Will the disciples be able to replicate the master? Movements founded by great visionaries have always struggled with questions of succession and continuity.

When Moses stayed up on Mount Sinai his people grew anxious. As you may recall, this long-suffering and "stiff-necked" people, had not shown much patience in the wilderness journey. Moses was their leader and the father whom they co-dependently followed and railed against. Moses was a visionary who saw the Promised Land, and struggled heroically to prod the Hebrew people to move towards the unseen goal. When Moses went missing, what did they do?

Exodus 20 says, *“When the people see that Moses delayed to come down from the Mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’”*

There are times in a story when you can sense that things are about to go from bad to worse. This is one of those turning points. The “people” feel abandoned by Moses. They are quick to dismiss him, his vision and God’s good promises made to their ancestors. This is what acute anxiety and pain can do. They want a quick fix for their discontent. They have forgotten God’s care for them and the commandments God gave them to help them stay on track. In particular, they have forgotten the commandments that prohibit idolatry, which leave no doubt about God’s intentions.

“You shall have no other god to set against me. You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous god. I punish the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I keep faith with thousands, with those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Any questions? You may not like the jealous and tyrannical representation of the deity in this story. But this section of the 10 commandments is at least very clear about the problem and danger of idolatry. It may not be so far-fetched. The problems of the grandfather or great-grandmother, the wrong turns, the idols of wealth, power or fame, the curse of addiction, violence or abuse may be felt by the grand or great grandchildren 3-4 generations later. Unintended consequences (good or bad) often reach far beyond the time of the action taken. The divine threat here may be taken as a description of the way things often actually work out in life, an existential reality.

After he hears the fearful complaints of the people, Moses’ brother, Aaron, does not hesitate to give them what they want, new gods to go before them. He asks the people to give over their gold rings and bring them to him. Let’s think about what he is asking of them and how they comply. As former slaves, one would imagine that the people did not have much wealth. What they possessed in riches (read annuity, life insurance policy, etc) might have been limited to the gold in those rings. They must have been quite anxious indeed to separate from this little bit of security. Were they generous or reckless? Both? In order to escape great peril, people will part with their gold or integrity. What is the “gold” that we would part with *only* if our lives were in danger? Most of us have idols that weigh us down and hinder progress in our spiritual journey.

Aaron took their gold, melted it down and cast an image of a calf. A new god was born, one that could be seen, touched, easily worshipped up close and carried from place to place. The golden calf was unlike Yahweh who was invisible and situated inaccessibly on a high mountain peak. Perhaps their shared sacrifice brought them together.

Only Moses could talk with Yahweh. No wonder they felt left out. The golden calf was accessible and definitely no party-pooper. Aaron proclaimed the next day a holiday. They rose early, “offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being”. “And the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.”

Who could blame them for preferring the golden calf-deity who issued no rules or commandments and who seemed to encourage a good time? The people forgot about their anxiety, stopped worrying about the whereabouts of Moses and did not think much at all about the God who had delivered them from slavery. How quickly we forget our benefactors. Yahweh had asked a lot of them with those commandments. No one likes a demanding absentee deity. Perhaps this God should come off the mountaintop with Moses and mingle with the people. That will happen but it will take a while, a long while.

The fear, confusion and desire to find a quick fix for pain is something we can relate to and perhaps forgive the people for their wrong-headedness. We have been there. We do not easily accept suffering in this life, be it mental duress, emotional wounding or physical hardship. We don't like it and will try many things to get rid of it. Isn't that what the golden calf and the problem of idolatry are about? We almost instinctually give up what is precious to us, our inner gold, and create something or use someone to distract us from pain. The obvious distractions are the misuses of alcohol, drugs and sex. But the harder ones are the fixed ideas we hold about people, political parties, family alliances, religious factions, social position, etc. Ideas and opinions that are fixed give the semblance of something durable and reliable, something to hold onto when we feel threatened or shaky. I suspect we all have our “golden calves.”

The opening quote from Proverbs was only half of the verse. Another translation goes, *“Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained. But happy is the one who keeps the law.”* What is the “law” that if kept would bring us happiness? Does it lie in the wisdom of the commandment, *“Thou shalt love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all soul, with all your strength and with all your mind?”*

Like the Hebrew people in the wilderness, we wander and stray much of the time. We look for solid ground where there often is none. We look to leaders for answers while forgetting to look for the strength, the divine image and wisdom inside each of us. Part of the crisis of the people in today's story is that their god is distant and they prefer it that way. How can they love their god

wholeheartedly if they are so dependent? Why does it not occur to them to march up the mountain themselves and find out who and what this god is all about? What would happen if they were to make the inward spiritual journey to seek god within? What if the way to that divine spirit meant recognizing and going *through* the pain, accepting the suffering inherent in life?

At his now famous 2005 commencement speech at Stanford, Steve Jobs told the graduating class, *“Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your own heart and intuition.”*

The inward journey does not end in narcissistic self-satisfaction but in joyful readiness to engage with compassion the suffering world.

Another visionary leader, the one we try to understand and follow, said that the kingdom of God is at hand; it is very near, it lies within you. Seek that kingdom first and the rest will fall into place.

Think differently and imagine that you cannot walk anywhere more than 100 feet, or even 10 feet, without bumping into the kingdom of God.