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Poison Oak

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Poison Oak

When I was a child, I had a bad case of poison oak all over my body. On the way home from vacation, our car was hit by a truck at an intersection. When the ambulance came, the attendants looked at me and thought that I had been injured because of the rash on my face, hands, and arms. I remember thinking how funny that was, but have almost no memory of how uncomfortable I must have been from the poison oak symptoms. Past physical pain is often forgotten over time. But the interpersonal experiences remain, and sometimes come surprisingly back into consciousness.

All of us have suffered in our human relationships, and some memories about our interactions with others are even today rather painful to recall. I can still feel embarrassment in recalling one or other clumsy and awkward moment. It seems to me that, if we reflect upon our experiences, we will find that physical pain itself does not ordinarily have the same lasting effects upon us as do the hurts we have received or caused in human relationships.

Heartaches, shame, and all manner of injustices that we suffer or can cause often have much to do with choices we or others have made. The most hurtful aspect of all forms of abuse is not the physical injury, but the inhuman treatment of one person by another. The commandment of Jesus that we should love one another is not an order imposed upon us by some kind of extraterrestrial being, but a clear statement about the very purpose and meaning of human life. We are not meant to cause harm to one another. If it is inhumane deliberately to cause pain to animals, it is because humans are made such that care and respect for one another, and by analogy for animals, arises from who we are, not from some "politically correct" expectation of behavior.

Extraordinary physical traumas, whether from accidents or acts of violence, are retained by our bodies, probably for life, even if no memories of them ever come to mind. Persons who have been through a war or a hurricane have automatic physical responses to certain sounds that cause no reactions in others. But hurts received in relationships, even though quite severe, can be healed so fully that memories of them no longer cause pain.

We cannot undo what we, or others, have said or done, but we can change, especially through prayer and reflection, our present attitudes, perspectives, and even the words we use to describe past experiences. Until we are finished with this life, we can decide not to add to past hurts through vengeful, angry, or fearful patterns of thought, and not to retain the role of victim as a counter-productive exercise of control. Rather, we can consciously accept our powerlessness to change the past and cooperate with

God in the process of healing. To love ourselves well enough to refrain from negative thinking is much easier when we consciously seek to allow, admit, and accept God's unconditional love for us.

Suffering from poison oak or any other ailment is not nearly as significant for us as the love that we can give and receive.