

FREEDOM OF DECISION

After the Great Depression, my father, who was a publican, lost a small fortune, so he quit the big pub in Sydney on Parramatta Road and we all got into the car in 1936 and we went to a little seaside town called Port Macquarie on the North Coast of New South Wales where we leased the Royal Hotel, which hotel was located at the exact point where the Hastings River met the Pacific Ocean. Now the Hastings River was a good river by Australian standards. Australia is not noted for its large rivers. The Hastings rose just 100 miles from the coast on the slopes of a mountain that I used to call the Elephant mountain because of its shape but its proper name was Mount Seaview. Now that river, it could be said, was the arena of my whole childhood and adolescence and it flowed through my brain and still does. It flows through all my memory and I knew every part of its lower reaches. I explored it, swam in it, fished in it, and nearly died by shark attack in it. I never explored the upper reaches of it where the mountains were, but I wanted to one day. Later, when my father retired, we moved from the place where the sea met the river to six miles up the river where we built a place called "Shangri-la" and it was located right on the same Hastings River. We had a boat -- just a little motor boat. And we had a garage right on the river and in that garage we set up a large broadcasting system with two speakers facing the river. One of my delights, when I was a lad, was to get out in a motor boat. We had two long-playing records. That was the day when the long-playing records were just coming in and I used to put those two long-playing records on. I know that you won't believe this but that doesn't matter: one of them was a record of great marches and the other one was a record of great waltzes. I used to put those on, drive the motor boat out into the middle of the river and stop the motor and float from the stream listening to that great music across the river. And down the river from time to time came the great timber drogher. It was something like a paddle steamer except that it carried timber. And I used to read a great deal of Tom Sawyer in those days or Huck Finn. I always forget which was which they blended for me. And I always grew up with this in my brain. When I came to America the one thing that I wanted to see was the Mississippi and so one day, my wife and I, on missional discontinuity, drove out to the back end of Illinois up to the Palisades overlooking the Mississippi. And there it was. Except it wasn't a big wide stream, it was made up of what in geography we call anabranches. Hundreds and hundreds of anabranches. And I remember saying, how on earth could anyone make his way down that river. It goes a thousand different ways and divides up into a million parts.

Another thing that happened to me in my adolescence was that I went to a convent school, a little Catholic school run by the nuns. There was a round that we used to sing, and it went "Row, row, row, your boat, gently down the stream, Merrily, merrily, life is just a dream." And I used to like the first line of that because I loved rowing, but the line that I rebelled against was the last line: "Life is but a dream." I never said it aloud but I used to say to myself that is wrong, that is wrong. Life is not a

dream: it's real. Anyway, we are going to go on another boat ride down the Mississippi. And we are now in Trek VII. Freedom of Decision - Me and my conscience.

Now I want to give the lecture first and then just talk to you about it, so here we go. There comes a very particular moment in life when the ground of moral principles, man's laws, rules, regulations, ethical guidelines, principles, rules of etiquette, and the whole panoply of virtues and values and motivations and perspectives and purposes and means and ends and categorical imperatives - all collapse. They are snatched away. And you see that not a single one of these can freight the context for making the decision that you have on your hands, let alone justify it. And at that point, you are driven beyond all morality, beyond good and evil, beyond right and wrong, beyond any virtue. You have crossed the Rubicon, and you see, in the midst of this exquisite ambiguity, where all your bearings are gone that you alone can make the decision, that you are the basis of judgment, that you are in charge, that you are your conscience, and that nothing, principle, law, virtue, or morality system can in the slightest way justify your decision. It is then that you are the sole determiner of good and evil, in that situation, it is then in the very moment of action, that you see that you are approved you see that your deeds have cosmic sanction. Life approves of you. You are a privileged particle of existence, in fact. Being is smiling at you, and they admire you and as Being's buddy. All you can do is to smile back. And you know that you can't do anything wrong. You hear your name called beckoning you to do the absurdity that you are doing and to be the absurd one that keeps on doing the absurd. And now you are God's man. Nothing else can give your decision, your deed, your life its significance, and therefore you can walk into anything as one with a charge to keep, as one who moves with secret authority in every situation.

The first part of this trek happens when life is going on in all its mundane normalcy and you are handling one accustomed situation after another with a fair modicum of ease and all of a sudden you find yourself no longer at home on familiar ground like turning a corner on a road that you have driven to work on for twenty years and you turn the corner and instead of seeing things as usual, you find that your car is about to be engulfed by a giant dinosaur 20 feet in front of it, and unless you take drastic action real fast, it's going to be curtains. It's something like that. I like mundane situations. You are sitting up in front in Academy running a good old Ecclesiola solitary after a hard day and you find well-laid out instructions and you are at the contemplation part when a~ of a sudden, without any warning, a participant begins to shake and then to shudder and the whole table starts to shake and shudder and then lo and behold he starts to neigh and whinny like a horse and then you know, that the moment has arrived and you are in the saddle and you are in charge. You have got to do something or the whole show is going to go to pot.

And it is then that you feel like Mountain Rivera as he steps out of the dressing room to make his march to the arena and the ring and the crowds are cheering in jest and jeering in earnest, whistles and cat calls, and you know that you have to get into that ring with those ridiculous pygmy Indians, with your Indian head dress on and put on a great performance for the utterly hostile crowd. What for? So that the colleague that bet against you can rake in enough money to save his own miserable

skin. And as Mountain comes down the aisle, you remember, that terrible music comes on. I'll never forget that music, and you hear in that music the eerie, sad, tragic fate of being a human being who is his freedom. It goes like this dum, ta-dum, . . . Now that last line has always carried for me the universality of that picture, that particular situation, that was the very first thing that I memorized from Heavyweight.

And what you realize in the very pit of your stomach, (This is not an intellectual exercise. It is in your gut), is that you have been betrayed. There is no map for this kind of thing. You have lost your compass. And all your coordinates and your computer are paralyzed. There is no data to work with or there is so much data coming in that the computer just grinds to a halt.

In a paroxysm of anguish, you know that you have been sold down the river. And all that comes out at first is a snarl of blind animal-like fury and anger. And then your next response is a great interior scream help me, for God's sake, someone, help. Then in dreadful loneliness you see that there is no one to help, no guide, no method to fall back on all that there is in front of you is a gaping abyss. Nothing has a name any more except the ship and the storm. I think that this poetry from Antigone gets hold of it:

"There had to be one man that said yes, somebody had to agree to captain the ship, she had sprung a hundred leaks, she was flooded to the water line with crime, ignorance and poverty, the wheel was swinging wildly in the wind, the crew had mutinied and every man jack among them was bent on trying to save his own miserable skin. Was that a time do you think for playing with words like Yes or no? You grab the wheel. You right the ship in the face of a mountain of water. You give an order and if one man refuses to obey, you shoot straight into the mob. Into the mob, I say. The thing that drops when you shoot may be someone who poured you a drink the night before but it has no name, and you, braced at the wheel, you have no name either! Nothing has a name except the ship and the storm."

You remember that movie "Airport" a lot of you have seen, set at our own O'Hare airport. One of those Chicago snowstorms was in progress. Only one runway was operating. There is a 707 slewed out on the runway bogged in slush and there is another 707 coming in, the last for that night and it is crippled and it has got to land and it has to land in 5 minutes, and one man holds the key to that one is the problem shooter at the airport. So, he goes out to that plane and he revs it up and puts ballast under the wheel and nothing happens. The aircraft won't budget. People are screaming at him over every speaker system "You get that plane out of the road or you will lose your job," and other people are screaming at him, "Get out of that plane, you are going to get killed;" and the pilot up in the other plane, is screaming at him, "Get that plane out of the way or we are going to have a disaster. I am coming in, in 4 minutes," and so on there it goes. He revs the engines up and every jet engine is screaming full power and it is two minutes to go and still it won't move! It is that sort of feeling. You say to yourself there is going to be a disaster here unless I make something happen. And you have not got a single solitary idea what to do and at that point dizziness turns to nausea and you may

unceremoniously vomit. And you see with blinding clarity, that's all there is. Do you remember that old movie, "The Egg and I"? You see with blinding clarity that all there is, is the Indicative and I. At that point, if you don't faint, you decide out of the sheer givenness of the situation that right and wrong and good and bad have about as much relevance as Emily Post at a gorilla banquet. In blind compliance with that same indicative, you execute the necessary deed. In that moment, you experience your whole being as stretched tight to breaking point and strung out all the way across the horizon and you feel that you are going to be torn apart at the seams, that there is an atom bomb inside you that is going, to explode you into a million pieces. Now at that moment which is one of the great moments of your life, at that moment, you pass from the realm of the moral to the kingdom of the ontological. In sheer dread, **you act** and that is one of the greatest movements of your existence.

I like homely examples. We used to live by the river. I think that I said that. And it was 1947, and we were going to have our first airline service using Sunderland flying boats. They were going to land on the river in front of our home and use it as the terminal. The flying boat made a perfect landing right in the middle of the river and dropped anchor, and that meant that the passengers had to be unloaded, the luggage taken ashore from the flying boat to our jetty. Apparently that part of the arrangements was not very clear so at one point, my father said to me, "Get into that motor boat and go out and get the luggage. So, I said, "Oh" You have to get a picture of me then. I was very small. There I go out to the flying boat and I thought that there would be just one suitcase - anyway, I pulled up to the flying boat, see the navigator, and he begins to hand me luggage and he said, "You are the luggage boat? Well, here it comes." And he loaded the boat up to the plimsoll line and there was a wind coming up on the river and the waves started to rise. They don't have to get very high on a river when you are only driving a small motor boat. And there was I, a mere mite, in charge of this boat, luggage banked right up - about three inches to the top of the water line. And then four people got in. And there I was - at least I thought I would get some sympathy from the passengers - they might tell me what to do, but lo, and behold, they were having a swimming fashion show on top of the flying boat and all the people in the boat were looking at the show and there was I with the waves coming up and the water already slopping over the front of the boat. I had to decide what to do. And there I was, in charge of the boat and the luggage and the future of that airline in my hands and no guidelines. Well, I did it. I got all the way back to the jetty and I parked the boat and I got everything off without swamping the boat or losing the luggage or drowning the passengers or ruining the airline. You feel great afterwards.

But it doesn't always work out so well. I was in a religious order for seventeen years of my life. When I was in the novitiate. I remember one day we were at retreat conference and all the religious superiors were up in front and the novices were down the back and all the people in between were in the middle. It reminds you of Bonhoeffer, Paragraph 5. The conference was just five minutes under way and the speaker was beginning to warm to his topic when, without warning a tabby cat strolled out onto the stage, sat in front of the speaker and meowed. The religious superior who was up on the Stage just looked at it, attempted to ignore it, but the cat would not allow itself to be ignored. And finally he said, "Perhaps, somebody might do something," and all the religious superiors sitting, in front with

arms folded just kept sitting there. So I said, "This is ridiculous," and got out of my seat, walked up the aisle, jumped up on the stage, took the cat by the neck to the nearest window and without looking threw it out. Now I felt like Robin Hood. What I didn't know until later and you won't believe this was that the vicar general of the diocese was walking in the garden below and that cat landed right on his head and I did the Litany with my arms in the form of a cross for the next two weeks. Often the acted-on indicative becomes interrogative and you freely surrender the deed, and the surrendered deed is the only good deed there is.

The indicative offers you a million ways to go and all your senses just suddenly start to reel and in a spinning dizziness you say, "Stop the world, I want to get off." It is then that you see that you are your own moral metaphor. Now you see that you are indeed the decalogue. And with that realization comes an outrageous sense of being invincible and unconquerable. But when you get that far the only thing that you see out in front of you is crisis, crisis, crisis. In the badlands it is High Noon every ten seconds and yet you are flooded with power and you are making decisions as fast as popping corn. It is as if you are doing, a mile a minute in your canoe, shooting the rapids. Or you're on the freeway and you are driving all the time in the outside lane, passing everything on the road and you know, as your most profound conviction, that you need no one's approval. In the brazen effrontery, you know that you can stare Pontius Pilate, out until the crack of dawn. In the land of the ontological you are king. You and your conscience are fused. You are utterly nonchalant of either approval or disapproval. And you say to yourself, "This is simply scandalous!" Yet with a calm deliberateness that seems to be utterly un-you, you act with a sureness and a competence that has the feel of your last dream when like a "Minnesota Fats" you walked up to the billiard table and in three superbly executed shots in front of 100 people, using a broken cue, you sank every ball on the table, put down the broken cue, dusted your hands, and walked out in smug complacency whistling "Everything's up to Date in Kansas City."

I remember three years ago when I was in the Sydney Religious House, I decided that I needed to get married, and I knew who I needed to get married to: Jeanette Marks. Nobody else thought that I knew, but I knew. I knew that the thing I had to do was to stay in this particular order and I could not afford to leave a religious order again and so I needed to get married to an order woman and to an American. Second, I needed to go global, and I could do both those things in one fell swoop by marrying Jeanette Marks. And so on the 29th of May 1970, on a family night, I sat down at my desk in my little room and I wrote out my plan to marry her. She didn't know; at least I didn't think that she knew. We hadn't even been out on a date. Now I saw with blinding lucidity the very day that I needed to marry her. It was on my 39th birthday on the 4th of July. She was an American and I was born on the 4th of July and I had been lying by a pool. And this was my 39th birthday and I needed to grasp my destiny by one great symbolic deed. That was utterly crucial. The problem was that that was only five weeks away. The idea was simply scandalous.' I drew up my model, walked out the door, stuck it under the door of the first priors who were also having their family meeting, went down the stairs, whistling "I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair." and halfway down the stairs I listened for the gasps and they came. And at that point I knew at the very moment of my most brazen audacity that

Being was actually smiling, in fact actually beaming at me. It let me get away with it. I actually did get married on that 4th of July. I won't tell you what I had to go through to get married, but I made it. Then you see yourself as a very privileged part of existence; you see Being smiling at you, and you decide to smile right back. But that is sometimes difficult.

I remember when I was in the religious order I spoke of - the De La Salle Brothers, a teaching order. And for many years I taught, faithfully. And then something happened that broke me loose to see that nobody in that whole school, that whole region knew why on earth they were teaching school or training football teams. And I became a disestablishment writer and critic and writer of letters to the editors you know the sort of thing, and I formed a cadre in the community (brash one that I was) to change the school that I was in and at the end of that year, the four of us were reassigned north, east, south and west, (if I were the superior that is what I would have done).

I finished up in another school forbidden to write, forbidden to speak in public, forbidden to teach anything radical, forbidden to do anything out of the ordinary except teach. And about that time I committed a major indiscretion. I wrote an article without asking anyone's permission, for the most prominent Catholic education journal in Australia calling into question the whole rationale of Catholic education in Australia and in fact the globe. Then after that, the day of judgment came. I was teaching Macbeth, Act 4, Scene 1. I remember it well. Ten minutes after the lesson began, I was called out of the classroom to report to the provincial superior. He had just flown directly from another city. I knew that something was wrong. That interview was very brief.

The bottom suddenly fell out of my life. Everything was known everything. And he went on to say that he couldn't understand how, etc. etc. What on earth was I thinking of? I had been forbidden to write anything. I said virtually nothing. My whole life fell with a great crash into the abyss. My reputation had just evaporated. I was known utterly. All manner of things to say flashed before me but all I could say was, "I am genuinely sorry for causing you so much trouble." He said, "You will want to consider whether there is any point in your remaining in the order." I said, "I will consider that very carefully," got up and left the room. Now at that point all that I could see that was any real possibility was to go down to Port Phillip Bay and swim out to sea, there was no future, the game was up, and all was on the hazard. Now the amazing thing was and I cannot explain it was that instead of reaching for the sleeping tablets or packing my bags, I walked straight across that school yard into the corridor, into the classroom only 10 minutes later, picked up my copy of Macbeth and kept right on teaching, Act IV, Scene I that is where Lady Macbeth and all the children get slaughtered in one fell swoop. It was an incredible feeling. By every criteria I should have been racked by guilt but there was an indicative of 35 seventeen-year-olds waiting to hear what was going to happen to Lady Macbeth and her children. And they weren't mildly interested in my predicament.

I saw that life really was my buddy. I got away with it. Being let me get away with it. The superior, who was morally outraged followed me across the school yard and stood outside looking through the classroom windows at me shaking his head in disbelief. Apparently he thought that I should have repaired straight to the chapel and repented in sack cloth and ashes and there I was teaching Act IV, Scene 1.

It is then that you see your life as a blank check signed by Being and you feel like Jack Brabham driving a Camaro passing every car on the road while all the other drivers are shaking their fists at you. Life is just a breeze. And you could not go wrong even if you tried. You just float in sheer relaxation. A dreadful complacency settles in, and you know that the whole world is your oyster. Everything is permitted you just decide. You get intoxicated on that kind of freedom. Like that man in that Airport scene -- there he is with the engines of the Boeing 707 just barreling away and nothing is happening and in comes this crippled plane heading straight for the runway and the trouble shooter is there with everybody set against him with no support. Then he decides to trust everything in that plane completely, he puts the engines up to maximum capacity, the engineers are screaming at him, "You will blow this 7 million dollar plane up if you do that," so he gets out his cigar and puts it jauntily in his mouth, puts on this great big grin, grabs the stick and gives it everything it's got and the plane moves. It is that sort of feeling, as if you are king of the cosmic castle. You have made an assault on Being and won!

I was driving home with a colleague after a highly successful recruitment expedition and got behind a truck carrying crates of frozen prawns, I think you call them crayfish. As it pulled up at the red light, some of the prawns fell out on the road, I was coming j about 20 yards behind and the moment that the lights turned green, I sort of put my foot on the accelerator, opened the door, steered with one hand, reached out the door, scooped up the prawns with one hand, drove with the other hand, passed one to my colleague and popped another into my mouth and I was king of the cosmic castle. Well, you feel that the sun rises especially for you every morning you just feel so good.

I was in another school once. It was in the time of Dialogue Masses. The Roman Catholics will understand this. Dialogue Masses were just coming in. Our religious community was having dialogue masses in our chapel, but in our parish church everybody was just dumb silent the whole hour of the mass. And so I got the idea I said to myself this is a terrible pity, all those people coming to Mass and they sit there like a lot of dumb ox's. Somebody ought to do something." So I said to my religious superior one morning, "Why don't you go down and tell our parish priest that we ought to have some dialogue masses and wake these people up?" My religious superior was a pragmatic man and he said, "They just gave us \$10,000 to keep this school going another month, we don't want to upset anything do we?" I pushed a little bit when I saw he wasn't going to do anything. So I said, "Why don't you let me go down?" and he said, "All right, you go down." So I walked down to the presbytery and knocked

on the front door and I went into his capacious suite and the reverend pastor was drinking whiskey and I knew that I had won. And he said, "Would you like a drink?" and I knew again that I had won. Next month there we had a Dialogue Mass in the parish church and we kept on having dialogue masses there. It is after a time like that when you hear your name called: Brian, your job in life is to do the absurd and to keep on doing it. History, you know, has called my name and elected me to do the absurd. And so now I am God's man and I am here to do a great destiny.

When I was a child, I was very small. I was so small that when I was 18 years old and was going to the Brothers Senior High School, I was still in the five stone, seven team. Now I know that doesn't mean much to you but there were several football weights, and at age 18 I was still in the lowest weight division while most of the students in my class were in the highest. That gives you some idea of what a mite I was. My mother used to take me to specialists until she realized what all such mothers have to realize. People used to look at me and say, "You would make a great jockey." I used to look at them with some embarrassment and say to myself (I was a very respectful boy, most of the time), "You don't know what you are talking about "I ain't going to be no jockey." And I find in certain decisive moments this phrase comes back. I say, I am no jockey. I am an undercover agent for Being. No man is going to dictate my destiny or write my epitaph. It is already written in the wind. I am the Lord's man and I am here to do a great service. I am the two-gunned Gabriel of Being! And you feel like a fighter pilot breaking clear out of the clouds into the wide blue yonder doing a victory roll. Ever seen a plane doing a victory roll? It is something. And you feel like Mr. Universe ontologically. You feel like Mr. Universe and find yourself actually flexing your muscles in public and with surprise and exhilaration and even a conspiratorial smirk you say to yourself, "Look Life, look people, no hands!!!"

There are certain indicative resolves you carry away after you've visited these states of being:

1. You know psychosis is just round the next bend and so you are interiorly disciplined. You can turn from ecstatic to somber at the drop of a hat.
2. You trust Your intuitions to the hilt.
- 3, You give definite answers to questions,
4. You develop a strange nervous "tic" when you hear the word "principle".,
- 5, You know nothing is predetermined Your tongue gets into your cheek when dogmatists are around.
- 6, You make great use of the proverbial grain salt,
- 7 You're very deliberate.
- 8, You never expect anyone to understand you. .
9. Your own moralism never quite recovers. You see that you have spent most of your life trying to turn off the valve.
10. You remember Dante's motto, "L'audace, toujours l'audace," and you take more chances.

1. You accept your own phoniness, inanity and stupidity and they become your authenticity. You never have to defend yourself.
2. Sleeping is the most boring part of your life.
3. Your name is very important and you shout it loud at accountability time, even though you know some will smile at you.
4. Comedy and tragedy merge. Humor is a great ally. You often wink at yourself in the mirror.
5. You cannot stand those colleagues who are in on your secret.
6. And ever after you look every man in the eye.

I'm finished.

Brian Stanfield