

Sanctification #3: Happy Death
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In this year of the Turn, as we have become a Resurgent Movement, it is as though we have been reliving our own history, retelling our story. Not surprisingly, along the way we have encountered that same dynamic in society, and as we have participated in our culture's turn toward Reconstruction, have found ourselves repainting our montage of meaning with images of the awakening of the Spirit manifest in art forms, in everyday life situations, in news events, and in recovering the wisdom of the Church Fathers. There is a great scene in the movie Man of La Mancha that holds Resurgence and the human response to it. It is the scene where you see Don Quixote and Sancho riding down the road on their way to fight windmills. Don Quixote is riding along singing, "I Am I, Don Quixote," with Sancho bouncing along next to him, and suddenly he says, "This is the road to glory. Just look at all this." He goes on describing the wonders of the scenery, while all the time Sancho is looking around, sort of frowning. Pretty soon, Sancho says, "Don Quixote, it is a funny thing, but this looks to me like the road to Toledo." That is what happens to me when I hear the term "Resurgence." Somebody says, "Oh, it is the time of Resurgence." And I say, "Funny thing, this looks like the fall of Rome to me."

To talk about Sanctification when we talk about Resurgence is to talk about the response that happens in our being. We all experience it more or less consciously. A fellow spends all his time talking about this incredible collapse in the 20th Century, and then he says, "But the other day on the street I met a fellow who said, 'Life is sure great.'" The signs of Resurgence are everywhere. The whole spectrum of history is visible as we look out on the horizon, and we are fools unless our first experience is that it is coming apart at the seams. Our relationship to

history involves trying to get hold of this Resurgence so that our being embodies it. We take a perspective on history to see what is going on there.

To describe our posture poetically, our experience of Resurgence, or to put it theologically, of Sanctification, is like standing on a seashore watching the waves go out and come back in. If you have ever seen big waves go out and come back in, there is a moment when the wave that is leaving meets the wave that is coming in, and what happens is - nothing. That is what happens. All you see is this big crest moving in history. Sometimes there is a little wisp of foam on the top, but for the most part, all you see across the horizon is this big mound looming up. Then all of a sudden - kawham! - the in-breaking wave comes back to the shore. As I experience this moment in history, I look out on the horizon, and all I see is a big mound rising up, and I do not know what it is. Sometimes I am not sure that the wave is going to come back to the shore, that it is the Resurgent wave. Perhaps it will keep going back out. This perspective is man's, as he looks at the times now, knowing that there is a sense of stasis in history, of boredom, in fact, but also knowing that underneath is the incredible whirl of the turbulence of two waves meeting. We know that whirl is there, but we do not in the first instance see it. It is unbelievable.

We have held the dynamics of this Sanctification experience with the categories of Universal Benevolence, Radical Integrity, and Endless Felicity. The best way I can describe Universal Benevolence is to use the image of the crane. Right across the way from the Toronto Religious House, they are building an expressway, using these big cranes on tracks. They are always driving them up and down, right by the Religious House. Each crane has a huge tower on it with a ball which they use to destroy things. Every

time they take that turn, that big wrecking ball comes about an inch from the Religious House, and we all hang out the window and say, "No, not yet!" Universal Benevolence is something like this, intensified to the point that you experience yourself under the crane. It is pure weight, sheer heaviness. The way I describe it in my own being is that I feel spiritually withered, spiritually dead.

Radical Integrity occurs when, in the midst of knowing that being spiritually withered is the state of your whole existence, you decide, somehow, to shoulder the burden. There you stand, a little bent over, but shouldering the burden. You experience being exhausted, and this is different from feeling tired after a couple of days of intense work. It has nothing to do with the amount of sleep you get, either; it is just weariness, the kind Mountain Rivera experiences when he longs for 24 hours without an ache in his body. This exhaustion is the physical manifestation of trying to invent your own selfhood.

Our main concern here is getting clear on Endless Felicity. The title "Happy Death" puzzled me at first. I read some passages out of The Dark Night of the Soul, by St. John of the Cross, and he was clear that this is not funny. Then, looking at the times of Resurgence, or sociological Sanctification, they appear utterly terrifying. We are scared to death of what is going to happen; it seems as though direction is lost. Nevertheless, to simplify it, this arena of Endless Felicity is where the struggle gets to be kind of fun. Consciousness of the stakes of engagement is greater, but the burden is lighter. This is like the moment in a football game when a team is at the fourth down, and the goal is at the other end of the field. In this arena of Sanctification, you call a dropkick play while you are holding the crane. This is radical happiness. Until you see the radicality of the Happy Death, you feel morose. Now my best example of Endless Felicity is a colleague of mine who looks morose all the time; he walks

around deadpan. But he is a happy man.

Now this title, "A Happy Death," has serious living behind it. In my mind, this is what St. John of the Cross describes in the Dark Night of the Soul, and this is clear in the "Stanzas of the Soul," upon which he builds his whole book. Here is the poetry:

On a dark night, Kindled in love with yearning--oh, happy chance!--
I went forth without being observed, My house being now at rest.

In darkness and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised--
oh, happy chance!--

In darkness and in concealment, My house being now at rest.

In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me,--

Nor I beheld aught, Without light or guide, save that which burned
in my heart.

This light guided me More surely than the light of noonday

To the place where he (well I knew who!) was awaiting me--

A place where none appeared.

Oh, night that guided me, Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,

Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in
the Beloved!

Upon my flowery breast, Kept wholly for himself alone,

There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him, And the fanning of
the cedars made a breeze.

The breeze blew from the turret As I parted his locks;

With his gentle hand he wounded my neck And cause all my senses to
be suspended.

I remained lost in oblivion; My face I reclined on the Beloved.

All ceased and I abandoned myself, Leaving my cares forgotten
among the lilies.

The very last line in The Dark Night of the Soul is "In the happy night." He was happy after all his suffering. In trying to figure out what it means to talk about happiness, an important issue is how to get people to like what they are doing. Perhaps that sounds unspiritual, but it depends upon what you mean by "like." I do a lot of calling with teams of colleagues, and sometimes I ask them, "Do you like what you are doing here, recruiting people?" They reflect and say, "Well, what do you mean by 'like'?" And I ask them, "Do you like ice cream?" Then they say, "Yes." That is what I mean by "like." Do you enjoy it; does it occur to you to

do it rather than not to do it? During this past spring, I have experienced myself trying to recover happiness, not the fairytale kind, but authentic enjoyment of life. It took some radical shocks to my being in relation to history before I began to see what I was really struggling with.

Some of the poetry this struggle has compelled me to put together contains the four categories I have found most helpful in attempting to describe a Happy Death. Here is the key passage:

The painful suffering of Oppressive Clarity, which coincides with the psychotic experience of an Eruption of Freedom, propels you to decide the incredible posture of Serious Courage which is, if given a chance, a Happy Death.

In talking through the dynamics of Endless Felicity, the experience of Oppressive Clarity presupposes that faith is already present, that a man has already decided to accept his acceptance. It comes as the first dimension of clarity beyond lucidity about the self, the neighbor, the world, and the Word, when lucidity begins to assail you with such power that you experience yourself as directionless. This is the experience that we have all had in life when we wake up and say to ourselves, "I've been had! I have been taken for a ride! I was not born to be exposed like this, to have this happen to me!" Usually this dawns in the middle of imaging ourselves as seriously vocated human beings. For years we put off getting clear images of our thrust; then, in the midst of one weekend on the town after another, we are "elected," or called to something. Then we spend years trying to put off the old images that life has planted in our being. When we discover we cannot, we finally say to ourselves, "All right, I will decide to live my life!" And we pick it up and proceed to live. But what we learn as we go along is that things do not get clearer; they get more and more unclear. Once we believed that we had a direction in life, but now the experience is something like standing in the middle of

a field where there are no pathways. There is just wheat grain all around, and we simply decide which way we are going. There is no more clarity, except the fact that we are standing in the middle of a field and not on a path in life, this paradoxical clarity about the directionlessness that that is the way it is. This is the end of the journey in this world. For there are two journeys that go on in life: one of them is the journey you take in this world, and the other is the one St. John of the Cross talks about. Whether you experience it in a 44-hour RSI weekend, or life has taught it to you, when the happening of the exposure of the endlessness of your life happens, the journey of this world ends.

This is not something you can explain to anyone. I can remember sitting in my father's living room trying to explain to him what I was doing with my life. As I was describing to him the fact that I was not interested in having a lot of cars or a home or any of those things, I can remember realizing that that was my being, not my ideology. It was not that I believed that it was not right to have cars; my being was not interested in this-worldly things. The Other Worldly journey begins.

To describe it sociologically, this is what happens to a 27-year-old housewife when it dawns on her one day, as she is standing there washing dishes and looking out the window at her lawn, that everything she has wanted and has been told she ought to have in life - a husband, a home, children - she has. And she is 27 years old. It comes like that, when you are washing dishes. For a clergyman, it comes on the day after he finally gets his own pulpit, and it dawns on him that this just is not it, and these cannot be the people. It must be somewhere else that he thought he was putting his life.

The sociological gap happened to me as it happened to most of my

generation. By the time we were 20 years old, we had all this experience, no philosophy, no ideology, no hope, no dream, no mother, no friend, nothing that held our lives. And we had eighty more years left to live. Our dream was to live it up until we were 25, and our nightmare was to live beyond that. Here we were with all our lives left to live, and everything was a lie, simply a lie. I do not know what leads to that consciousness. It occurs on the other side of faith, and St. John of the Cross appears to have some handles to hold this experience.

I can remember thinking that if I joined the Movement, this consciousness would go away; I would get something to live my life for and die my death for. And I suppose I did, but we have all experienced that we do not get rid of despair. Every time I get down into despair, I say to myself, "This despair is preparing you for something great. Grin and bear it; you are being purged." Then one day it dawned on me: what is it I am being prepared for? Do you want to know what that something great is? It is what you have now. What we are being prepared for is what we have. Life has delivered us into deciding to bear the crane.

The other way that I experience the assailment of the Oppressive Clarity which St. John calls the Dark Night, is in the form of boredom. Two years ago in the Movement everything was exciting. Leaders would get up and say fantastic things and bounce around the room. Oh, it was exciting! At that point, it did not matter what they said, it was exciting. Now it does not matter what they say, it is just boring. You do not bother to evaluate whether it is good or bad. You have to conjure up everything in your being just to listen. Things go right past you. Life has a kind of boredom about it that is quite outside your capacity to control.

Now I saw two movies together recently: Soylent Green and The Poseidon Adventure. The effect of the combination is unbelievably

powerful, especially if you experience them in that order. They begin to hold the relationship between the boredom of Oppressive Clarity and the Resurgent Eruption of Freedom.

Soylent Green portrays New York City in 2022, where the air is so thick with smog that you can see it. The city is built entirely of concrete. There are so many people that they are sleeping on stairs, and there are beggars all over the place. Food is gone; there are no fresh vegetables or meat. What you have to eat is a variety of crackers: there are green, red, and blue crackers. The T.V. is always coming on, saying, "Eat Soylent Red; it is good for you." (It is a salad.) "Eat Soylent Green." (That is a staple.) At this point, forty years in the future, everything we consider nice is gone. There are no trees; there are no animals; you cannot see the sunset. They have artificial lighting in the city.

There is one character in the movie who is just tired of life. This fellow decides that he is going to "go home." "Going home" in this movie means to go to die. There is this place where you go to die in the city. It is incredible, because the whole city is gray except for this one place where you go to die intentionally. It is a white, luminescent building in the center of a square. You walk in there, go up to a desk, and they start filling out a card for you. They ask what color you like, what music, what kind of scenery, your favorite place, etc. They record your name, and then a fellow ushers you into a little room where you lie down and drink your favorite flavor of hemlock, so to speak. Then you lie there and have yourself fifteen minutes of ecstasy. There is this wide screen that turns on with your favorite music as background for scenes of flowers close up, or deer in parks, all of those good things. You lie there for fifteen minutes, and then - Boom! You are out, and they wheel you out and the next guy in. Then they push a button and on comes his favorite song with

his favorite scenery.

What shook me to the core about the movie was that place. It was so easy to believe what was going on there. It was utterly believable, in no sense like science fiction. Where my anger welled up was at what had happened to the human beings. I reflected on things like the energy crisis and the environmental crisis, which I have scoffed at as reduced issues. But these are serious. We are going to have to decide as a globe to go on living or to lie down and let the grass grow over us. What the movie did was to shake my boredom. It broke loose my consciousness of the urgency. A few days later I was leafing through the newspaper, and on page 15, it pointed out that the worst famine in 500 years is going on in North Africa and spreading over into India. They estimate that three to five million people will die this year. And it is true.

Now I was shocked by this movie and by the fact that I had already known all that was going on and had assumed a posture that allowed me to relate to that nobly and stoically. Today our response to the urgency and reality of history is predominantly stoic nobility. There are countless people who go around trying to clutch defeat from the jaws of victory. This is the response of lethargy in the face of that overwhelmingness. One of the manifestations of this lethargy is that people seem perturbed by trivial upsets, and let immense tragedy go by without a flicker. A catastrophe happens, and we do not know about it. Three days later, we have forgotten.

The shock was what broke me loose to understand the Eruption of Freedom in the midst of this lethargy. It comes as a kind of anger. During the past year, I have thrown and intentionally broken three alarm clocks. When it starts ringing in the morning, I wake up, pick up the clock, throw it out the window, and swear at it. I am angry that life is going on. There is no good reason for it, but there is a kind of depth anger there. Perhaps in secular language this is what St. John of the Cross talks

about as being empty. It is the condition of grasping the freedom of the Happy Death. There is a kind of vacuum. Have you ever been short of breath on a hot night, gulping for air while stadding in wide open spaces? After the fact of being free to go ahead and live your life, there is a quality of being suffocated, because you cannot fill life full enough.

Once this anger breaks loose in the midst of the consciousness of raw freedom, there is the possibility to risk in Serious Courage. That other movie, The Poseidon Adventure, dramatizes this point in the journey of the Happy Death. It is a fantastic movie about a ship, The Poseidon, which is going along fine until a tidal wave hits it and turns it upside down, so that everybody who was at the top of the ship in the ballroom is now at the bottom. There they all are, down in the ballroom with the water starting to seep in, and they have to make a decision. Gene Hackman, who played the detective in The French Connection, plays a radical clergyman. He asks, "Now, how do we get to the top of the boat?" Everybody answers, "But the top of the boat is the bottom, and there are not any exits in the bottom of the boat." But he says, "I am going to the top." And the people in the ballroom, except for perhaps eight of them who decide to go with him, decide to a man to just sit there, while the water is rising, and they are sinking deeper and deeper. Gene Hackman stands up there saying, "Do you understand that life is up there, and death is down here? We are sinking, right? Now if life is up there, let's go!" But everybody just sits and decides to stay put. Oh, they gather a little bit of data. And then they see that the authority, the bursar, is down there, so they all want to stay with him, because he has a uniform on. Finally, Gene Hackman starts climbing up, and a few people, including a last fat lady, a cop, and a ding-bat type girl, start moving to the top of the ship. They struggle upward, with the water one foot behind them all the way. When they get almost to the top, they meet another group which is going towards the bow of the boat, when all the time Hackman had decided to head to the stern. At this point,

The group has an argument about which way they should go, because the other group is larger and seems to be moving more quickly somewhere. Finally, Hackman says, "No, we are going to the stern, because I have decided we are going to get out of here, and I am going to get us out of here." He does not even consider the question. He simply decides he is going to do it. And they go to the stern.

In the end, when they are just about at the point where they can get through the door to get out, the steam valve breaks loose and blocks their way. Now it is difficult to imagine, but they are now standing on what used to be the ceiling. To get to the steam valve, you have to jump out over an incredible abyss containing boiling water. In this impossible situation, Hackman breaks into an incredible soliloquy: "God, what more do you want? What more life do you want? All right, you want another life, take mine." And he dives out, grabs hold of the steam valve, and starts preaching as he is turning it, "All right, God, if you are going to be that way..." and he closes the steam valve while he is hanging over that vat of boiling water by his two hands. Now there are only six people left, and as his hands are slipping off, he says back to the cop, "Get 'em out!" Then he drops into the abyss.

Now that was the Serious Courage of a Happy Death. Sheer decision, which is hard to describe, is what kept that clergyman going. It is not only that he decided to take eight souls up to the top of the ship; he decided to turn the trend of history. Human suffering can be turned by decision. When a man puts his life behind that, he discovers Endless Felicity; that is Happy Death.

There is a passage from Albert Camus's book, A Happy Death, which holds the final dimension of Endless Felicity. It reads:

I would be the experiment of my life.... Now I know that acting and loving and suffering is living, of course, but it's living only insofar as you can be transparent and accept your fate, like the unique reflection of a rainbow of joys and passions which is the same for everyone.

The question is: how do we release human motivity in history? How does it become power? That is what it is to be in mission. The happiness of bearing the weight of the future is, as Camus says, "...acting and loving and suffering, which is living, of course." Bearing the weight of creating the future is what human living is all about. And I think we know what it is to be happy. I mean that; I like doing what I am doing. I have often wondered why people who come into the Religious House are always asking us, "Why are you always happy?" I say to myself, "Has anybody cracked any jokes?" For, in the first instance, my experience is that I am not happy, but then I see that I am, too. Somehow we do like what we are doing.

At that point, you grasp being. Doing the dropkick on the crane means that you be an actor, make them weep, make them laugh, make them cry, make them sing. You do not ever let life be boring for humankind. That clown, Emmet Kelly, was a Guildsman. And that is Happy Death, when you put that face on as an utter clown. Then, my God, life is not boring and is not about to be.

There is one more passage from A Happy Death that draws all this together:

You make the mistake of thinking that you have to choose, that you have to do what you want, that there are conditions for happiness. What matters - all that matters, really - is the will to happiness, a kind of enormous, everpresent consciousness of happiness at the center of your being.

And you think you have to find something you like?