

I am not the poet; I am a person who is going to talk about the poet. But of course at the same time I am the poet. There is the poet in every man since the poet has to do with profound humanness. The poet is a human role far more than a position or a conglomeration of talents and skills. As we look at all these categories, we are talking about roles in the drama of humanness far more than about skills or talents.

Poets have always fascinated me. What fascinates me about people who self-consciously create poetry is the microcosm which they create. They articulate an entire universe of experience in a few short phrases. It is this microcosm which always draws and compells me, this articulation of the great universe in one or two phrases, one or two symbols. Time and time again poets explode the solitary journey. The poet breaks loose the solitary journey in a microcosmic statement.

You and I have our solitary journeys--we go through our lives and encounter what we encounter. In times like these there is a strong temptation to take my experience and allow it to be an isolated encounter, rather than to see the relationship between what I am experiencing and what other people experience. I begin to believe that my experience is unique unto myself. In a mild form, that leads to isolation--a profound sense of cut-offness or rootlessness in relationship to one's neighbor. In its most extreme sense it is paranoia, an unreflective crawling-up-inside-of oneself. It becomes the inability to communicate with one's neighbor.

The poet demands that you stand before your experience as the common experience and relate that experience to the journey of all men. One of his key tools is the emotive. In this culture, especially, it is the poet who saves us from a shallow, sterile rationalism. The poet uses the emotive dimension of life to break through and explode the entire universe in one microcosmic statement. He uses the emotive dimension--the dimension of the feelings--which is sometimes ignored and lost in a rationalistic culture. He breaks through the barriers of the self and allows us to see the relationship between who it is we are and what it is we have done and what it is that all men have encountered. I don't want to talk anymore about the poet. I want to read you something.

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey;
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet,
The camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:

A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly....

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down this
Set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and not doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We longed to return to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods,
I should be glad of another death.

The absurdity within the human journey came to my mind when I was assigned to a Youth Forum. It was not absurd because I am all that old. It was absurd because all my life I have spent my time being old and not wanting to be the youngest person in any situation. It was my life journey away from identifying with youth that was absurd.

When I arrived at the Forum it was "folly." A colleague tried to convince me otherwise, but I knew it was folly. When the time arrived for the meeting and there were only six people in the room, I knew it was folly. When I saw the rest of them were outside playing basketball I knew it was folly. When they came in and spent the morning workshops talking to each other and running around the room and falling out of their chairs and yelling across the room and using six-hundred pencils to write absolutely nothing, I knew it was folly. Then they ate lunch and ran out to play basketball and there were only three left for the afternoon spin. We had accumulated some forty people by lunchtime, but they were all out playing basketball. And so on, and on into the afternoon. When we brainstormed the problems and issues in education, it was always the teachers and administrators. I said to myself "This is folly." When they went on to discern the contradictions and challenges and came back with, sure enough, the inevitable "people don't love each other enough," I knew it was all folly.

At the end of the day we talked with the man from the Robert Kennedy Foundation who was there watching this whole event. He was considering funding Youth Forum. He came to the back of the room to sit with us and I said "this man is going to tear us to pieces." He said: "That is the most fantastic method I've ever seen. I've never seen anything as effective as that." Then, at that moment, I knew

it was folly. I knew that folly is the only thing that makes any sense. I knew that folly is the human experience. When human beings refuse to have the folly that life is, they miss also the wonder and the meaning. Life itself is folly. There is nothing more ridiculous than doing county-by-county Town Meetings or teaching Academy for a hundred thousand years, or doing social demonstration in all those villages nobody ever heard of and which nobody ever will hear of. I've been in social demonstration and we don't even remember the name of the place anymore. Life is folly and it is through the poet that the folly of life is that which reveals the way.