



# Jars

Thomas Ehrich

*[Jesus'] mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you" . . . Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.*

John 2:5, 7

Before dawn, my niece returned to training camp for lightweight crew. Did anyone on her flight recognize signs of Wednesday's funeral? Did her rowing teammates make room for her grief?

Later, my wife, three sons and I started our two-car caravan south. We were quieter than usual, as we reflected on events since my mother's death and prepared ourselves for return to schools and offices.

Today my brother and his family return to the Northwest. After two long flights among strangers, they will rejoin a world that seems far away, perhaps disconnected. My sister will reclaim a house that was brimming with family life, then observe her first birthday without Mom.

Tonight my father will spend his first night alone. I don't know which is loneliest: being home alone, being in a crowd alone, being among colleagues and classmates alone, or being within one's closest circle and still feeling alone.

I think lonely just is. I don't think loneliness is a sign of a life poorly lived, as if one should have made more friends or moved less often. I don't think loneliness is life's punishment for being too different, too passive, too assertive, too anything. I think loneliness is part of life.

As reflective beings, we observe life even as we live it. We see the crowd and ourselves in the crowd, and we feel the gap between self and other. When we speak, we observe the impact of our words. When we embrace, we sense the otherness of the one hugging back. We laugh or cry and wonder what others make of our emotions. We measure ourselves in comparison, that is, in separation. Life crises

push us more deeply into that separateness which already burdened us. Most people didn't understand us before, and they surely know nothing of us now. They stood apart when we felt able to connect, and they surely are distant now. Or so it seems.

We are like the jars that Jesus touched. Full or empty, but always separate. Filled with water or wine, but always separate. Set among joy or sorrow, but always separate.

Once his mother goaded him to action, Jesus had two instructions. First was, "Fill the jars with water." Second was, "Now draw some out." Somewhere in the middle water became wine.

Life has a way of filling us up, sometimes with treasures and attributes deemed positive, sometimes with bitterness and grief. We probably have little control over what fills us. Jars, after all, are vessels being acted on by outside forces.

What God does is transform our contents and pour us out for others. Our sadness, for example, can build bridges to others. When our family processed to the front pew and sunlight broke through a

Life has a way of filling us up, sometimes with treasures and attributes deemed positive, sometimes with bitterness and grief.

leaden sky, flooding the nave with light, people didn't applaud us for deserving sunlight, but hugged the light to their own wounded hearts. Among the several hundred kind notes that readers have sent me are many that spoke of their own losses and grief. We don't attend funerals because we are morbid, but because there is living water being poured out.

I doubt that college friends took much notice of my niece's grief. But she is different now, pouring something new out of her life, and that wine will be tasted. However brusque and uninterested our classmates and colleagues seem on our return, God is drawing something new out of us, and that wine will be tasted.

Yes, life is inherently lonely, and yet God transforms even our most sour separateness into something sweet. We just need to let our jars be filled or emptied, as life and God desire. □

**This article is reprinted from "On a Journey." Used with permission. "On a Journey" meditations are e-mailed six days a week to interested readers. For correspondence write [tehrich@earthlink.net](mailto:tehrich@earthlink.net). Thomas Ehrich is the author of *With Scripture As My Compass* (Abingdon Press, 2004) and *Just Wondering, Jesus* (Morehouse, 2005). See p. 19 to order.**