

This Modern World

“Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century?...Why is the good life which men have achieved in the twentieth century so bad that only news of world catastrophes, assassinations, plane crashes, mass murders, can divert one from the sadness of ordinary mornings?” Percy, Walker, *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 1980, p. 3.

“Quite unexpectedly, as Vasserot
The armless ambidextrian was lighting
A match between his great and second toe,
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough
To waltz-time swinging Jocko by the thumb —
Quite unexpectedly the top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing — nothing at all.”

— MacLeish, Archibald, “The End of the World”

“We must meet more often, my dear friend. What is so nice about you is that you are not cheerful. We could spend a most pleasant evening together.” — the Princess des Laumes in Proust, Marcel, “Swann in Love” in *Swann’s Way*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1928, p. 443.

“...Czeslaw Milosz provides the definitive view on why Americans degrade themselves with mass culture: ‘Today man believes that there is *nothing* in him, so he accepts *anything*, even if he knows it to be bad, in order to find himself at one with others, not to be alone.’” — Kaplan, Robert B., “Was Democracy Just a Moment?”, *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1997, p. 78.

We must never forget how utterly completely different life in the 20th century was for scientists (and, I suppose I should add, for engineers) as compared to life for most artists, writers, and for those philosophers who could not bring themselves to merely serve as clerks for the scientific enterprise.

“What is the meaning of human life, or of organic life altogether? To answer this question at all implies a religion. Is there any sense then, you ask, in putting it? I answer, the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow-creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life.” — Einstein, Albert, *The World As I See It*, Citadel Press, N.Y., 1993, p. 1.

A naiveté is revealed in these words which is almost beyond belief to those of us who have spent a lifetime trying to come to terms with the inescapable *facts* that we know in our skin and bones with even greater certainty than that we have skin and bones: (1) Human life is meaningless

and worthless; (2) There is no reason whatsoever to believe that we will ever be able to escape, either in this life or the next or a previous, the unbearable anguish arising from that fact.

“And this is what eats at me, this is the one problem that will break me, the one problem I don’t even know where to look for the *means* to solve, that human life is without meaning or purpose. It’s not so for everyone, I know that, but it is so for many of us. I am smothered every day by it, like one of those poor North Vietnamese bastards you see in the documentaries: U.S. soldiers hold him down, hold his nose and pour water into his mouth until he drowns or talks. That is what it’s like, day after day, year after year, and like all unbearable suffering it carries with it the conviction that this will continue forever, even after we are dead, that there is no escape. What good is suicide if you believe that? — and I do believe it!” — S.f.

“The unexamined life is not worth living, and in our time neither is the examined life.” — S.f.

One of the fundamental assumptions of 20th century existentialists was that human life is meaningless. But we must ask who the existentialists were, and the answer is that, without exception as far as I know, they were intellectuals in the humanities. However, the 20th century world was not waiting for the next English major or philosophy major or history major to graduate. It definitely *was* waiting for the next scientist or engineer or computer programmer or mathematician to graduate. The 20th century was a golden age of science and mathematics. I cannot recall ever reading a word by a scientist or mathematician during this period about the meaninglessness of life. For these fortunates, life was filled with meaning, the secrets of the universe and of the greatest of all intellectual disciplines were being unlocked year after year.

Murphy’s Law: Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.
Franklin’s Corollary: Everything can go wrong.

“By the time most of us achieve wisdom, it no longer matters.” — S.f.

“On March 9, a San Francisco woman in her 30s was hung from 28 wire-suspended fish-hooks, all pierced through the flesh of her back, legs, and buttocks. This was a women-only event. More than 80 spectators and friends were in attendance at the black-walled South of Market space, drumming, chanting, and coaxing her on.

“Raelyn Gallina, an East Bay piercer who has a lot of female clients, organized the event and did much of the piercing. ‘It was women doing it for women,’ she says. ‘It was a very powerful experience. There were women who *needed* to be there. This was a major, history-making thing. There were three videographers and two still photographers. Women would cheer every time a hook went in.’

“Gallina knows firsthand how piercing has spread to the general population: ‘I get suburban couples now who see it in the sex mags. They look like librarians. When *Private Lives*, a sex

newsletter, ran a story written by a former client of mine about her piercing, I got 50 or 100 letters from all over the place. We're talking Boise, Idaho.'

"Gallina has her own thoughts on the popularity of body play. 'Basically,' she says, 'the world is meaningless. There's just your body and you. That's all you've got.'" — Marchand, Shoshana, "Hooked: Mind and Body Games Among the Modern Primitives", *The Bay Guardian*, San Francisco, Calif., May 27, 1992, pp. 23 - 26.

"Nothing implies anything: true in logic, true in life." — S.f.

"...this country, where everything is done to prove life isn't tragic..." — Camus on America during visit here, *Newsweek*, Aug. 10, 1987, p. 23.

"We have used our unprecedented wealth and technical ability to construct a massive edifice designed to deny and confute life's essentially tragic nature, and this has made us ridiculous. That is why, for example, this sign [smiley face] is now recognized as the most inane cultural symbol ever produced by a supposedly great civilization. We're struck by the boldness and simplicity of its utterly false message." — Kunstler, James Howard, *Home from Nowhere*, Simon & Schuster, N.Y., 1996, p. 22.

"It is not an accident that the entertainment industry is the one major enterprise at which no other country has been able to overtake us. No other civilized country is so preoccupied minute by minute with make-believe, with pretending, with fantasy. We demand fantasy in order to distract ourselves from the reality of life's tragic nature, and since reality tends to be insistent, we must keep the TVs turned on at all waking hours and at very high volume. Yet fantasy is ultimately less satisfying than reality, and only deepens our hunger for the authentic." — *ibid.*, p. 23.

"All our efforts to nullify life's tragic nature have paradoxically led us into deeper unhappiness. What we have done to the physical fabric of our country finally is not an illusion but a genuine tragedy. We have come close to making civilized life impossible in the United States." — *ibid.*, p. 24.

"Why has Richard Selzer [surgeon-author of *Mortal Lessons, Confessions of a Knife*], not found a larger audience? Because he presents a view of sickness and death which we Americans don't like: diabetics going blind, having their legs amputated; the sound of a woman's breast dropping into the waiting cardboard container after mastectomy; a patient in excruciating pain for weeks, then dying shortly after the operation. We don't like to hear about suffering like this." — S.f.

There are always two sources of suffering associated with any disease: the pain caused by the disease itself and that caused by society's opinion of those who have the disease.

The pain of dying takes your mind off death.

We are like schoolchildren: we believe that where there is a question there must be an answer, and that if we were only smart enough, or behaved properly, we would be able to discover it.

“I also understand that there must be artists to paint religious pictures for the people, so that they may have something to worship which is not poor and dirty like themselves; beautiful, unearthly pictures of martyrs who, honored after execution, have been given costly garments and a gold ring around their pates, just as they too shall be honored after they have finished their miserable lives. Pictures which show the rabble that their God was crucified, and that it happened when He tried to do something here on earth, making them understand that there can be no hope down here.” — Lagerkvist, Paer, *The Dwarf*, Hill and Wang, N.Y., 1945, p. 12.

The creative individual is the least qualified to speak about the meaninglessness of life because he always has an ace up his sleeve which others do not have. Or, to put it another way, one of the fundamental problems is that books are always written by people who write books. We see examples of this in those conservationists who are promoting the idea that our salvation lies in a “return to the land”, e.g., to a “nomadic” existence on the edges of, but not exploitative of, the Wilderness. Whenever we come across ideas like this, it is well to examine, not so much the credentials, as the sources of income of the people advocating them. If these sources are primarily the writing of books whose message to the rest of us is “Live like me!”, you can be sure these books do not contain the answer for the vast majority of us. We see another example in the existentialist authors. Not only should their work be regarded with skepticism because of the existentialists' refusal to give credit to — and in many cases even to bother to understand — the astounding accomplishments of modern science and mathematics, but also because these works never acknowledge that there is all the difference in the world between writing books about the meaninglessness of life — books that are published and enthusiastically read by others — and living the meaningless life without having the talent to write books or do anything else that is of interest to others. The latter cannot be considered in any way an “answer” to the problem of life (except by authors who write about it). The situation is not much different from that of the rich, overfed prelates of the late Middle Ages preaching the holiness of poverty to the masses.

If there is no way to find out the right thing to do, then there is no right thing to do.

“...Or to have no name, like nature, in which the most refreshing thing of all is that here we at last no longer encounter a giver and bestower, a ‘gracious countenance’! — To be sure, you have frivolously sacrificed even this refreshment, for you have put a god into nature — and now every-

thing is again tense and unfree! What? Never to be allowed to be alone with oneself? Never again to be unobserved, unprotected, free of leading-reins and gifts? If we are always surrounded by another, the best of courage and goodness in this world is rendered impossible. Is this impotency from Heaven, this inescapable supernatural neighbor, not enough to drive one to the Devil! — But there is no need for that, it has been only a dream! Let us wake up!” Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 464.

Among the most difficult tasks of all is that of *getting out from under* the belief that, when all is said and done it *will* turn out that there was an Observer after all, that he planned our lives all along, knew how they would turn out, that all this Yes but No, boxes within boxes, black is white is really black, has a higher purpose, that our struggles, our rebellion -- all was preordained, so that, despite everything, our lives were a kind of obedience.

Did the gods observe Sisyphus carrying out his punishment, and if so, did he know it? Then it was bearable. Otherwise, not.

“Who am I?” means “Where is my community?” “What is the nature of things?” means “How shall I live?”

What is real? Feelings of suicidal depression, and the theorems of mathematics. Neither can be denied.

“In misery we seem aware of our own existence, even though it may be in the form of a monstrous egotism — this pain of mine is individual, this nerve that winces belongs to me and to no other. But happiness annihilates us; we lose our identity.” — Greene, Graham, *The End of the Affair*, The Viking Press, N.Y., 1961, p. 55.

“Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence.” — Léon Bloy, epigraph to Greene, Graham, *The End of the Affair*, The Viking Press, N.Y., 1961.

Remember that you are always living in someone’s distant future and someone else’s remote past.

Volumes have been written, and will continue to be written, on the question of the meaninglessness of life, but the truth is that in most cases, the question becomes unimportant as soon as the work we want to do becomes important to other people.

The sculptor would like everything he works on to be some form of sculpture. But most of the time — if he has to work for a living — that is not possible. In that case, he may find some relief from his drudgery in learning to sculpt the *doing* of the task.

One reason for the appeal of spy and detective stories in our time is that they give ordinary objects and activities a significance: a park, a boat trip, a suitcase, a basket of oranges, the mere standing in front of a building become something other than the meaningless, empty things they normally are for us.

“There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”— Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”.

Just as it is often impossible to see a pattern in a set of events unless we view them at sufficiently rapid speed, so certain ideas are out of reach of those without sufficient self-confidence, sufficient arrogance.

“If I knew for certain that by pressing a button, every man, woman and child on earth would be annihilated instantaneously without knowing it, and that no plants or other animals would be harmed, I would press that button without a moment’s hesitation.” —S.f.

“Best way I know to suppress sexual desire: simply keep repeating to yourself, ‘This is what produces more human beings.’” — S.f.

“Then Bioy Casares recalled that one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men.” — Borges, Jorge Luis, “Tloen, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, in *Labyrinths*, New Directions, 1964, p. 3.

“Birth: where tongues and cocks have been, now there is a baby.” — S.f.

The propagation of the race:

She: So, what do you want to do tonight: watch TV or make a baby?

He: Oh, I don’t know...what’s on?

(She tells him.)

He: Oh, what the hell, let’s make a baby.

Being happy is a reason to go on living. So is being miserable, provided you know that someone, somewhere, will admire you for it.

“It is that very hope [for a better world] that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into numb inactivity. It is hope that breaks down family ties, makes fathers renounce their children, or wives sell their bodies for bread, or husbands kill. It is hope that compels man to hold on to one more day of life, because that day may be the day of liberation. Ah, and not even the hope for a different, better world, but simply for life, a life of peace and rest. Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man [sic], but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in the gas chambers.” — Borowski, Tadeusz, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1967, pp. 121-122.

“*Hope*. Pandora brought the jar with the evils and opened it. It was the gods’ gift to man, on the outside a beautiful, enticing gift, called the “lucky jar”. Then all the evils, those lively, winged beings, flew out of it. Since that time, they roam around and do harm to men by day and night. One single evil had not yet slipped out of the jar. As Zeus had wished, Pandora slammed the top down and it remained inside. So now man has the lucky jar in his hand forever and thinks the world of the treasure. It is at his service; he reaches for it when he fancies it. For he does not know that the jar which Pandora brought was the jar of evils, and he takes the remaining evil for the greatest worldly good — it is hope, for Zeus did not want man to throw his life away, no matter how much the other evils might torment him, but rather to go on letting himself be tormented anew. To that end, he gives man hope. In truth, it is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man’s torment.” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human, All Too Human*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, para. 71.

“What would life be like if it were not futile? Futility is the foundation upon which it rests. On what other foundation could it have been based which would have held and never given way? A great idea can be undermined by another great idea and, in due course, be demolished by it. But futility is inaccessible, indestructible, immovable. It is a true foundation and that is why it has been chosen as such. That so much cogitation should be required to realize that!

“I know that by instinct. It is my nature to know it.” — Lagerkvist, *ibid.*, p. 57.

“O miserable Mankind, to what fall
Degraded, to what wretched state reserved!
Better end heer unborn. Why is life giv’n
To be thus wrested from us? rather why
Obtruded on us thus? who if we knew
What we receive, would either not accept
Life offer’d, or soon beg to lay it down,
Glad to be so dismiss in peace.”

— Adam in Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, Book XI

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“Sweet is’t to sleep, sweeter to be a stone.
In this dread age of terror and of shame,
Thrice blest is he who neither sees nor feels.
Leave me then here, and trouble not my rest.”

— Michelangelo

The worst thing that can happen to anyone is to be born.

