

THE RECOVERY OF THE OTHER WORLD

The Other World in the midst of this world has been hidden for centuries. I am reminded of a motion picture about the dinosaurs which I saw years ago entitled "The Lost World". The lostness of the Other World in the midst of this world seems to me to be much greater. To have it disclose itself afresh forces me, regardless of my years, to experience myself all over again as a stumbling child first learning to walk.

This Other World was not discovered by religious people, but by ordinary 20th century people. It had been discovered for a long time before it was finally acknowledged as the Other World in the midst of this world.

There is nothing "super" about this Other World. Once one has beheld it, it is as ordinary as any mundane activity one engages in. It is related to the explosion of consciousness that has taken place in our day, in and through which the radicality of humanness has become clear as never before in history. I would anticipate that what happens from the disclosure of the Other World to our century may be more colossal than in other great historical moments when this same Other World made its presence powerfully known to man. But we must be clear, when we talk about the Other World we are dealing with the ordinary secular world and secular consciousness of man.

The Ontology of the Other World

The Other World involves an understanding of the ontological dimension of life beyond the moral. It may help to think of Nietzsche's category "beyond good and evil". This is the realm of the Other World. It is the realm of wild self-consciousness beyond the superimposition of man's rational capacities upon it. That is a rather difficult statement to make, because to even talk about the Other World is to get your rational faculties engaged in it. But one of the remarkable things about reason is that it points beyond itself. The Other World is the world beyond reason that reason itself points to. As reason attempts to understand and talk about that world, what is being described is not that Other World itself, but is only indicative of that Other World. The Other World is radical being or raw self-consciousness, and to make an interpretation of it is to take one step backwards into this world which is the world of reason that reason invents.

Another way to talk about this philosophically is: in our time we have succeeded, in a rather admirable way, in destroying the two-story universe. We understand that we live and die in one world, and when we are dead, we are really dead. That means the two-story image has been smashed. A more direct way of saying this is that we have gotten rid of the old metaphysics which was related to the second-story universe, or the understanding that finally reason was the king of the universe.

In our day we are building a new metaphysics. A human being grasps himself or herself as living on one plane, but has experienced the transparency of that plane itself. I like to compare it to holding a match underneath paper and first seeing little streaks appear, then see it turn brown, and finally the light breaks through and pops into flames.

Maybe I can illustrate it this way: we have lived in a time when the uniqueness of the person was emphasized. This happens, I suspect, whenever a culture collapses in its ability to tell a person what it is to be human. At that point you have a new birth of existentialistic reflection. For black persons in our day to be human beings they had to embrace their blackness to the hilt. It so happens that in doing so they enabled some white folk, for the first time in their lives, to embrace their whiteness. But when they embraced their uniqueness to the hilt, black or white, they experienced transparency. It was as though their fist went through their uniqueness. Right now we are discovering all over again what it means to be human beings beyond our uniqueness--not by going around our uniqueness, but by going through our uniqueness. That is the experience of transparency.

We could talk about the experience of women and youth in our age exactly the same way; and also people in the non-Western world. After World War II, there was an emphasis upon the particular, the unique nationalism. But lately I have discovered that across the world people have moved through their uniqueness and are discovering, again, humanness itself.

In this transparency of one world, or one plane is the new metaphysics. What I suspect history will call this, in one way or another, is phenomenology, or phenomenological thinking. The metaphysical question of "the real" as an

abstraction apart from my consciousness is bracketed. I bracket that and concentrate the states of consciousness which is the Other World, or is my experience of the Other World. One soon discovers that a state of being, a state of awareness, a state of consciousness, is the most objective reality ever experienced. In these matters one cannot let the epistemology in which subjectivity and objectivity are divided, get in the way.

What I refer to as a state of being is comprised of an image, an accompanying affection, and a pre-decisional resolve. Golding, in his book The Inheritors, described coming into a new situation and experiencing it as though chaos had suddenly taken over because the images in his mind were not capable of giving meaning to what was impinging upon him. In the book he is pictured as pressing his palms on his temples in order to produce a new image that would give the situation meaning. I call what was going on in that character a "Big Think". Grasping the Other World involves a Think--something beneath an image, an idea, a construct, or a concept. When you are dealing with a state of being, you are after the Think.

The second aspect of a state of being is a "Great Feel". I have a colleague who calls the Think impressionistic and the Feel expressionistic. For me, the impressionist painters were starting with what could be seen and pushed it until it bent into the Other World. Then the expressionists went clear through the Other World.

If the Think is primordial, so is the Feel and they cannot be separated.

The great Think fundamentally is composed of mystery--the mystery that never goes away, the "no-thing-ed-ness", "Nothingness". The big Think is of nothingness, absolute nothingness. In that primordial Big Think that mystery becomes the final overagainstness of your total existence.

It has many faces and many forms.

The Big Feel that always accompanies the Big Think is awe. Awe, too, has many faces. As Otto pointed out so clearly in his book, The Idea of the Holy, awe is always simultaneous dread and fascination. When you deal with that Big Think, you are splitting reason, you are breaking through reason, dealing always with that which is just beyond reason. And in the awareness of your overagainstness to that mystery, you are shattered with terror. I like to think that mankind

came into existence through awe, that many stabs toward consciousness of consciousness that could have produced the human race failed because that un-man was rocked by the terror he experienced, of the sheer mystery which consciousness about consciousness is, and pulled out.

And yet, with this terror is fascination, which is harder to describe than terror. It is a compulsion over which you grasp you have no control whatsoever. I remember not so long long ago, I thought I was caught; I thought people were on to me. And before I knew it, I ended up over a toilet with my hands on each side, vomiting. But in the midst of that terror, I perceived a fascination. At such a time you do not say this is the leading of Providence, but when you are finally able to get back on your feet, you know this was the hand of the One who, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to call your God and your Father. He does not look like your God and your Father when he beats you, but He is.

Perhaps you have thought of the area of psychology. In a recent book, Joseph Campbell deals with schizophrenia. I am not sure he says it, but the difference between a spirit man in the Other World and the schizophrenic is that the spirit man is swimming and the schizophrenic is drowning.

Or, I mention to you mythology. You have been taught to believe that mythology is kind of a fairy story that mankind has outgrown. Mythology is the frame whereby man has held his experience of the Other World. The mythologies of the past are gone. They no longer communicate to us. Therefore, probably the biggest contradiction in our time is the absence of an adequate mythology whereby a man has a roadmap over and through the topography of the Other World.

The Poetic Topography of the Other World

In our time the world has become slowly conscious of the Other World in four areas. To use a little poetry, we have called the first area, "The Land of Mystery". In our lifetime, people have rediscovered this mystery. As a matter of fact, the natural sciences, the psychological sciences, the biological sciences, and the mathematical sciences have discovered it. This is the first breakthrough of a fantastic area in the Other World.

The second breakthrough has been the area of freedom. We call it "The River of Consciousness". This is Jean Paul Sartre's poetry of the en soi and the pour soi, or Kierkegaard's understanding of the self as a relationship which relates itself to itself, and when it goes about its proper business of being a relationship which relates itself to itself, it grounds itself transparently in the power that constituted it. But these are only two of the hundreds of people who have broken through in this area.

The third way in which people in our time have broken into the Other World is with the concept of engagement. The next two areas have been broken loose more by social upheavals than by any intellectual schools. The youth culture in our time was a sociological manifestation of a search for a dimension of existence that this present world was not capable of providing. One of the crucial insights they held before the world was authentic engagement in life itself. They are the ones who began to recover the word "love" in any serious meaning whatsoever. In the midst of their lostness they began to grasp what it meant to be genuinely concerned with that which was unsynonymous with oneself. Their revolt against vocations, and their revolt against money for the sake of money itself, were indicative of this kind of awareness in which love--if you please, agape--was giving yourself to the journey of mankind and not giving yourself to yourself. This area we call "The Mountain of Care." The Other World which is the realm of the awful mystery and the realm of radical consciousness, is also the world of taking upon your back global responsibility for the whole journey of man.

Before I go on to the last one, I pause to remind you that because the Other World is beyond the realm of good and evil, it is in the ontological and not in the moral--that whatever you say about the Other World is always in the indicative and never in the imperative. The Other World knows nothing whatsoever about imperatives. That is in this world and without it you would not have this world. In the Other World there is only the indicative. When you talk about the Mountain of Care, or picking up the burden of all mankind, you are not talking about something that says you ought to do it. The indicative is that the man who lives in the Other World has the world on his shoulders. When you live before the mystery, the world is yours.

The last area we call "The Sea of Tranquility", which is the recovery of that weird kind of peace where there is no peace. There is no sentiment here, for the Other World is right in the midst of this world, and there has never been any peace in this world for a man who has the world on his shoulders.

I never dreamed that this awareness would break loose in my lifetime. We who worked for the renewal of the church had to fight any nonsense about peace or joy in this world. You would never have had the renewed church if you had not slain that sentimental misunderstanding of what authentic peace and joy are. I never dreamed there would be a possibility that we could use those words authentically.

Actually, in the Other World there is only one state of being, not four. For where consciousness is, there is the mystery, there is the world on your back, and there is the peace that passes reason's capacity to grasp it as peace. I tell you, this world, in which the Other World is, is a tragic world. Unamuno is quite right when he talks about the tragedy of the world, in the sense that existence is itself tragic. If the whole journey of man is not your specific vocation, you would never have the slightest idea what you mean when you talk about the joy unspeakable and full of glory. When you dare to live your life before the mystery, there is peace and joy. If you have authentic peace and joy, you can be sure you are living your life before the mystery.

The Basic Significance of the Other World

In conclusion, when dealing with the Other World which is in the midst of this world, you are dealing with what it means to be a human being. Thirty years ago our whole world was hanging on by its fingernails, raising the question, "What is life all about?" Now we have come out of the trough and are moving on the crest of the wave. Once again in history, man has found the answer, his answer. Now when someone begins to ask you what life is all about, you have something to bear witness to.

Very likely also, within the poetry of the Other World is the secret to the new mythology that will enable mankind to find his way to swim in the rivers of radical consciousness. It has been a long time since man with any sense of genuineness could speak of what fulfillment means, of what happiness means.

And then we know that moralities rise out of new definitions of man, of new experiences of what it is to be human. As you delineate the topography of the Other World, you are building the basis for the new morality that every sensitive person is screaming for--not only the youth, but old men and old women. We are beginning to define again what we mean by a man of faith, a man of spirit in the world.

In working on the Other World, you are also building the tool for the new evangelism. By evangelism I mean how you can elicit out of people the decision to live an authentic life. Years ago when I was teaching in seminary, one of the problems people screamed about was that they had no way for the new theology to really get down into the pews. It was not that the clergy could not articulate it. But lives are not changed by intellectual ideas. The work on the Other World is the beginning of the creation of an instrument that will enable people to have self-consciousness about the states of being that define them.