

Muddling through: 2 Kings 5:1-14

by [J. Mary Luti](#) in the [September 23, 1998](#) issue

When I became a seminary administrator, a colleague at another school gave me this advice: "People always act from self-interest. When you approach them with a plan, they'll invariably ask themselves, 'What's in it for me?' Figure out the answer to that before you propose anything, and approach issues accordingly." Pared to its core, it seemed that my job was to outfox selfish louts bent on advancing their own agendas.

I discovered that my colleague was only partly right. If people acted only from simple self-interest all the time, things would be easy. But it's more complicated than that. We're all impelled by a bewildering array of interests, contradictions and passions (self-interest being the friskiest, but not always the strongest), most of which we do not know and never name.

In such a case, you don't get far psyching people out and playing to what you find. The maze of motives thwarts you every time. The most you can do is make it OK for people to muddle along the best they can, at their own pace, and intervene occasionally to keep them focused. The trick is not so much to outfox as to outwait. Most of the time, the ragged human convoy of divergent perceptions, piqued honor, high-minded posturing, insecurity, good humor and basic generosity will wend its way to insight and accomplishment.

I could have opened my Bible to learn this lesson. Take the story of Naaman in 2 Kings. A proud man muddles toward health, toward a restorative knowledge of God and himself. But he makes progress only by ragged fits and starts. He has a clear self-interest--a cure for the disease that threatens his career, his place in human company, his very life. The people who care about him appeal successfully to that self-interest, but the pull of other passions almost derails him. Naaman craves respect almost more than he wants health. He is so sure he knows what he needs, he almost refuses what God wants to give.

Almost. But not quite. When he doesn't get the attention he thinks is his due, God waits, letting him vent and strut. No lightning bolt consumes him in mid-rant, no

disapproving angel descends. God waits until Naaman acquits himself of the odd human propensity to work against one's own good. And when, after stalking off, he relents, we see in him what God has seen all along--a man of faith.

And so it was all along. We'd be wrong to regard his healing and conversion as something completely new, a miracle. What God waits for in Naaman is the fitful progress of a transformation under way in Naaman even before he sets foot on the soil of Samaria or in the puny Jordan--a slender opening, first apparent when the great warrior takes advice from women and (how could it have been otherwise?) subdues his disgust at needing help from an enemy's god.

Grace has established a pulse in him--irregular, perhaps, but not arrested by his unchecked rage. When he finally gives up, lets go, obeys his servants and washes in the water, there isn't a lot more healing for the river to do. All that remains is for Naaman to meet, knee-deep, the One who engineers his victories and presides over his life. Awash in the revelation, Naaman, "a great man" from the start, becomes Yahweh's man for good.

Naaman has come a long, ragged way. The man who derided the stupid river in Israel now packs his mules with Samaria's dirt so that at home he may worship on holy ground. There's still a long way left to go. It's not as if Naaman will never scream or sulk again. For now, however, God seems to think he's made enough progress. Maybe that's why Elisha does not invoke Yahweh's awesome jealousy when Naaman, sensitive to the compromise entailed in serving his king, asks for permission to bow on occasion to his master's god. It's as if Yahweh takes whatever Yahweh can get. Given the erratic character of the human procession toward the holy and the deadly pitfalls lining the road, God is not touchy about the now-and-then concession to the status quo.

You could scour this story for more important theological themes, and you'd find plenty. You could also point out that this Old Testament incident is hardly as dramatic or wrenching as, say, David's nasty detour with Bathsheba. But weighty theological issues and unspeakable depravity are not, thankfully, part of everyone's daily struggle. Dealing with human weaknesses is. Muddling along is too. It's what we do, and we hope God will have mercy on us for it.

We know Naaman. We know all the irritating and endearing, weak and tenacious behaviors in this story--altruistic aims, big ideas, bad tempers; smelling a rat, taking

offense, throwing tantrums, pleading and cajoling, seeing reason, changing your mind, eating crow. We've all asked for brazen blessings on unavoidable compromises. So to watch God leave Naaman alone while never leaving his side is a huge relief. It is also a strong antidote to perfectionism, a reproach to a thousand daily judgmental impulses, a cause for gratitude and praise.

God outwaits us while in weakness healing begins. God outwaits us while we locate the fissures of mercy in the heaped debris of fear and anger--and learn to breathe the Spirit's air. We change and grow, believe and love by grace, the best we can. We are going to the river, whatever the reason or unreason that moves us; we are going to wade right in. Knee-deep in unaccountable love, we'll meet the One who gives us all our ragged victories and presides over our life.