

IDENTITY

Most people can deal with the pleasant aspects of life, but the disagreeable ones cause a little more trouble, even if they are simply slightly annoying. I was in a Chinese restaurant on Argyle other night, and I ordered Won Ton soup. After three years in Asia, I still order Won Ton soup. The soup came to my table warm, not hot; there is that type of slightly annoying dimension to your life. Then, there are things that are profoundly destructive in your existence. My mother died of cancer about 12 years ago. I still have not really recovered from that unbelievable shock to my life's fibers.

Particularly in this culture, we have taken the disagreeable and tried to figure out how to deal with it. For the most part, we have lumped it together, called it evil and have devised three ways to handle it. One is to relate to it as though everything were all bad. Or, you can relate to it as though everything were partly bad and partly good. Thirdly, you can relate to it as though everything were all good. That last method requires a trick. We are all aware of how this happens.

The first method, in which you relate to all as bad, is really a variation of Platonism. You think that somehow, your life is a mistake. When you get into the next world, sometimes called "going to heaven," you will get what you really have coming to you, which will be good. This type of thing happens to a pregnant teen-ager in a tenement, when she is caught up in images of hoping that she can get into that other world. You run into lots of people in Religious Houses who operate as though next year, life can really begin. This year is fundamentally a mistake.

The second approach is somewhat similiar, however it is a little more optimistic. There is good and bad, and you stoically bear through the disagreeable parts until the things you like show up again. The third approach, where you say that the bad is not really there, is probably the trickiest one. When something you do not like shows up, all you have to do is make a creative, decisive stance of affirmation, and then, the bad will cease to exist. These are all ways of pretending that the disagreeable in our lives will somehow disappear, rather than a stance of deciding to deal with that.

We all know, and we all have-experienced that something happens to us in the midst of those events. When we are convinced that our lives have been utterly ripped apart, utterly smashed, we are given back our lives. This usually happens during profound disorders in our existence--losing a job, a relative dying, getting a divorce. We once again experience the fact that by driving through the profoundly disagreeable in our lives, we become capable of facing life anew, caring again, and sensing ourselves as having purpose, direction and meaning in our existence.

Tonight, I want to capture this happening in the mundanity of our lives. This is the crux of it. We are clear that this happens at times of pivotal decisions. I got to thinking about what is often a typical evening. It does not usually happen this way, but periodically, I have evenings that go like this.

It begins as I look at dinner and think, "Surely, there must be a better way to earn a living." This is partly because I have a very tender tummy and most of the stuff that you guys like, my stomach just rejects in despair. Next, I go to my 8:00 meeting. It starts out late, and there are six interruptions and two new assignments -- it drives me nuts. All of you keep dropping into Spirit Life with all those good ideas. It is one of those nights. Then, I lay out my model, put it on the board, and it is slaughtered. I do not mean it is crucified, because it does not lay its life down voluntarily; I mean slaughtered.

I go to my 10:30 meeting. It is late and the issues that I have been waiting for all day long do not even get on the agenda. Finally, the meeting ends at 12:30. I go upstairs and discover I have been assigned to India, or worse yet, back to San Francisco. I finally say, "at least I can go home to my loving wife." I dash upstairs and discover that she is in Minneapolis on a development trip or, I find that she has taken this night to reorganize her notes, and she is spreading them all over the room. As soon as I walk into the room, she starts talking on and on about her great successes in development and so forth. Then the coup d'etate -- she has bought some more of that terrible-smelling sausage and has put it in with the foods that I have been storing carefully.

At that point in my life, I just decide that I have had it. I go to bed, and I resolve never to get up again. I am going to stay in bed for the rest of my life. You know how that goes; you have done it. I really envy people--but I have trouble getting up in the morning. I have not willingly gotten up any morning in the last ten years -- a couple of afternoons, maybe, but not the mornings. After a night like the one I just described, when the alarm goes off, my life -- not my brain, not my stomach -- but my whole life just goes, "NO!" I sleep on.

After about 20 hours (I cannot seem to make it past 20 hours of sleep and I have to play possum the last four), as I start to regain consciousness, I begin that great litany that you all know. It goes: "There are only three things in life. The first is, I do not know what the devil I am doing. The second is, I am sure as hell not cut out to do this kind of work. And the third is, I do not give a damn. And the greatest of these is, I do not give a damn."

You think that is not part of the lecture but it really is. This lecture is on "I believe," "I care," and "I am chosen' or "I choose." This litany is exactly the way we try to refuse to be human beings. When we say, "I do not know what the devil I am doing," we are flying in the face of "I believe." When we say "I sure as hell am not cut out for this kind of work," we are flying in the face of "I am chosen ." And when we say, "I do not give a damn," we are flying in the face of "I care." I want to push through on these again. These are familiar to any of you who have been here.

In this lecture, I am talking about three things -- faith, love and hope -- the "I believe," the "I care," and the "I am chosen." These are, if it is helpful, the knowing dimension of faith, hope and love. In each of these, I am going to try to use the same kinds of categories. I will analyze first of all, normal care or belief; then unbelief or uncared; and third, the "beyond" category, or belief beyond belief. The last category is how you return and are able to pick up all the beliefs and cares that you do not want to have anything to do with.

Let us talk about belief. The point here is that every human being counts on something. He puts weight on something, whether it is his wife, or money, or nation, or being a Religious House prior. He counts on something. When he fails, or when he ceases, he commits suicide. There are subtle ways of doing that; they are not all open. There are subtle ways to refuse to be a human being.

We are thrown into life with those things we count on or with basic assumptions about what is significant. Then, life calls these into question. Something happens which allows you to say, "Oh look, my silly belief was just smashed." Life itself cares enough about you to grab hold of you and give you a brand new way of living. Every man is clear that life is insignificant today. You could document for hours the fact that people no longer seek significance in life.

One interesting dynamic occurs particularly in the Movement, where people join Religious Houses to find significance. People join the Movement to find significance because the world has smashed into them and shown them that life is insignificant. We constantly create ways to hide the fact that life is insignificant. It is a lot harder to perpetuate those ways in a Religious House because the House is devoted to holding people over against the raw naked, insignificance, which is in fact, the way life is. As a result, when you get involved looking for significance, you are rudely shocked. That is great because it allows you to see what is actually going on in life.

For example, I used to be a good teacher, and I was recently thinking of my colleague, Joe Pierce. Several years ago, Pierce was talking to me, saying, "I am no longer a good teacher." I could not make any sense of this statement, because I know he is one of the best teachers around. So I said, "You are just being modest." But no, he was not being modest; he really believed that. I thought, "I am such a good teacher and he thinks he is not. Try and make sense out of that."

It seems to me now that Pierce had driven through to seeing the profound undertaking that teaching really is. He also saw the ways in which he was totally adequate of meeting the great expectations and the great need that exists. Consequently, he experienced humiliation in the basic sense of that word. He saw that he was not equal to the task and in his very being, he experienced himself as not a good teacher. This is what I mean by having your basic grasp after significance wiped out of your existence.

Come back to me lying in bed for a minute. I go through the time there and I finally reach a point where I am literally compelled by life to get up. Moses was walking up a mountain when this realization literally leaped out of a bush at him. Or, it falls out of the sky on your head. It dawns on you;

it finally occurs to you that as you are lying in bed, life is forcing you out. You are saying, "I am not going to get up. No! I will not be tricked again. Remember last night? I will not go through that again. Life is just . . ." "Come on, come on, come on." And you respond, "No, no, no." Then it dawns on you that life can be trusted, not because it is trustworthy (it is not) but because your only alternatives are to get up or to go down to the washroom and slash your wrists. The latter alternative is a refusal to pay attention to what is going on as you lie there in bed.

This all happens very quickly. Sometimes I think that it happens chronologically, where first I believe, then I care and then I see I am chosen, but I know they happen simultaneously. I find myself saying, "I am not going back to Spirit Life under any circumstances. It is the stupidest assignment that I have ever seen." I get up and start wandering around the building, trying to figure out what I am going to do all day. Then life confronts me. I run into some of my colleagues and they come rushing in with a universe. When that universe lands on top of me, I discover that there is life, demanding that I deal with it. It dawns on me that I care.

It is not that I want to care, mind you. It has nothing to do with what I want. It is that I just do, and then, that I am chosen. You are lying in bed and in spite of everything that has happened, you decide to trust life; once again, to get up and go out again. It is not that somehow, you made a mistake in your evaluation. You were right. It is insignificant. It is absurd. But nevertheless, "decide to live that."

You are like a human being returning from a foreign plant. You land. You get out and look around. You do not recognize a thing and you wander around trying to figure things out and all of a sudden, you notice that you can re-engage. But, coming back from the other side, you are re-engaging totally with the awareness that all the stuff here is insignificant; and you go back to washing dishes, making love to your wife and setting up meetings.

When you look squarely in the face of Town Meetings, you know that you do not know why we are doing it. You cannot make any rational, coherent, significant sense out of the whole thing. And there are an awful lot of arguments against it. What happens on the other side of this event is that you say, "I know quite a bit about setting up a Town Meeting in the midst of all the external chaos of not knowing what the hell I am doing." It is that kind of return to the mundane. I create systems of understanding. I create ways of creating significance literally out of chaos. But it is only on the other side of seeing total insignificance.

All right, let us go on to care. I was sitting in a local restaurant working on this lecture this afternoon. I looked at the jukebox and noticed a song called, "I Care." Now, I have a lot of trouble deciding how to relate to the romantic images in our society. But I was really excited about this lecture. So I started flipping through the names of all the songs; even started writing some of them down. There were songs like "Always," "Best of My Love," "I Can't Help It," "I'll Do Anything."

Half of me reacts by saying, "That is just romanticism. If dumb, ignorant people knew better, they would not pay attention to those songs." I think there is an element of truth in that. You can get going in such a way that you think this lady over here is the end of the earth. It is dumb to focus all of your attention that way, but people do it. You understand what might be going on.

The other half of me starts going, "Well, Vance, if you were assigned to the 20th Century, and you had to come up with a way to express ultimate care so that people in the world would pay attention to it, what would you create if you were the mystery trying to sneak down in?" I recalled talking to a colleague about Ray Charles. He said that Ray Charles once told him that when he writes a song about a woman he loves, in the first instance he is writing about how that woman represents the whole of life over against one man. And when he sings about a woman, he is singing about the whole of life -- the mystery is one of the words.

Then, you have to tread lightly and try to appropriate what is going on. You either have to do that or decide that three billion people are stupid. Reality probably lies somewhere in the tension of appropriating that kind of care for a particular, and yet not getting trapped in the particular.

And yet, care always shows up totally destroyed. In California, we were setting up Town Meetings, and were invited to one of these state Bi-tennial workshops. We were on the main program with a display and a huge banner. When you walked into the auditorium, all you could see was our banner. Afterwards, as we tried to figure out how to follow it up, we thought, "Well, if we could get that network to set up little meetings, we could talk to those people."

We started planning and analyzing what it would take for that to happen, and so forth. Something happened, and all of a sudden (you still hate it) you try to succeed, you throw yourself into it and suddenly, the hatred is overwhelmed. It is still there, but it is overwhelmed. Passion is released that you cannot rationalize. You cannot comprehend where all that passion came from. And the next thing you know, you are back out setting up Town Meetings. You are back working in production; you are back doing things that have to be done. Care has been reduced to your life.

--Robert Vance

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