25th January 2025

Empathy

"The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy, we can all sense a mysterious connection to each other."

Meryl Streep, *Soft Skills Strategies for Success*

Scotland's National Poet, Robert Burns, was born on January 25th, 1759. So today, there will be "Burns' Night" celebrations throughout the world. For my toast to Burns' "Immortal Memory" at a Burns' Supper tonight, I've been reacquainting myself with Burns' material.

Our understanding of Burns can be limited to the little we know of his work. He knew about love, and *My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose, Ae Fond Kiss,* and other poems and songs touch us deeply. He struggled with the Church, the satire of *Holy Willie's Prayer* being ample evidence of that. He saw worth in everyone, given the insights offered in *The Cotter's Saturday Night,* and *A Man's a Man.* He was a passionate Scot, inspiring us with *Scots Wha Hae* and *Ye Jacobites By Name.* But sometimes Burns drew upon life's more basic experiences. This is nowhere clearer than in his treatise on an issue with which most of us will be familiar, *Address to the Toothache.* Here are two stanzas which graphically illustrate the point.

My curse upon your venom'd stang,
That shoots my tortur'd gums alang,
An' thro' my lug gies mony a twang,
Wi' gnawing vengeance,
Tearing my nerves wi' bitter pang,
Like racking engines!

Where'er that place be priests ca' hell,
Where a' the tones o' misery yell,
An' ranked plagues their numbers tell,
In dreadfu' raw,
Thou, Toothache, surely bear'st the bell,
Amang them a'!

Even without a glossary, can we not *feel* the anguish with Burns?

It's not just *big* things that need empathy and understanding, in the words of a wonderful poet, or in your life or mine. But when others are in in anguish, let's offer empathy too, that "mysterious connection with one another", which has its roots in our own experiences – toothaches and all!

A prayer for today

In the big things of life, in the small – and in the tortuous – Lord, stay with me. Amen

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