

Handicaps as Factors In Spiritual Formation

What factors in Katharine Tekakwitha's life played parts in the formation of her personality? Here was an Indian girl, orphaned, physically handicapped, who followed an adaptive pattern of life which seemingly led her insensibly to the end which she attained. One can see a gradual tilling of the soil, a refining of it, until the coming of the Jesuits and their doctrine of the Incarnation and the Redemption planted a seed which ripened with great rapidity and fruition as an expression of all her repressed desires. Here was an answer to her struggles, her strivings, her unhappiness. She found, at last, "One" Whom she could love and trust without fear.

We have here a girl and woman growing in sanctity, not a saint who was secondarily a woman. Katharine's natural handicaps were used as stepping stones for the achievement of this purpose. In a "case history" of this sort new insights may be gained in the guidance of unusual children.

Fortunately for us and for her, as it turned out, Katharine was not able to fit into the tribal social pattern adequately. She was handicapped by being badly scarred and not very pretty, and with eyes seriously damaged as a result of smallpox. Moreover, she was an orphan and had no understanding mother to whom she could turn for help in her attempts to adapt. Save for these things it is possible, even probable, that she would have followed the normal pattern of Indian childhood and adolescence.

Katharine was the offspring of a Mohawk chief and a captive Algonquin mother who was a Christian. It is possible that her mother may have instilled a few Christian ideals into the child's mind, but it is doubtful, in a child surrounded by a late Stone Age culture, that they could have had any great impact. Heredity may also have played a part, the gentler temperament of the Algonquins moderating the more active and ruthless one of the Iroquoians. At any rate, the mother did not have much time for guidance. Katharine was four years of age when the smallpox epidemic hit the village, killing her father, mother, and little brother, and nearly herself.

After the death of her parents, Katharine was adopted by an uncle who was childless. He lived with his wife and sister. This meant that Katharine was to be brought up as an only child in a family in which she had a mother only by proxy. A child under such circumstances is perfectly aware of its loneliness and the lack of a mother to turn to in its need. Seeing the relationship of other children with their parents, Katharine would be conscious of a definite void in her own life, engendering a feeling of insecurity and consequent inferiority. (1)

It is true that a child under such conditions, having no brothers or sisters, has another handicap in the lack of close association with others of its own age-group. It is forced to make adaptations in an adult environment. The child is lonely and more or less dependent upon itself. (2) Katharine was a lonely child. Because of her eyes she could not play as other children played. She spent more time in the house with the women, and so acquired an adult point of view very easily. This may account for Father Jacques de Lamberville's surprise at Katharine's quick grasp of the elements of Christianity. (3)

In such a situation Katharine would become insecure, with a tendency to stay by herself, or in the company of older women who would not be competitors. As she grew up the tendency to retire into solitude seemed to grow more pronounced. She is pictured by those who knew her

as timid, shy, and as spending much time in the dim light of the longhouse doing bead work or the household chores. Needlework seemed to be her specialty. (4) But the adornments she made were for others, and not for herself.

Iroquoian women loved to adorn themselves with pretty clothes and trinkets. Much trading was done for beads, necklaces, ear pendants and colored cloths. Katharine loved pretty things, but what was the use of adornment to one who was scarred and not at all attractive? If she had been pretty, things might have been different, very different indeed.

So for many reasons, Katharine lived a life apart. It would appear that non-conformity to tribal ways would not allow her much happiness.

Outside the accustomed boundaries set by tribal life there was nothing. Generally, the tribe circumscribed the individual's life; beyond its close confines gaped a void as deep and obscure as the forests that hemmed in every village. The tribe was society; no standards other than its own were tolerated. (5)

It is evident, though, that living more or less alone as she did, she would be more occupied with wiser thoughts than by the distractions of the average Indian girl, whose thoughts were occupied with her work and play, local gossip, and chatter about boyfriends. Day by day, trial by trial, the soil was being cultivated and perhaps without such cultivation Katharine might not have been so ready for the light when it came.

What influence did Katharine's background have on her refusal to marry? Certainly such a refusal was entirely out of character for a Mohawk maiden of her time. Remember that the husband becomes one of the woman's family, another provider, in the Iroquois society. A good deal of pressure would be brought to bear upon her in order to force a marriage. Moreover, Katharine belonged to a childless family and from a social point of view it was her moral duty to provide a helper for her aging uncle and aunts. One would think her own insecurity would move her in that direction. Yet Katharine would have none of it. Why? There is no way of knowing. What she may have seen, heard, or experienced we cannot ascertain. Whatever the cause, it constituted a threat to her which completely overbalanced any other consideration. Certainly, she knew nothing of virginity at the time, nor of the idea of consecrating oneself to God. The cause must have been a natural one. Her dislike of the very idea was so great that neither her own desires for security, nor her moral duty to her adopted parents could overcome it.

Here then was Katharine when she first came in contact with the missionaries. She was a shy retiring girl, much of a recluse, much liked for her pleasant smile and for her desire to be helpful to everyone (Characteristics of those, who, for one reason or another need some protection). We find a girl not caring for the usual pleasures of women of her race, content with her needlework and the making of things for others. (6) She was undoubtedly mature in her thinking, and certainly knew her own mind.

When Jesuit Father Jacques de Lamberville came into contact with Katharine he realized almost at once that there was fertile ground. He was amazed at the avidity with which she grasped the new doctrine, and the understanding she had of it.

Katharine, shy and retiring, would not go to Father de Lamberville. It was he who came to her. To a human being whose life, condemned by circumstances to loneliness, lovelessness

and unrest could be given that which she was unconsciously seeking: One in Whom she could find faith, security, and love. Here is an edifying example of God's grace acting through natural means to supply what was badly needed at that time, an example for the new pagan converts to Christianity; one, who by her life could crystallize the fervor which was spreading among the newly formed Christians.

Constitutional factors result from native dispositions, both psychic and physical. (7) St. Thomas clearly indicates that one's dispositions may favor one's moral tendencies when he says: "Some people by their own bodily constitution are disposed to chastity or meekness and the like." (8)

Moreover there are positive and constructive aspects of inferiority. (9) It keeps one striving to reach beyond one's poor self. It prevents a smug satisfaction with the status quo. It is the very breath of inspiration and progress. The stammering Demosthenes became a great orator, blind Milton, a poet; the hunchback Steinmetz was a wizard of electronics, and Helen Keller could compensate for her blindness and deafness by remarkably developing her tactile and intellectual coordinating capacity.

Although an individual may be somewhat inadequate in certain fields, yet, one is almost sure to find compensations of real excellence in other directions. Wisely handled, natural handicaps may yield success, spiritual and vocational adjustment and happiness. Religious educators, through wit, understanding and love, may arrive at an accurate estimate of a student's handicaps and pave the way for an intelligent, well-ordered approach to religious advancement utilizing those handicaps.

NOTES

1. Edward A. Strecker. Basic Psychiatry. New York: Random House, 1952. 399.
2. Rudolf Allers. The Psychology of Character. New York; Sheed and Ward, 1943. 134-140.
3. F.X. Charlevoix, op. cit., 441.
4. Strecker, op. cit., 405-408, describes a form of compensation for inferiority feelings that he calls the specialist attitude. The compelling motive is escape from the unpleasant facts of undistinguished competition.
5. J. H. Kennedy. Jesuit and Savage in New France. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950. 160.
6. Strecker, op. cit., 407.
7. James Van der Veldt and Robert Odenwald. Psychiatry and Catholicism. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952. 30.
8. S. Theol., I, n, Q. 51, a. 1, corp.
9. Rudolf Allers, op. cit., 48.

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