

The Other World TREK I
Summer '72

THE AWFUL ENCOUNTER

Have you noticed what has happened around here in the last 24 hours? We have turned this building into a monastery. We have taken a business building, the symbol of the secular having been raised to the position of the religious, and in 24 hours have converted it to a place for the activity of the religious. The religious are just regular secular folks. There is nothing pious about this transformation. The secret is that in our time the secular and the religious are the same. You and I have the possibility of experiencing the secular as religious rather than making the secular a religion.

It has been five years since I have experienced the kind of explosion in my life that I am experiencing now. I discovered some years ago that the journey of man is also my journey. This happened when the bottom fell from my images of what it means to be a knowing creature. Discovering RS-I had recreated for me my entire experience as a knower. Several years later I discovered that the deeper I pushed into RS-I the deeper it got until the bottom absolutely disappeared. I had experienced the bottom fall out before and I dare say I will experience again before I die. The difference was before I had some name to give it, so handles to grasp as I fished around in the abyss. Not this time. It has been a long search but I believe I am beginning to find those hand holds. They are the categories of the OTHER WORLD.

It seemed that several things happened at about the same time. Once someone gave me a new book to read. It was Gogarten's, *Christ the Crisis*. I am not suggesting that I understood him then or completely now. The book gave me permission to struggle where I was already struggling rather than spend my time seeking for "the correct struggle." The new songs, offensive as they may be, were another kind of permission to risk with new courage. The words of Jesus conversations reopened the New Testament for me. It gave me permission to hear in a way I had never heard before. To hear not just the New Testament but the words of my neighbor, the cries of the society and the groans of all of history.

To say I am excited to have begun to discover the Other World is at least an understatement. I shocked one of my colleagues the other day. He asked me about a certain movie. My only response to his question about the worthwhileness of the film was, "Was it a good movie? I'm not sure. All I know is it saved my life." That is somewhat my response to the Other World. Is the chart correct, are we on the correct track? I am not sure, but it has given my life back to me.

Particularly when you are experiencing what I am you must guard against your own propensity to over react. You must keep the "on behalf of" category before you. The question is not whether or not it saved my life, but can it be a tool for the salvation of the world? Because of this there are several warnings which I must hold before myself. If you have heard these you probably need to hear them again. And remember these are primarily for my sake. I am letting you hear my self-talk and if it's helpful then we are off to a good start.

First, whatever we mean by the Other World it is a reality in the midst of this world and not somewhere else. If you have read the HRN article *Toward An Other Worldliness*, then you will remember that he indicates that every creature and particularly man must have two worlds in which to live. Consciousness is the awareness of that fact. These worlds are not complimentary or supplementary, they are in the same relationship as oxygen is to hydrogen when they are found as water. If you have life (water) it is because of the presence of this world and the other. Take one away and you and I do not have what I mean by Life.

There was a time in the church when the propensity was to live in the other world at the negation of this world. It produced sterile asceticism. Today our temptation is similar to what Gogarten talks about when he describes the New Testament time. Gogarten indicates that the religious of the day had allowed the creation to become the creator. Today we tend to reduce everything to this world and negate the presence of the other world to emerge in the midst of our daily experiences. In its most destructive form you have the objective worship of the things of this world which leads to a rigid legalism and in its most benevolent form you have humanism. Our task is to hold both these poles, these realities in a tension which never lets us escape the fact that the other world appears in the midst of this world or it does not appear at all. This is warning number one.

Secondly, the other world is ontological not moralistic. A concrete happening helps me get clear here. A friend of mine called several months ago to ask me to bury his father. There was nothing particularly strange in this except this young man's father had abandoned his family almost 15 years before and had remarried two more times, each ending in divorce and when he died was living with another woman. His despair of his own life had also ruined his professional skill to the point he could not maintain a job. On the plane all I could think about was, what am I going to say at that funeral? I was smart enough or scared enough to take my New Testament and my copy of Gogarten with me. (This is a tangent -- would you believe when we left Houston the plane was climbing to its cruising altitude and we went at about 4 or 5,000 feet and I looked out the window. We flew over a cemetery and there was a funeral going on. Can you imagine how insignificant a hundred people standing around a six-foot hole in the ground looks like from 5,000 feet. Think about that.) My concern over what I was going to say was re-enforced when I got to the funeral home. I would meet people who knew the deceased and they would have written over their faces, what are you going to say about that man? I only hope that I did not give away my own anxiety at that point. I went to my room and I began to search in the New Testament and in Gogarten and by 10 o'clock I was ready. What had been made clear to me was not something about this man's life, but rather something about the structure of the way reality is. My friend's father's life was a failure before man and the criteria of this world. Before the final mystery it was simply and irrevocably finished. Before God you have the alpha and the omega. Before man you have success, failure -- good, bad -- faithful, unfaithful. Not so before God. I relied on the only drama I know to be ontological, that is the worship. We confess -- not that man's life but our relationship to that life and review that death always catches us unprepared. We listened to the Word of God, or as it is called in some liturgies, comforting words. We gave praise for the being of one man and rehearsed his journey through those 53 years and pronounced it good and whole and complete. Then we took his body and made the supreme act of dedication, we committed it to that from which it had come. Moralistically, the man's life was a mess. Ontologically, his life was lived and died before God and no other reality.

Thirdly, you and I must keep in mind that the Other World is a world of indicatives not imperatives. The scriptures are helpful here. When Jesus calls for a response from one of the disciples, he said the answer is either yes or no and anything else is of the devil. Your life will finally not be lived in relationship to what ought to be, but before what is. That is indicative.

These are the guide lines I used as I began work on these charts. It might be helpful to underline Joseph's word's of yesterday. Do not think for a moment that those charts there are synonymous with the Other World. Those charts were built by

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limited, sinful and sometimes stupid human beings and therefore have the results of that sinfulness. Those charts are A TOOL that allows you and me to experience the fact of the Other World as a reality in the midst of this world. It must be rethought, reworked and refined until it is the most helpful tool we can create. And then it still will not be the Other World.

That was a long introduction, but now maybe I have self-talked enough to have the courage to proceed.

It is no accident that the top of the chart is the Land of Mystery and likewise it is no accident that Trek I is called Awful Encounter. One of my colleague almost a year ago suggested that there were all sorts of routes to approach the spirit depth, but that in the final analysis the only route a man ever is propelled into the deeps is through contingency, poverty, unmitigated death. How do we get underneath what it means to be radically contingent creatures? How long was it that you had the idea in your head that one day you were going to die, before the idea became a reality so objective you could taste it? Maybe you found yourself in a situation in which your life was threatened or at least you thought it was. Sometime later, an hour, a day, a year that happening happened to you anew, but this time it was not abstract. It had your name on it. Have you ever seen someone who was in an accident and stayed very calm throughout the entire ordeal and then an hour or so later begin to shake. The doctors call it delayed shock. I call it the sudden awareness of the fragility of my own life. The big think, not abstract but objective mental fact, is I am going to die. Not someone is going to die or even everything is going to die; but I, David Scott, am going to die. The big feel is a stunning paralysis. You are frozen. Your blood still circulates, your brain is functioning and your senses are alive, but you are afraid to move for fear you will break like a smashed China doll into a thousand pieces. You have been given a blow from which you will never recover. The big resolve is to be the dead man I am. I AM A DEAD MAN. Some of you may find that funny but I will give you an opportunity to win some easy money if you think that that statement is not true. You take \$100 and I will take \$100 and we will seal them in an envelope to be opened at my funeral and you see who wins the money. I have been a dead man since the moment I was born, I did not know it at the time. And the secret is that you are also. What could threaten us. What power you and I have simply because we have decided to be the dead ones we are.

I was doing a Lenten series at a local church last year and in the midst of the discussion on death a man raised his hand and reported that he had a friend who had just found out that he had but 6 months to live. This man's report on how this had effected his friend was an eye opener. He said his friend was a changed man. Things that, a week before, had seemed important now were insignificant and that some very important items but over-looked earlier were getting his full attention. The man added, "What would happen if we were all told we only had six months to live?" You know what I did as a good pedagogue and ham actor. I walked over to the man and said, "Hello, my name is Dr. Scott. You have six months to live." We are in the same boat with the sick man. Exactly! We are no closer or farther away from our own end than that man.

Are you experiencing a bit of a tremor run through your body? My aunt Effie called that, having a possum creep over your grave. Some of those old folk sayings had real meaning. You have experienced driving down the highway and seeing an animal which has been killed. You shuddered as you past. You told yourself it was

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the blood, etc. Let us not fool ourselves. The shudder was the awareness that one day you will be as dead as that dog.

The big think which invades your being is that it is all absurd. Here I am working my head off for the mission, or thinking my head off for the mission, being my head off for the mission and one day it is going to be nothing. Life is 100% absurd. You cannot make any other statement about life as it is.

The big feel is one of disorientation. You feel lost and a bit like you have gone mad. A moment before you could tell yourself a story and things fit and now you see that it, everything including your story about life is absurd. History has gotten along without you for several years before you showed up and as Sartre says, "You are afraid that one day it will go on without you."

The big resolve is that I am the one who has had his eyes opened. Naiveté cannot long be a descriptive adjective for me. I am freed from the Garden, not like the popular song of some months ago, "We must get back into the Garden." You and I have been permanently kicked out and there are angels (not demons) with fiery swords to keep us from re-entering. It is Stephen Crane's lines:

I was in a dark place,
I could not see own thoughts, or the wishes of my own heart.
Suddenly there was a great light.
Let me into the darkness again.
There is no more darkness. I AM a man of the light.

I have always suspected this reality was behind the tradition of being quiet at funerals. I know all the things you and I have been taught about the respect for the deceased. But I have wondered if it was not a reaction to the fact that everyone there knows that one day he, too, will be where the departed is and that that is absolutely absurd. If you let your voice rise above a whisper, then before long you would be shouting and everyone would be shouting, "I know I too will die."

What I encounter in the midst of this is the next big think -- I am facing non-being. What human beings are facing is no-thing. As I grew I was facing -- in relationship to many things, I guess my father, the first concrete experience of over-against-ness. Then it was my mother and then my siblings. Sociology took over at this point and it was the structures of education and order (police) or an offensive end that outweighed me. Then it was my wife and still is. Then I see that, No! That is not what I am finally overagainst. I finally face no-thing.

The big feel is that of profound shock. You have been jolted, like being dropped from a tall building and landed on the seat of your pants. That is what I mean by jolt. You think you have been jolted by your wife recently. When you see through that jolt to what is behind that, you will be shocked as you have never been before.

The big resolve is to be a child of no-thing. Not a child of your family, or your society or your spouse, but a child of that which is there before you appear and after you are gone and whose name you do not know.

Martin Buber talked about this when he articulated the famous I-Thou relationship. Before you are aware of the presence of the reality in your life or in life in general, you are a "me" in relationship to something (family, society, wife). When the reality is opened to you that you as a "me" is before only one reality and that is the no-thinged-ness in life, then the "me" becomes an "I" and the nothing becomes a "Thou". That is to say an authentic relationship is created. And it is the only relationship YOU will ever finally have.

What you and I experience is Awe. Awe is not a psychological category of some interior providence. Awe is objective and not something you carry around with you, but rather sometimes you find yourself in the midst of it. You get the objective notion that life is Awe. Without the experience of Awe there is no life. You might as well showed up a cat. Awe and your becoming aware of it is what makes you human. Awe is not being overwhelmed by my own stupidity, my own inadequacy, my own un-clarity. Whatever we mean by Mystery it is that reality which takes your clarity and my clarity and shoves them out of sight. The experience of that overpoweringness is the experience of AWE. It is utterly objective. It is not something you and I can create as if our meetings were seances where we evoke the spirit of one dead. No, if you experience AWE in the midst of one of the Treks, it is because you are aware of that which was always there and has always been there; but you and I are too blind to see. We create tools not to produce AWE but to make ourselves aware that life is AWE-filled. The AWE is objective and has been a part of man since man has been human.

The big feel is that of total shock. Paralyzed and you sense yourself helplessly suspended over an immense abyss. Life is life and the first cave man to experience AWE was in exactly the same relationship to God as I am.

The big resolve is that I be the Awe-filled life I am. Every second is precious. Every situation is filled with AWE. Every creature is participating in the wonder of what it means to be creation.

Would it not be great to be able to get a view of when the discovery of AWE happened? Some ancient caveman who had been wise in his day; he had developed his memory to the point that images stuck to the wrinkled surface of his brain rather than sliding off into unconsciousness, He had seen the other animals. He had seen them die. He knew the pattern and one day he knew that his time was at hand. He probably called the clan around his bed and announced to them that he was dying. And then he left the only legacy he had. He gave them his only wisdom. He told them all he knew. He told them one day they too would die. That cave was so filled with AWE they probably buried the old man there and sealed the cave and remembered that that was a place of strange events.

That is the primordial AWE. And that is what the Land of Mystery is all about. There are all kinds of land marks in this arena, but the air, the environment is one of rarefied wonder, of paralyzing shock at the presence of the Mystery in every aspect of life.

You do not face the land of Mystery unarmed. You learn to hear the Word of Jesus with new ears. You learn to risk singing new and wonderfully strange songs (even if you cannot carry a tune), you learn to waltz (only those who can waltz can navigate the fear and fascination of this land) and you must do your solitary work on the charts. Do not be unprepared, but be bold as you venture into the land which is your new home, THE LAND OF MYSTERY.

David Scott