

The Box

A Short Story

I met a man today who was stuck in a box. This might sound absurd, but it was true. There he was, crouched in his box. He seemed comfortable enough, but not happy, for the box was just smaller than he was. It was big enough for him to move around in, but not big enough for him to stretch out, and in no way was there any room for growth.

Now, as I observed this strange situation, I could not suppress the curiosity that soon directed my steps toward the box. As I approached the box and its lone inhabitant, I shouted a greeting. "Hello, friend. How are you?" "Hello there," came the reply. "I'm okay. Nothing to complain about." I thought it rude, but I couldn't help broaching the subject of my curiosity almost immediately. "Friend, why are you in that box?" I asked as gently as possible. "What box?" came the immediate reply.

Now, at this, I was somewhat taken aback. Could it be possible that he did not realize he was in a box? He must be joking, surely. I inquired further. "Why, the box you are in, of course—the one that keeps you from stretching to your true height. It must be cramped in that box." He looked at me a bit confused, then answered, "I don't quite know what you are going on about. I am in no such box, and I am perfectly comfortable. At least as comfortable as one can expect who has been through what I have."

I tried to suppress my surprise. So it was true: he could not see the box he was in. "And what have you been through?" I ventured. "Why," he said, "it would be too much to tell." "Go on," I encouraged. "Well, it all started in my childhood. You see, I came from a middle-class family, and my father was not around much. I never had a picture of what a true man should look like, so that is why I have made so many

mistakes trying to find who I am. Then there was the case of the bullying in my school. Why, those kids bullied me and told me I was worthless until I believed them. That is why I struggle with a bad self-image and negative thoughts. Then, in high school, my sweetheart ditched me in favor of the captain of the football team. Since then, I have never been able to be really confident around women and have always found the need to prove myself.” And he went on and on and related to me the circumstances in his life that had caused him to be the way he was.

As he moved through each part of his story, a strange thing happened. Each time he moved to another section of the story, I saw a man behind him come out and begin to build something. As I listened to more and more of his story, to my utter astonishment, I saw the very box that this man was in take shape. I could scarcely contain my surprise and disbelief as I realized what was happening. This man was building the very box he was in. Piece by piece, it came together. All the pieces were perfectly formed and fashioned to give him just enough room that he was neither in pain nor happy, but in a numbness that is often worse than either. Then I had the most surprising and saddening realization thus far: the man who was building the box was him, the speaker. The box had gradually taken shape through the ways he responded to what had happened to him. Those responses may once have helped him survive, but over time they had become a place of confinement he could not yet see.

The harm done to this man was real, and none of it was his fault. The vision was not blaming him for what others had done. He was not responsible for the wounds he received. With God’s help and the support of others, however, he could begin deciding how he would respond to those wounds and whether the protections he had built were still serving him.

After he finished his story I asked him what he planned on doing in the future. He replied, “I suppose I will just have to continue on. I guess I will just have to make the best of it.” Of course he could only continue on, I mused. How could he make any great change when the furthest he could see in front of him was the wall of his box just a few inches away?

I decided to do a very bold thing. “Sir,” I said, “you may believe I am crazy, but I still think that you are stuck in a box. Could I try to get you out of it?” “Ha!” came the reply. “I am stuck in no box, nor will I ever be, but to satisfy your curiosity, you can try to remove this imaginary box.” I walked up to the box and attempted to pull it apart, but no matter how hard I tried or how much effort I expended, I could not even put a dent in it. It was then that I noticed the following words printed on the outside of the box: “This box was made by its inhabitant and can only be destroyed by its inhabitant. Beware that you mold yourself in life’s circumstances, or the circumstances in life will mold you.”

I stepped back and wiped the sweat from my brow. “My friend,” I said, “I cannot help you. You are the only one who can remove this box you have built around yourself.” I sadly walked away, pondering what I had seen.

As I went my way, I met another man who stopped me. “Sir,” he said, “do you realize that you are in a box?” “Ha,” I replied, “I am in no box. That fellow up the road is, though. You should go see the box he has built for himself...” My voice trailed off as the words of the man I had just spoken to took shape in my own mouth. I was in a box too. We all have our own boxes—things that we have not responded to in the proper way. We have let these things shape us and bring us down instead of letting the pain and difficulty that we go through become our strength.

I turned to the stranger and addressed him. “Sir,” I said, “will you tell me about my box—what it looks like and how it appears to you? I don’t want to be in my box anymore.” Thus, I began the journey on the road to complete freedom. Freedom in who I am instead of what has happened to me.

Companion Resources

Recognizing God's Fingerprints in Your Story helps us examine the experiences that have shaped us and decide what we want to carry forward.

Four Invitations of the Heart explores woundedness, self-protection, vulnerability, and wholehearted living.

When Relationships Are Wounded considers humility, forgiveness, boundaries, and wise next steps after relational pain.

Copyright © 2015 by Jonathan Forte

Used by permission