

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but the sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me."

Romans 7:15-20

I don't always agree with Paul or the writings attributed to him. Overall, I much prefer the Epistle of James. Paul is much more of a struggle for me. So, when reading his letters, I try to use a piece of Paul's own advice, found in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, "[T]est everything; hold fast to what is good."

I find a lot of good in Romans 7, even if I don't necessarily agree with some of the conclusions Paul makes based on it. Long before I knew that this Meeting even existed, I had stumbled on these words and found, if not encouragement, certainly kinship.

"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." If I were writing my life story, these words could be echoed again and again throughout most of the chapters. I know the person I want to be. I know how he acts, what he thinks, and what behavior to expect out of him. I just haven't become him. And I imagine that I am not alone in this condition.

But this is only one way to look at the situation. A different way to look, a longer way, would be to look at the person I was the first time I entered this Meetinghouse. For although I am not the person I want to be, I am no longer that other person either. I am somewhere in between. In this, I find hope.

A few years ago, I bought a little notebook so I could jot down little things that struck me as truth or words of wisdom. Now, sometimes I'm good about writing down

where I came across these little sayings, other times, I am not. One of the sayings I have written down is from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, "No heart is so whole as a broken heart."

This is one of those sayings that I had failed to write down a source for. Recently, in rereading it, I decided to try and find a source for it. So I googled the Rabbi and came across an e-book entitled The Essential Rabbi Nachman. Since discovering it, the Rabbi has made at least eight other appearances in my notebook.

One such appearance, a much longer passage, centers on the act of boiling water. Rabbi Nachman lived in the late 18th century, a time when clean drinking water wasn't as readily available as it is for those of us fortunate enough to live in a first world country today. And in the 18th century, one of the methods used to purify water was to boil it and skim off the impurities as they foamed up on the surface of the water.

Now, Rabbi Nachman understood that any person attempting to answer a calling to serve God would have to face up to a number of unpleasant things about themselves, and struggle with the sense of failure that generally accompanies this realization. He also understood, perhaps from personal experience, that one way to deal with such struggles is somewhat similar to purifying water.

To Rabbi Nachman's way of thinking, the entire process of discovering and subsequently dealing with one's innermost failings is "like a pot of water which initially seems quite clear, but as soon as it is placed on the fire and starts to boil, all the impurities begin to surface. Someone has to stand there constantly removing the scum and impurities. At first the water appears perfectly clear, but as it heats up, more and more impurity surfaces. At last, however, when all the impurity is removed, the water is truly pure and clear. The same is true of a person."

I have often thought it shouldn't be so difficult to become the person I want to be. Just stop getting angry. Stop being judgmental. Stop being such a hypocrite. And most mornings, this is what I will myself to do. But it doesn't seem to work that way, and when it

doesn't, it can quickly become discouraging. Both Paul and Rabbi Nachman understood this well.

“It might seem,” says the Rabbi, “as if it should be possible to remove all this filth and impurity at once.” But it isn't. It is a long and diligent process. He adds that a mind, like the water, is too thoroughly mixed with the impurities to have this be the case. Like the person standing over the boiling water, “One must be very patient until little by little one becomes completely pure.”

I am not the person I wish to be, but perhaps, little by little, I am skimming the surface of that person. And perhaps, someday, I will find myself capable of doing the good I want to do.