Anatomy of bitterness

By Jacob Akindele

We speak of emotions, feelings, attitudes, perceptions and thoughts, the entirety of what goes on within us. Often, we endeavour to conceal from others, this inner life that determines behavior. It is strictly personal, consisting of reactions to external stimuli. It is the product of how the human entity had used its free will to mould its intrinsic caring essence.

The mixture of currents generated within underlies the appearance presented to the world. In each man or woman, what is the substance of this powerful subterranean pool? Is it beautiful or ugly? Is it alluring or repelling? Is it fragrant or odious? Is it noble or base? Is it uplifting or degrading?

Bitterness is one such substance, generated by the personal application of that potent, non-physical element in us called the mind. It deserves specific mention because it is widespread among us, human beings. It does immense harm to the one who generates and nourishes it with concurrent thoughts. It also hurts any other that is the focus of the negative currents. Many people need to be liberated from it; otherwise they cannot experience genuine happiness or true joy. This humble probing of the putrid poison might contribute to the healing of victims of this self-inflicted inner wound that can become a festering sore on the psyche.

The content of a mandatory five-hour driver education course for driving in New York State offered an apt illustration of the free will to decide and choose reactions. The instructor asked the participants to define feeling and attitude. A gentleman from Nigeria said that attitude is a choice. The instructor accepted the definition and used it to drive home the message he hammered into the minds of the students. “In life, everything you do depends on the type of person you are. While driving, if someone gives you the finger or uses a racial or ethnic expletive, you could feel bad. Then you have the choice of what to do about that feeling, just as with any information received. Life is about decisions and choices. My job is to teach you to choose the attitude that will get you to your destination safely. Always, there will be many irritations out there on the road. You have to develop a thick skin to drive safely on the road, just as you have to do for success in life as a whole.”

The explanation of the driving instructor is a reminder on the reality of existence. Attitude is a choice of reaction to events or information that may be true or false. It is important for each person to develop the capacity for handling the unavoidable vicissitudes of life in this world. The New York State Department of Motor Vehicles and the Federal Road Safety Corps of Nigeria educate people on the right attitude for driving safely. Their work would be greatly helped if parents and guardians would teach their protégés to apply their minds to choose the right attitude in specific situations. Enlightenment is essential to broaden awareness and give a basic understanding on the patterns in life.

Knowledge and understanding are essential for a happy life. This is captured in a Yoruba name: *Enigbonjaiye*, which literally translates into: "The knowledgeable and mature one enjoys life." On the road of experience in life's onward journey, the unenlightened are at a disadvantage. The Yoruba word "ogbon" encapsulates knowledge, attitude and good judgment. In this context, it is about knowledge on the basic truths of existence.

The individual who lacks knowledge of his place in the universe may become conceited and lacking in humility. Such a person is prime game for generating bitterness. In relationships, a memory chest is kept of every minor or major inconvenience suffered from others by errors of omission or commission. The experiences could be dismissed if a person is able to shrug his shoulders and say "Oh, it's one of those things we encounter in life on earth." Rather, the ego could come into play with wailing. "I was hurt. This was done to me. I was not made happy. I was not given pleasure in the manner I desired. I was not waited upon. I was not adored. I was ignored. I was not worshipped"! Going too far, some may say. However, it is the downward path to the dark realm of bitterness.

A review of one's life will reveal a catalogue of matters over which a person had generated and sustained negative thoughts and currents eating away at the core, causing inner wound. There was the case of a young man who, for years, harboured bitter feelings towards his father because of "what he did to my mother." This eventually led to hatred and a decision at total avoidance. All efforts by his father for a normal relationship were rebuffed by the younger man. Then, one day, he realized that his mother had misrepresented what actually happened and passed the prejudice to him. This is common in many families.

Imagine how double guilty the bitter one must be before his Creator, as all the years of resentment towards his father originated from false information or an incorrect reading of a situation. There are many cases of clever and calculated distortions by either parent in order to curry favour from son or daughter.

In another true life experience, a married woman packed her children and fled to Europe without informing her husband. Like many others, she soon discovered that her problems did not cease with the change of continents because the developed country was no El Dorado, especially for aliens. The children clamoured daily for their daddy but she drummed it into them that *he* had "abandoned" them. How unfair to plant in the minds of innocent chidden the seeds of bitterness which could make them emotionally unbalanced all through life on earth?

It was just before the passing on of the famous singer Sonny Bono that his daughter reconciled with him. She said it was unfortunate to have wasted all those years in negative feelings that could have been terminated in a second. For many others, however, the opportunity to clear the slate (of negative thoughts towards others) is missed through egotism, vanity and rigid obstinacy. There is no need to wait till one is on the death bed before praying for God to give the strength to "find it in my heart to forgive" another for real or imagined misdeeds. Why hold God

accountable for what we choose to generate and sustain? Every person has the power to change his attitude or alter his paradigm, in a moment. This is necessary to cast the unnecessary burden off the chest.

We are learning that the earth is the plane where reconciliation can be achieved quickly. The individual man or woman must get hold of self; muster all the inner strength to overcome the ego in order to do what he would expect of others who might have taken offence by any of his actions: *forgive*. He must do so if he wishes to be happy and "pass" before his Maker.

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