The Three Wishes by Douglas harding

The three wishes
You get what you want, because you want what you get

Once upon a time there was a poor woodsman who lived with his wife in the forest. One day, when he was cutting logs by a stream, he was startled to hear someone crying, and even more startled to find it was a fairy sitting on the bank of the stream bemoaning the fact that he couldn't get across. Lifting him onto his shoulder, the woodsman waded the stream and set the little fellow down gently on the other bank. 'As a reward for your kindness,' said the fairy, 'I grant you three wishes.' That evening, over their humble meal, the woodsman told his wife about the fairy and the three wishes, and they discussed at length what boons to ask for. 'While we're making up our minds,' said the woodsman, 'I certainly could do with a sausage to go with this dry bread.' And immediately a fine sausage landed on the table. His wife, furious at him for wasting a wish on something so trivial instead of a sack of gold, couldn't help blurting out, 'You stupid old man! You deserve to have this miserable sausage growing at the end of your miserable nose!' And at once there it was, dangling from the poor man's nose. Well, after further argument and mutual recrimination, they agreed that their third and last wish must be to get rid of the sausage and restore the situation to normal. And so it happened. The three wishes were indeed granted as the good fairy had promised, yet in the end they left everything unchanged. The man and his wife got what they finally decided on, which left the normal routine of their simple lives unchanged. But with this difference: it was their choice.

What a waste opportunity! Or was it? Was all lost by that foolish couple? Or could there have been more to that third wish than just repairing a desperate situation? Was it, after all, and in spite of their silliness, the wisest and most rewarding wish they could have made, the true sack of gold? The one we all need to make, as well the one we are all granted?

Various lessons can be learned from this well-known folktale. The one offered here is as follows. We are indeed granted three wishes. The first and overt one is that we get something we consciously want. The second and hidden wish is that, along with that something, we get the shadow side of it without which it's a mere
phantom—it's negative side or antithesis—which we don't consciously want. Far from it! The third and even more hidden wish is that we get all of the things—both 'good' and 'bad'—everything that happens to us, much of which our surface mind vaguely resents and some of which it hates and fears. Evidently this third and last wish is the only one that is always granted in full.

And not at all, evidently, is it—whether or not we ever get round to admitting it—the one that is our deepest desire. The truth is that we have already chosen that our world shall be exactly as it is at this moment, but are unaware of having made this momentous choice. We repress it, and the symptoms of repression afflict us. We disclaim responsibility and wash our hands of the whole tragico-comic affair—and pay the heavy price. And so it comes about that our true life's work and our healing is to end that repression, raising to consciousness our heartfelt acceptance of the world just as it impinges on us. That, in brief, is our interpretation of the story of the woodsman's three wishes.

The masters of the spiritual life are in agreement. 'God is telling you,' says Jean-Pierre de Caussade, 'that if you abandon all restraint, carry your wishes to their furthest limits, open your heart boundlessly, there is not a single moment when you will not find all you could possibly desire. The present moment holds infinite riches beyond your wildest dreams.'

On the face of it, this is extravagant talk, wish-fulfilling nonsense that's far too good to be true. Such wild optimism, apparently so contrary to common sense and to our experience of life itself, certainly isn't to be taken blindly on trust. It demands rigorous testing and proof, if it's to be credited at all. And most of us, floundering—if not yet drowning—in a raging sea of disappointments and frustrations, are going to take a lot of convincing.

In the rest of this chapter, I want to put to you some reasons for concluding that, amazingly, de Caussade was altogether right to claim that, when we let ourselves go (repeat, when we let ourselves go) and push our wishes beyond our surface consciousness to their as-yet-unconscious limit, we shall find them at once perfectly fulfilled. That, in fact, the reason that we don't get what we want is
that we don't want enough; that our demands, like those of the woodsman and his wife, are infinitely too modest.

Only get your Identity right, and the rest comes right. Whatever your problem, the only real answer to it is to see whose problem it is. The answer to the problem of your will — of what you want and how to get it — is no exception. Who is the one that demands this and refuses that? Who is this one really and truly? Solve that riddle and you have solved the riddle of what you really wish for, and how to be really sure of getting it.

Put it like this: you have two identities, one apparent and provisional and the other real and for good. In appearance, as you are seen by other people (looking at you from a distance) you certainly are a something — something shaped, confined within distinct boundaries, perfectly opaque, multicolored, local and not all over the place, hugely complex, moving around, going for this and avoiding that, and moreover just one of countless similarly limited and very choosy creatures. But in reality, as you see yourself (looking at yourself from no distance) you are...? Well, why not just look and see, right now? Isn't it a fact — an amazing and crucial fact — that in your own present experience you are the very opposite of how you strike others, and of how you struck yourself before you got around to looking for yourself? That instead of being a thing among things you are Space for things — including, just now, these printed words, this page, the hands holding the book, and their fuzzy background? Only you are in a position to answer the all-important question of what's your side of the scene, of whatever's occurring to you. If, in all honesty, you perceive yourself to be a something here confronting a lot of somethings there, why of course you should stick to your view: you are the sole authority on your experience of you. Only, in that case, I suggest you take a short break from reading, and devote it to re-examining the spot you occupy, just in case you discover that, after all, it's occupied by others and not by you at all!

But if you do indeed find that you are No-thing where you are, if you agree that you are Space, Accommodation for whatever you happen to be occupied with, why then the problem of your will — of getting your own way — is solved. In reality you have no will, seeing that Space has no needs and makes no demands. As Space you are self-sufficient, whereas none of the bodies, of the visible bits and
pieces of your own body, none of the limited objects coming and going in your Space is self-sufficient. Their needs are insatiable; they must continually pursue what makes for their survival and resist what makes for their destruction. All this purposive behavior of course characterizes you also as the limited object you appear to be when looked at from outside, but never you as the unlimited Subject you really are when looked at from inside. As Capacity for objects you the Subject are freed from them all, forever the same, unstainable, invulnerable. Obviously this self-aware Emptiness which you now clearly perceive yourself to be doesn't prefer some of its contents to others. It has no favorites, no preferences, no opinions, no plots or plans, no comments at all to make. Like a mirror it accepts dirty things as readily as clean ones, ugly things as uncritically as beautiful ones, tragic things as coolly as joyfull ones, and none of them leaves any trace. As your true Self you have no likes or dislikes, which in practice is only another way of saying that in the last resort all happens to your liking. Inevitably so, seeing that Who you are is responsible for what is. There's a paradox here, of course: one which Angelus Silesius noted when he wrote, 'We pray Thy will be done. But He has no will. He is Stillness alone.' As Him you have it both ways. You get what you want because you want what you get. Truly there's no other will than yours — you Who are without will!

It may well seem to you that we have now left behind the firm ground of direct and indubitable experience and taken off into the nebulous realm of pious speculation. In what follows I hope to show that, on the contrary, it all makes good sense.

Let's look more carefully into the question of how many wills there really are. Consider the human body. It's made up of billions of creatures called cells, each of which is born and flourishes and dies independently of the life of the body as a whole. Each competes with the others for the available nourishment, each follows unswervingly its characteristic behavior pattern, each strives for its own survival regardless of the others. And the end result of all this unbridled individualism? Wonder of wonders, in spite of themselves these myriads of separate lives add up to a single life of a higher order — that of the whole man. When he walks and talks and mind his own business, it's thanks to his horde of subordinates (cells compromising his vocal chords, tongue, lips, leg muscles, etcetera), each minding its own business, which is nothing like his. Nor does
this magical process of will-transmutation begin and end here, of course. The integration of divergent parts into wholes of a higher order goes on at every level — particles into atoms, atoms into molecules, molecules into cells, cells into plants and animals and humans, and so on upwards till in the end the entire hierarchy of parts and wholes culminates in the Whole. In the Whole that alone is perfectly whole and self-contained and dependent on nothing external. The Universe itself constitutes a single Super-organism, the only true Individual, compounded of and reconciling and unifying the hugely divergent drives and intentions and activities of its components at every level, including the human. De Caussade puts it beautifully: 'Divine action cleanses the universe, pervading and flowing over all creatures.'

How does man dovetail into this grand cosmic design? Viewing him from within as Subject, we have already found him to be the Nothing that includes Every-thing — in a word, the Whole. And now, viewing him from the outside as an object, as the thing provisionally called a human being, we find that thing isn't itself without the backing of the rest of things belonging to all levels. What is man, indeed, without the world of cells, molecules, atoms, and particles that compromise him from within and below and without the world of other organisms, of Earth and Sun and Stars that sustain him from without and above? He's not himself without them. The whole man is the Whole. Nothing less is viable, all there. However you look at him, then, whether from inside or outside, in the last resort he is the all-inclusive Being that organizes the divergent wills of all beings into a single will. It's called God's will, and it is none other than your will when you see Who you really are and what you really want, when you are all present and current and wholly Yourself. Seeming to yourself and others to be a part of the Universe, you intend that part; being all of it, you intend it all. Strictly speaking, will is indivisible, and it is all yours. Your will up against my will, ours against theirs — all this is playing the game of narrow-mindedness, mere willfulness. As the One you really are you really will, and you get what you really want.

To come down to earth again, you and I want to win. At least those of us who are at all alive and well, and sufficiently honest with ourselves, have to admit that it's success that we crave — whether that success is material or psychological or spiritual. But honestly also compels us to add that this is by no means the whole truth.
There's something in us that does not want more possessions, power, reputation, creativity, sanctity, or whatever; without limit. In fact (absurdly self-contradicting creatures that we are) we discover sooner or later that we also crave the opposite of all this — less and less instead of more and more. Hiddenly we yearn to be relieved of all these mounting goods and the responsibilities and anxieties that come with them. Our achievements and acquisitions become fetters that increasingly restrict our movement, burdens that increasingly weigh us down, but we make little effort to break free. Addicts, gluttons for punishment, we are all too apt to go on clutching at more and more. Increasingly we are torn apart inside. A civil war is going on, with no prospect of peace in sight.

Peace will not come by moderating the conflict or declaring some kind of armistice, but only by seeing the conflict through to the very end — to total victory for both sides! Our urge to grow will never be satisfied till we become All, and our urge to ungrow will never be satisfied till we become Nothing. And — happy outcome! — it turns out that these opposite goals suddenly merge into one goal, a goal that is moreover already achieved. Here extremes meet and merge, and our ever-present Nature is Nothing—Everything. Our trouble wasn't the growth—ungrowth contradiction, but our failure to see it through to the limit where it is suddenly and absolutely resolved. Here at last our very own joy is discovered waiting patiently for us, because here we have what we really wanted all along. We wanted Everything and we wanted Nothing, and that's precisely what we have. How blessed we are when we let ourselves go!

With one voice the world's saints and sages and seers confirm this precious truth. 'His will is our peace,' says Dante. Conversely, our will — our willfulness as particular humans — is what shatters our peace. It is precisely what, according to William Law, separates us from God. Here is De Caussade again, 'It is by being united to the will of God that we enjoy and possess Him, and it is delusion to seek this divine possession by any other means.' A skeptical disciple of Nisargadatta's remarked that, if he the disciple were Who the sage said he was, why, then he could have anything he wanted. To which Nisargadatta readily agreed: 'All will happen as you want, provided you really want it.'

But it's no good just taking anyone else's word for it. Your own oft-repeated experience of how life treats you provides the clinching
evidence. Think of one of your notable successes. Yes, of course there was some joy at the time, but how long did it last? Has the long-term result come up to your expectations? Is it free from suffering? Alexander the Great didn't spend long relishing his conquest of the known world: he wept, because there were no more countries to conquer. The cynics who assure us that nothing fails like success are right — up to a point. That point is complete success, the success which alone is real and entirely satisfying. When at last we have the grace and the good sense to say YES to all those mixtures of success and failure that have been ours, the willingness to concur in everything that life is now dishing up for us, then a quite unique happiness, a peace like no other steals over us. Whenever we wish for what we are getting, our heart says we have wished well and made the right choice. This is what we really, really want. We have raised it to consciousness. This alone is true success.

The price of saying no to what we are getting can be very high. Depression and exaggerated anxieties and irrational fears, along with their bodily counterparts, are danger signals indicating that an enlargement of consciousness is required. These neurotic symptoms arise from concealed inner conflict, from unrecognized and unexpressed wishes that are incompatible with our surface intentions. We repress these unconscious desires which nevertheless belong to our totality, and which stand ready to compensate for the one-sidedness of the conscious mind. For the unconscious isn't the monster which some take it to be. 'Such a view,' says Carl Jung, 'arises from fear of nature and life as it actually is... The unconscious is dangerous only when our conscious attitude towards it becomes hopelessly false. And this danger grows in the measure that we practice repression. But as soon as the patient begins to assimilate the contents that were previously unconscious, the danger from the unconscious diminishes. As the process of assimilation goes on, it puts an end to the dissociation of the personality and to the anxiety that attends and inspires the separation of the two realms of the psyche.'

These well-known and widely accepted principles apply to what we may call the third realm beyond the psyche, to the realm of our third-level wish that everything shall be as it is. Just as our acute symptoms arise from the repression of our second-level and still human desires, so our chronic 'existential' symptoms arise from the
repression of this truly divine and basic desire. These 'existential' symptoms are a global sadness, resentment aimed at nothing in particular; a deep dissatisfaction with life as it is, a wanting that doesn't know what it wants. Our cure is to shine the light of consciousness upon the deepest level of all, upon the ineffable Core itself, our Source and True Nature. There's no other relief from our deep suffering. We are well when we know what we want. And we know what we want because we know Who we are — namely the One who wants nothing and has everything.

And then we are clean out of hell and into heaven. 'For there is no hell but where the will of the creature is turned from God, nor any heaven but where the will of the creature worketh with God.' William Law, again.

The foregoing is rather abstract and generalized, so let's give it substance by ending this chapter as it began, with a tale.

Elsie had a beautiful voice and ambitions to become a singing star. She tried and tried to get a studio audition, and at last — to her delight — succeeded. Then everything went wrong. She had great difficulty in finding the studio and turned up late. Another date was fixed, but this time she developed a last-minute attack of laryngitis which ruined her performance. On the third and last occasion there was a mix-up about the songs she was going to sing: the accompanist took along the wrong music. This was too much! She grew depressed and nervous, and her behaviour became erratic. Sensibly, she consulted a psychiatrist. With his help she discovered that her deeper and unconscious wish was quite different from her superficial and conscious one. She didn't want a show business career at all, but to marry and devote herself to raising a family. Repressing her real desire, she was suffering from the sort of symptoms that repression gives rise to. She herself, without being aware of it, had cleverly fixed things so that the studio audition never came off. And, as it turned out, this second and deeper wish of hers didn't come off either. The possible husbands she fancied didn't fancy her, she made sure of failure, unconsciously. Again, frustration bordering on desperation, and a new crop of psychosomatic symptoms, including migraine and ulcers. This time, however, instead of going back to her psychiatrist, she went to a teacher who helped her to probe still deeper. He got her to look at Who she really was, and what that Who really wanted. She woke to
the fact that her third and bottom line wish wasn’t that one day she could be a famous singing star, or a happy wife and mother of three, or anything different from what she already was. Already her deepest desire was realized. She knew that at root she was identical with all the prima donnas in the world, and that side of herself was already marvelously taken care of. And that all the children of the world — and all the grown-ups too — were her children. And so it transpired that the granting for this third and final wish of hers — that all should be as it is — satisfied her other wishes also. Given a few adjustments in detail, Elsie’s story is our own story, directly we care to make it ours, and to discover that His will is indeed our peace.

The above is a revised version of an article I wrote some eleven years ago. The revision has kept me busy over one of the most physically painful weeks of my life, during which — I have to confess — I have failed miserably to practice what I preach. If I have given the impression that severe bodily pain is easily accepted and borne, if only we unite our will to God’s will, then I want emphatically to undo and withdraw that impression. Too eagerly I have taken on board De Caussade’s ‘Holiness of heart is a simple fiat, a simple conformity of the will to God’s will. What could be easier?’ ‘What could be harder?’ would, in the light of my recent experience, be much nearer the mark. And yet De Caussade is perfectly right in this sense. I say YES to my inability to say yes to severe physical pain! After all, it is the will of God, alias my deepest will, that I should be no Stoic.

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