

THE POWER OF IMPERFECTION

How to Have the Courage to Be Yourself



*"Deeply distinctive
and healing work."
—Rowan Williams*

Ruth Scott

The Power of Imperfection

RUTH SCOTT

SPCK

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Contents

Introduction		vii
PART 1	LEAVING EDEN	1
	1 <i>Paradise lost</i>	1
	2 <i>Life after Eden</i>	11
	3 <i>Tools for the journey</i>	19
PART 2	COMMUNITY	31
	4 <i>No man is an island</i>	31
	5 <i>Community challenge</i>	39
	6 <i>I am because we are</i>	49
PART 3	GREED	61
	7 <i>What's yours is mine!</i>	61
	8 <i>Our blinded sight</i>	73
PART 4	COMPASSION	85
	9 <i>No more Mr. Nice Guy</i>	85
	10 <i>The cost of caring</i>	95

PART 5	CONFLICT	107
	11 <i>No peace in our time</i>	107
	12 <i>Faith in conflict</i>	117
PART 6	LOVE AND SEX	131
	13 <i>Only fifty shades of grey?</i>	131
	14 <i>Where is love?</i>	141
PART 7	POWER	155
	15 <i>How are the mighty fallen</i>	155
	16 <i>True power</i>	167
PART 8	PRIVACY	177
	17 <i>Justice or just us?</i>	177
	18 <i>Retributive and restorative justice</i>	187
Notes		199

Introduction

I'm sitting in a BBC Radio 2 studio waiting to do my regular slot on the Chris Evans' Breakfast Show. Chris' guest this morning is the wonderful English tenor Alfie Boe. On one side of Alfie sits BBC Sports Reporter Vassos Alexander, a fixture on the show. I'm on the other side. Unlike everyone else in the studio, Vassos hasn't been reduced to tears by the tracks they've played of Alfie's songs, so Chris has asked Alfie to sing live in the studio—especially to Vassos. I'm on immediately afterward with my segment called, "Pause for Thought."

At such close range, Alfie's singing vibrates through my body and leaves me choked up and breathless. How can I follow that? Yet follow it I must. As it happens, I'm talking about the news item reporting that blue plaques marking the homes of famous people in London are about to become a thing of the past as a result of financial cutbacks. I wonder aloud what the plaques might have said if they had focused not on the amazing achievements of the person honored, but on their way of *being*, and I suggest that this method of recognition might not be quite so edifying. Judging by the audible sounds coming from Chris and Alfie, they agree. When I go on to ask what the three of us might find on such a plaque about ourselves Chris laughs and says, "Don't even go there!"

My script then continues as follows,

“‘Goodness’ would definitely not be in a description of me. The best I might hope to be is a half-decent human being. ‘Selfless,’ wouldn’t figure either. Nor, ‘She hurt no-one’. ‘Could do better,’ is definitely on the cards, although it’s a bit too negative for my liking. ‘She tried to make something positive of her many mistakes,’ is much more realistic. Of course that’s far too wordy for a small blue plaque. It’s the kind of thing more likely to appear on my tombstone. Thinking about what we’d like to be remembered for, and what present reality suggests will be our legacy can be a useful way of reflecting on where we’re at and what changes in our behavior we may need to think about... hopefully, I shall have a few years yet to turn my mistakes into something more inspiringly memorable.”

On the train home it suddenly strikes me that I could have produced a so-much-better script. I should have focused not on getting *beyond* my mistakes but on the creative potential of human complexity and messiness *as it is*. It’s taken me long enough to realize the connection between my creativity and my complexity.

I am not where I expected to be in my mid-fifties. My younger self imagined me at my present age to be living a comfortable existence, free of material concerns and having sussed out the meaning of life. My spirit of adventure would still be strong, but wisdom and integrity of being would have calmed the restlessness of my youth. Given my reality today, the very thought of my earlier expectations makes me sit giggling at the computer—hysteria at the absurdity of it all finally setting in, no doubt! The memory is still strong of a recent anxiety dream—I was standing in front of a congregation with hardly any clothes on, trying to read a service book that was disintegrating in my hands. The choir was revolting in the vesting area. My sermon notes had disappeared, and there was a fifty-foot rope to climb to access the pulpit. Me, the epitome of calm and self-control? Not always! While those who listen to me on the radio, or who encounter me professionally and pastorally perceive me as creative, gifted, calm,

wise, strong, courageous, and steady, I and my close family and friends know I can also be erratic, emotional, lacking in confidence, insecure, vulnerable, unreasonable, and sometimes difficult to deal with. It's not that the person others perceive me to be is pretense. It's simply that she's not the whole picture—not my whole self.

As if internal insecurity was not enough to deal with, recently I gave up my work as a chaplain in order to become fully freelance. I relinquished financial security to make room for...who knows what exactly! My head said this made no sense, but my heart felt it was the right thing to do. After twenty years of being a priest, ordained to priesthood with the first women in the Church of England, my spiritual home all my life, experience seems to be drawing me into the Society of Friends—the Quakers. The deepest love I know compels me along this path, but in moments of doubt I wonder if I've lost the plot completely.

In all these things there's a gap between my public face and my private experience. I wish that wasn't the case. I wish when I was confronted by my seventeen-year-old son pushing all my buttons, I was always able to activate my adult self, instead of sometimes behaving like an equally immature teenager. I wish the calm I bring to other people's problems was always accessible to me when confronting my own personal pain, instead of sometimes being commandeered by an inner crazy woman running amok through my life. I wish I could always think clearly and rationally, and not sometimes be overwhelmed by unhelpful and irrational emotions. At least, I wish these things when I'm confronted by their debilitating impact, but again, this is not the whole picture.

It may not seem wise in the introduction to a book I want others to take seriously to highlight the inadequate aspects of who I am, but I want to counter right from the start the idea that a wise, generous, and compassionate humanity depends upon a person being "good," that is free of the faults and failings wrestled with by the rest of us "lesser" mortals. A number of times in my life people have said to me, "Ruth, you're such a good person. I couldn't do what you do."

PART 1:
LEAVING EDEN

1

Paradise lost

I am a late developer. Adolescence passed me by. I moved from caring child to adult caregiver without encountering teenage rebellion. That came later when living through it was more complicated. As an adult, I am supposed to know better—although I'm not sure I always do. Sometimes I think I simply find ways of concealing my confusion and appearing more together than I actually am. Sometimes I think I've got things sussed out at last, only to fall flat on my face and fall back to square one! Ring any bells?

I didn't truly know myself as the woman I am until my late twenties, when I moved to rural Herefordshire, a county in Southwestern England. My next-door neighbor was a wonderful and whacky woman—a one-time prima ballerina, who by all accounts (in contrast to my own experience) had lived riotously and irreverently in the United States before retiring to renovate the dilapidated house next door that was the old rectory. Under her influence, my long-term short-cropped “worn out toilet-brush” hairstyle grew out Rapunzel-style to become a mane of strawberry blond hair long enough to sit on. In that transformation, I came home to myself. The feminist part of me was unimpressed, but that's how it was. Human beings do not, by

nature, fit into neat boxes or stick to the plot lines we think acceptable. As I indicated in my introduction, my own story has certainly not gone as I imagined it would in my youth.

Recognizing what is

My teenage self with her romantic aspirations to sainthood, is a lifetime away. Back then I wanted to lead a selfless life. Inspired by my love for God, I intended to do great things. I thought myself “good,” which must have been insufferable for my friends! I hadn’t had to confront—or maybe I avoided—the less palatable aspects of my personality, so it was easy to condemn such things in others.

My stained glass image of saints, like my sense of self, was far-removed from reality. So many saints seem to have been neurotic, even crazy, sometimes anarchic, and usually difficult people. The 14th century Saint Catherine of Siena was anorexic. In her day, her lack of appetite was considered miraculous. Today most of us would see it in far more down-to-earth terms. In that, I guess there’s hope for us all. Sanctity is not about being free of human messiness. It’s about drawing something magnificent out of the mess. And yet, we find the inter-connectedness between the sordidness and sanctity of a person difficult to swallow.

The impulse to separate the darkness and light of our human nature is understandable. The darker, disordered aspects of who we are individually or collectively can be profoundly destructive, as well as potentially creative. Evidence of suffering imposed by one person on another (or one community on another) is all too apparent in human history. If you think about your own experiences of being hurt by or hurting others, you will understand the impulse to deny or put at a distance the less palatable elements of being human. What good can possibly come from them?

In 2014 I wrote a BBC Radio 4 Sunday Special for Holocaust Memorial Day. We recorded part of it in the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, which confronts visitors with extreme acts of inhumanity.

In the program I was making, I wanted to help listeners recognize that the dynamics of dehumanizing and demonizing others in order to destroy them are not the sole preserve of evil, crazy people but something of which we're all capable, albeit in less extreme forms for the most part. Back in England, I interviewed four lovely Year 9 (high school freshmen) students from a school group visiting the Holocaust Centre at Laxton in Nottinghamshire.

“When students fall out (disagree) with each other at school what happens?” I asked.

They talked easily about how their language concerning the people they had disagreed with became derogatory; how social media sites were used to abuse and alienate anyone who was seen as unacceptably different; how easy it was to join the bandwagon of people ganging up against a particular person; and how it was hard to speak out if you didn't like what was happening because you might become the subject of bullying if you did.

Accepting who we are

I love the way the students were upfront about acknowledging behaviors in themselves and their friends that adults find harder to admit. The inability to own the way we can and do hurt others is far more destructive than if we're prepared to accept and work with the less palatable elements of who we are. Yet a common “grown up” response to this kind of honesty is to silence the one speaking with words of disapproval, rather than recognizing the truth of what they're saying and helping them to make positive choices when confronted with human complexity.

Recently I was working with another group of 14 year olds.

“What do you think or feel when you've hurt someone else?” I asked.

“Guilt,” “Regret,” “Sorry,” “Angry,” and “Anxious,” came up rapidly. Then there was a pause.

“Have any of you ever felt really glad when you’ve hurt another person?”

There were one or two nervous giggles as they glanced around at each other. No one spoke.

“Put up your hand,” I said, “if, like me, you’ve sometimes been glad your words or actions have hurt someone else because you think they deserved it.”

As soon as I raised my hand, there were sighs all around and a forest of hands went up.

“I thought so. These reactions are very human. It’s not wrong that we have them. Generally we don’t choose to feel them. The critical thing is what we do with them. We can follow through on them—adding to the harm of a situation, or we can decide to channel them in more constructive ways.”

To recognize the creative potential of working with our many shades of being is not to glorify grim realities or to say that anything goes. It’s about equipping us to work with what is, rather than denying it or beating ourselves up because we’re not the person we’d like to be.

As a child growing up in a practicing Christian family, right and wrong were very clear-cut. When I didn’t live up to the standards of behavior expected, I was wracked with guilt and shame. How are the aspirational mighty fallen! Doomed to failure because of wholly unrealistic expectations of being human! Today I recognize my reality to be more in keeping with the images in Brian McCabe’s poem, “In the Skip”.

In the Skip

Half a dozen bricks
are clinging to their brickness
and to the idea of being
a wall.

Drawers lean on drawers as if
their crazy staircase could recall
the time it was a kitchen cabinet.

A mattress, doubled up, yearns
to yawn, stretch, turn over and
scratch itself where it's ripped.

Dust, yes there is dust.
And sometimes I think
my history is there in the skip:

a gap that was once for sitting on;
a piece missing its jigsaw;
a smatter of glass, convinced
it was always meant to be a window.

I peer into the rubble to see
what's salvageable.¹

“That’s me,” I thought, when I first came across the poem. The recognition was not negative. There was a freedom in it. To accept the mess is to be released from the oppression of never feeling “good enough” and to open up the possibility of finding gifts in the gutter of my personal reality.

Over the years, artists of all kinds—religious and non-religious—have been crucial to this process. They have cut through my defenses, ignorance, and self-deception in ways that rational argument often cannot do. I have found liberation, not to say salvation in their honesty. The writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn was right when he said that the purpose of art, of artists, and writers is to vanquish lies. It was a sculpture that first brought home powerfully to me the importance of getting in touch with the issues in myself I sought to deny.

Working with what is

Back in the late 1980s when I was training for ordination, one of our tutors showed us a picture of Brazilian sculpture—Guido Rocha’s

THE POWER OF IMPERFECTION

Many of us go through life feeling as if we are failing to be the person we could be. But as this liberating book explores, there is power in imperfection.

If we are able to acknowledge and work with our own complexities and imperfections, we can begin to see them as great resources, not obstacles—and we will discover the courage to be ourselves. Using stories from scripture and the news, personal experience, poems, and art, author Ruth Scott celebrates the messiness and creative potential of being human.

“Ruth Scott’s book opens up for us a large and potentially disturbing question: Do we really want truthfulness more than tidiness?”

Most of us actually do not, and so we need to be shown, with Ruth’s typical patience and insight, how truth—above all, God’s truth—will emerge when we stop straining after perfection. Weaving together autobiographical recollection, pastoral probing, and theological meditation, this is a deeply distinctive and healing work.”

ROWAN WILLIAMS,
former Archbishop of Canterbury

Ruth Scott is a freelance writer, broadcaster, lecturer, facilitator, and above all, a storyteller. She was among the first female priests ordained in the Church of England and is now a member of the Quakers.



Forward
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inspire disciples. empower evangelists.

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