

Brother Nivard and the Fudge Factory

Bill Pickett

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Br. Nivard is sixty-eight years old and in his fifty-first year in the [Abbey of Gethsemani](#) in Kentucky. He is a fine monk: hospitable to all, holy, and conscientious about his work. He worked for twenty years packing cheese and then another twenty or so in the kitchen. For the past several years, he has been working with Br. Rene' and Br. Harold making, packing, and shipping fudge. These three along with occasional helpers make more than 27,000 pounds of fudge a year. They do this by working four hours every morning six days a week, fifty two weeks a year. Recently they have had to go to double shifts a couple of days a week to keep up with demand. The profits from the fudge along with those from the much larger cheese and fruitcake businesses support the monastery. In fact, the monks have money left over each year that they distribute to the poor and needy in the local area. This is the Cistercian tradition.

Br. Nivard does not make the fudge but rather packs and ships the finished product. In the outside world, they would mechanize much of his work. Here, the monks value repetitive, manual labor. So they arrange the plastic trays that hold twenty pieces of fudge on large trays by hand. The finished trays are placed in plastic bags by hand. The bags are sealed by hand and placed two at a time in boxes that have been hand assembled. These boxes are then shrink wrapped and placed

in the larger shipping cartons. Br. Nivard then date codes each box and carefully enters production information in a spiral notebook. All this activity takes place in a large work room (approximately twenty by thirty feet) next to the smaller room in which Br. Rene' and Br. Harold make the batches of fudge.

During my second week in the monastery, I began to work in what I called the "fudge factory." The first day I made boxes. Over the remaining three weeks, I made a lot of boxes. These were small--perhaps 5x7x2--gold foil cardboard boxes that came to us flat with appropriate die cuts. Tabs were bent on the scored lines and a box materialized along with an open flap top. We would stack the boxes ten high inside each other and then store them with the hundreds of previously made boxes. Each morning we began by placing the completed trays of fudge into plastic baggies. Then we placed two baggies in a box along with a card telling the story of the monastery's fudge--"a recipe given to the monks by an old Kentucky family." We stacked the filled boxes five high. After we had boxed all the fudge, we carefully wiped off any fingerprints or fudge smudges, closed the lids, and carefully inserted the side tabs into the body of the box. When all this was done, we would have a table full of gold boxes, five high, ready to be wrapped. We would roll the table over to the shrink wrapping machine. This was the only mechanical device

used in our part of the operation. In the actual fudge making, Br. Rene' assisted by Br. Harold used a converted paint mixer to mix up their fudge concoction. otherwise, everything in their "production" room was done manually as well.

I was fortunate that they had invested in a shrink wrapping machine in the past year. I learned that until then they had used a hair dryer to warm and shrink the plastic wrap around the boxes, a process that took most of a day. Even so, my role in the shrink wrapping process was highly routine. With my right hand I would grab a box from the stacks of five on the table at my side and place it on marks on a wire grill that covered the heating elements. With my left hand, I would close the lid--the whole contraption looked like a stripped down gas barbecue grill--which would turn on the heating element. I would watch the wrapping shrink and then would release the spring loaded lid. Br. Nivard would then take the wrapped box and place it in the shipping carton while I was moving back to the right to place another box in the machine. After a morning of doing this, I developed a rhythmic motion. A highly repetitious physical motion allows one to begin to think less and less about the act and thus frees the mind for reflection and thought. This is why so much of the work of the monastery is manual. The more repetitious the better; it is good monks' work.

One morning, we had finished packaging the fudge and were about to begin shrink wrapping. There were almost twice as many boxes as the

day before because Br. Rene' and Br. Harold had made fudge the previous afternoon and thus we had two batches to wrap and pack. Br. Nivard looked at the clock on the wall and said that we should be done in 30 to 45 minutes, longer than it would normally take. I picked up the first box, placed it on the grate and closed the lid. I watched the wrapper shrink and then released the lid as I reached for another box. As I began the process, I wanted to go as quickly and as efficiently as I could. I felt welling up within me the desire to be competitive, to exceed Br. Nivard's expectations. I wanted him to say to me, "Bill, you are the best shrink wrapper we have ever had. I am amazed at how quickly you caught onto this." As I went through the rhythmic motions of shrink wrapping, I was fantasizing about the conversation I hoped Br. Nivard would have with me. I wanted to hear him say my name and to tell me how well I was doing this shrink wrapping.

I began to be more conscious of what I was doing. I tried not to waste any time between his removal of a completed package and my placing a new one on the grill and thus beginning the process again. I wanted to beat his time estimate so that he would be amazed and thus would have to value me more highly. Suddenly, Br. Nivard started taking the wrapping off a box and placed it back on the table for me to do again. He told me that the seal had failed and that we would have to seal it again. Then another failed and another! He adjusted a dial and said that sometimes it got too hot and we

have to turn it down a bit. Eventually the process settled down but I realized that I had lost whatever opportunity I had to beat his time estimate. I continued to work quickly and to watch the process even more closely to prevent any additional failures that would slow us down and would be evidence of my lack of skill as a shrink wrapper.

Suddenly, I brought myself up short. "My skill as a shrink wrapper?" What was going on here? There is practically no skill involved at all. This is a simple process. In fact, all the work I was doing in the "fudge factory" would be done in a sheltered workshop or by machines in the world outside the monastery. I was trying to earn the regard and acceptance of Br. Nivard through my shrink wrapping productivity. Whether or not I am a good shrink wrapper is and should be unimportant; it is a trivial process. Yet, I had invested my self regard and self image in this trivial, meaningless task. I truly longed to hear Br. Nivard using my name as he told me that I was the best shrink wrapper he had ever seen.

Fortunately Br. Nivard did not say anything. I am not sure why but probably because it was not something that needed to be said. How often have I said positive, affirming things to people because I know it will have a positive impact on them? Honestly I never thought of it as reinforcing a dynamic that was problematic. That's what would have happened if Br. Nivard had said something to me. Thank God he didn't.

Because of the innocuousness of this event, I learned something very important about myself and about human nature that a more important event would have obscured. On reflection I realized often I had fantasized about other people telling me I had done a good job. Convincing myself of the importance and validity of this feeling was easy for me because the jobs themselves were important. I served as the president of a college for ten years. What I did or did not do and how well I did certain things had a direct impact on the professional and personal lives of students, faculty, and staff. That I did my job well was important. I could even build a case for the importance of other people noticing how well I did my job. With the shrink wrapping, however, the unimportance of the task brought me face to face with a disturbing fact. I based my self image on what others thought of what I did and how well I did it. Through meditation on this shrink wrapping incident, I came to realize that who I was had little to do with what I did and even less with how well I did it.

I learned this lesson again in the "fudge factory." Another morning as I was shrink wrapping, I noticed that Br. Nivard was inspecting each box as he removed it from the machine. I was habitually watching this out of the corner of my eye. I was waiting to see if something was wrong with the packaging so he would have to unwrap it and give it back to me. I wondered why I was noticing this. After all, his job was to make sure that the shrink wrap was intact and then pack the box in the shipping

carton. He was not "checking up" on me; he was just doing his job. I, on the other hand, was viewing this as a judgment on me and my ability. Once I realized this, I consciously stopped watching him and just went about the shrink wrapping. Some wraps would not be acceptable; so what? I was doing my best. More important, his judgments were not about me as a person; they were about the shrink wrapping. In fact, he quite clearly made a distinction between who I was and what or how well I did anything. He focused on the quality of the shrink wrap seam. If it were not up to standard, we needed to do it again. It was never a question of whether we were "up to standard."

I learned even deeper lessons from these and a few other, equally simple incidents. These were simple but powerful lessons about my view of reality and how I related to other people. Some took place in the "fudge factory" but two others took place in the choir loft.

One night in my third of four weeks, a very attractive, young woman showed up among the retreatants. We were in the choir loft where the retreatants gathered to participate in the community prayers with the monks. I was a couple of rows behind her and had watched her as she walked in. She was slim with blond hair. She was the kind of woman who generates activity in my fantasy life. I observed her in way different from the way I had the other retreatants. I checked to see if she were wearing a wedding ring.

I noticed her again the next morning at Vigils that began at 3:15 a.m. Her long hair was not styled as the night before but combed out and flowing. I looked at her a couple of times and felt the urge to engage in some sexual fantasies. I also had the glimmer of a thought that perhaps I was not well suited to celibacy after all. My need for affection was at work again. I was projecting, or beginning to project my needs, on this woman. I had always considered fantasies harmless enough as long as my behavior was appropriate and ethical. I recall Jimmy Carter's statement that he had committed adultery in his heart. Who hadn't, I thought at the time? As long as I or Jimmy had not acted on those fantasies, there was no harm. What I hadn't realized until now was that the fantasies kept me from experiencing a woman as she is in her own reality. I experienced her as an object of my fantasies that were based on my needs, desires, and issues. This woman, any woman, exists independent of my needs and fantasies.

A couple of days later, she was in the choir loft again. She was in the front row and I got there later than she and sat down a couple of rows behind her. My mind roamed into the beginnings of fantasies. I stopped and tried to understand what was happening and what I was feeling. I realized that there is much old, habitual behavior here. I had become more conscious of my basic interior dynamics. I was more aware of my fantasizing and I knew it was not based on reality. As with other behaviors, I think I just needed to

face this head on and realize that I do not need to do that any more. It is not a question of exerting will power to force myself not to fantasize. If I can distinguish between reality and a fantasy, I realize that a fantasy doesn't give me what I want; in fact, it cannot possibly meet any need I have since it is, by definition, a fantasy. Further, I realized that the neurotic needs from which fantasies flowed in the past either did not exist or were so weak that they need not control my behavior. For all I knew, this young woman was oblivious to my presence. If she noticed me at all, she saw an older man with long hair and an ear ring trying to be spiritual. If I were to see her as a child of God, as one of God's works of art as Paul writes, I would see her as she really is and not as some dim reflection of my need for acceptance.

It was my last full day at the monastery. I was working in the fudge factory and reflecting on the way I seem to continuously think about what other people think about me. Br. René came into our room and asked Br. Nivard to bring back a "712" from the storage room. A "712" is a case of twelve of the one pound boxes. I immediately thought, he is going to give it to me as a going away present. What will I say? Will I explain that I have taken this work into account in what I am contributing for my retreat? How will I distribute the fudge? On and on. I realized what I was doing at the time, but every time he came into our room or did something out of the ordinary, I saw it as related to something for my last day.

Realistically, I knew that it would not be characteristic of the monks to take much notice. After all, when they got word of Thomas Merton's death, they completed dinner, and then continued with their daily work as before. Why would they respond in some extravagant way to my being here for three weeks packing fudge? Even though I knew this, I continued to have this kind of thoughts bubble up inside me. When I got back from break, Br. Nivard gave me a pound box "compliments of the Abbey of Gethsemani," as he said. Exactly right. Why do I think so much about what other people may be thinking, saying, or planning about me? In fact, they do very little of any of that because their lives are filled with, well, with their own lives.

Later that same day, I was returning to my room in one of the monastery wings. To reach my room, I had to go through the choir loft. As I came upstairs, a couple was entering the choir loft just ahead of me. It was clear to me that they were visitors because of the hesitant way they acted. As I entered the choir, they were standing to one side whispering to each other. I moved across an open space toward the door that led to the monastic wing. I was aware that there was a sign--"Please Do Not Enter"--and that my entering it would indicate to them that I had some special status. They would likely conclude that I was a member of the monastic community. And so, what did I do? I stopped midway and bowed to the main altar. This is something that I usually did when passing this way. I considered whether or not I should do it this time

because it would indicate something to these visitors. I could easily have not done it and simply continued on through the door and to my room. Or I could have bowed and continued on without thinking about the visitors.

What I did do was bow and enter the door, speculating about what they were saying to each other about me. Even while I was doing it, even while I was deciding to do it, I was aware of the dynamic and I did it anyway. This is a clear example of Paul's statement that the good that I will, I do not do and the evil I do not want, that I do. Now this little act was not evil as such but it arose from a dynamic of illusions. My illusions about myself and about my importance to others is the spawning ground of acts and thoughts that are evil.

In the quiet and solitude of the monastery, these simple, almost trivial experiences taught me much about love. The constant theme running through all these vignettes is narcissism. Even in these little experiences, I was experiencing reality including other people as though their only validity was in relationship to me. Br. Nivard, Br. Rene', the young woman, the visiting couple entered my consciousness not as independent beings but as beings whose importance lay in their relationship to me. Br. Nivard was important because he could validate my effectiveness and productivity. Br. Rene' was important because he could validate the general regard in which others held me. The young woman was important because she could validate my loveliness. The

visiting couple was important only because of what they might be thinking about me and my "holiness."

As I reflected on these interactions, I realized that many, if not most, of my relationships with other people were infected with this virus of narcissism. Further, to the extent that a relationship was so infected, it was not a true relationship but rather a projection of my own needs and issues onto the other person. The strength of the feelings was not the issue. I could feel strongly attracted to another person especially a woman but that attraction was based on illusions rather than the reality of the other person. I learned that fantasies were an indication of this narcissistic dynamic.

To fantasize is not to preview, not to plan but rather to enter a world of unreality and illusions. In a fantasy we create situations, behaviors, and relationships that we wish were true and are not. Fantasies do not lead to overt actions to change the reality with which we deal but rather take us away from that reality into a world of self absorption and denial. A fantasy is the only way to create a world in which we cannot be hurt but being truly happy and joyful is also impossible. It is in reality that we can be fully ourselves, feeling deeply both pain and joy but knowing all the while that we are fully alive and that those with whom we deal are real. To the extent we have internal issues of self acceptance, self image, self esteem, we tend to seek a solution or resolution of these issues in our relationships with others. By definition another cannot

resolve an internal issue of self esteem and self image. Further to the extent that another person is fighting his or her own battle with such issues, his or her relationship with us will be similarly infected. The result can be a powerful and often lasting relationship that never finds its way out of fantasy and illusion into the light of reality.

To love someone is to see myself and the other person as we really are and to respect the dignity, autonomy, and sacredness of the other person as other. This is true of all human relationships but it is especially important in intimate relationships: between lovers and between parent and child. These are powerful relationships because they are intimate and thus can have powerful impacts on how we feel about ourselves not just about the other person. I can live out my fantasies and illusions through the lives of my children and through a relationship with a lover. The tragedy of this all too common circumstance is that I never really know my children or my lover. They exist in my consciousness as twisted images of my self and my needs and desires. If I have authority and power over them, my illusions can harm them all the while I am claiming that I love them and am only doing what is best for them.

No amount of behavioral advice, no number of books on how to love a child or a lover, no talk show, no "how to" video tape will make a difference until we can give up our illusions. Until we can experience people as truly and fully other, we

cannot love them intimately. Intimate love involves a distance at its very core, a distance born of respect for the sacredness and autonomy of the other. It is only then that our life and our relationships with those we love become filled with personal acts instead of behaviors driven by illusions and needs. It is only when we can honestly say to someone, "I love you and I release you of any obligation to love me," that we can truly love another.