

Saint Pierce

By Pierce Butler

My wife and I were having a familiar argument: she was singing her Needy song, I my Angry song. Suddenly I was aware that she had simply dropped it: she wasn't singing any more. "Are you still angry?" she said to me. "No," I muttered, through clenched teeth. She began to laugh; she could see very clearly what was going on with me. "Why don't you just—stop pretending?" she said. So, I did. I told her just what I thought of her Needy song and what I thought of her dropping it like that and what I thought of the cool, calm, and collected look on her face. And as I yelled, I began to hear the sound of my own voice, the voice of a bad actor, reaching for an emotion that wasn't his, struggling to take himself seriously. Once I saw this, my Angry song fell to the ground. I burst out laughing. We both had a good laugh, and that was the end of the argument.

But the real punch line came a few seconds after I'd wiped the tears from my eyes and taken a deep breath. I suppose I was congratulating myself. I'd managed—with a little help from Susan—to experience my anger and not to take it so seriously. But in the next instant that anger was beside the point. I saw that I was really identified with the tight-lipped saint my wife had teased, the person who said he wasn't angry. That was the person I believed myself to be, the person I had to be at all costs—cool, calm, and collected, in spite of all the indications to the contrary—and it was terrifying to see, if only for an instant, that it was a lie. I felt that my world, my conception of myself, had been turned upside down. I had gone forth to encounter the demon Anger and to wrestle it to the ground if I could. But the real enemy, the pretender, the liar—was St. Pierce.

I struggled for years to separate myself from negative emotions like anger by opposing them with an effort of attention. I hoped that something new would enter to resolve this opposition, a sense of freedom or detachment that I called separation. The alternative was that the emotion would eat me up alive, that I would be nothing but emotion, completely identified. But then I saw that instead of working with emotion, I was just trying to keep it down, that my attempt at separation was really a kind of repression—a refusal to acknowledge the presence of unwelcome feeling in myself. As long as repression masqueraded as work, there was no hope of seeing what was in me, no hope of real separation.

Once I realized this, I tried to encourage emotion to come forth from its hiding place, and my work was to feel it, to accept it, to be present to it with as much force as I could muster. This is the essential foundation for my work. But the true beginning came when I saw the persona that controlled the mechanism, the 'I' that tried to be above feeling—the plaster saint.

A paradox: You can't separate from emotion if you're determined to keep it at arms' length.