

The Black Door

There's a Middle Eastern story of a spy who had been captured and sentenced to death by a general of the Persian army. The general had fallen upon a strange and rather bizarre custom. He permitted the condemned person to make a choice. He could either face the firing squad or pass through the black door.

As the moment of execution drew near, the general ordered the spy to be brought before him for a short, final interview, the primary purpose of which was to receive the answer of the doomed man to the question: "Which shall it be---the firing squad or the black door?"

This was not an easy question, and the prisoner hesitated, but soon he made it known that he much preferred the firing squad. Not long thereafter, a volley of shots in the courtyard announced the grim sentence had been fulfilled. The general, staring at his boots, turned to his aide and said, "You see how it is with men; they will always prefer the known way to the unknown. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. And yet I gave him his choice."

"What lies behind the black door?" asked the aide.

"Freedom," replied the general, "and I've known only a few men brave enough to take it."

Like so many stories out of the Middle East, this one carries a pretty hefty message. The first is, of course, that we will often choose the familiar, even if it's undesirable, over the unknown, which might be a wonderful opportunity. And second, that few people are brave enough to choose freedom.

I'm not saying we should reject the familiar---not by any means. But we should question the familiar. Just because it's familiar doesn't make it good, better, or the best thing to do.

When you heard the story about the black door, you probably said to yourself, "I would have chosen the black door. I would have had nothing to lose; the firing squad was certain death." And most people would say the same thing. But actually faced with the choice, would you? How many doors to freedom have we passed up during our lives because we tend to cling so fiercely to the familiar?

How many times have events come about that we worried and stewed about--- even though calamitous at the time---and that later proved to be blessings in disguise? Each of them was a black door through which we passed to greater freedom. But at the time, we would have chosen to keep things as they were if we had been given the chance.

At any rate, it's one of those stories that makes for interesting discussion at the dinner table, or with friends. Tell the story of the black door, and see what sort of reaction you get.

It's good to remember, if we can, that it is often those things we worry about and most fear that turn out to be blessings in disguise.