

On Drama (and Living Without It)

“It’s not my intention to go to Jerusalem and do something in society,” Cardinal Martini replied. “I want to become a private man. I’m sure personal prayer is more important, and silent study will help the world more than many words and actions.” Cardinal Carlo Martini, New York Times, 1 Sept 2012.

For some reason or other—and I can’t quite put my finger on it—this quote stayed with me since I came across it several years ago. It was written by a cardinal noted for his scholarship with regard to the critical text of the Greek New Testament. Also he is renowned for having introduced the practice of *lectio divina* in the diocese of Milan which has had and continues to have a positive impact among young people. As for the quote at hand, it comes after life of service at the highest level of ecclesiastical administration which exposed Martini to all sorts of criticism. Now with that behind him and having retired to live what boils down to a monastic life in Jerusalem, he was free to devote himself to his first passion, prayer coupled with study. His desire to be a “private man” isn’t one arising from selfishness nor dissatisfaction but had far deeper roots which many today unfortunately cannot fathom. That must have opened him up to some criticism, but fortunately it’s drowned out by his sterling reputation. As for how Martini conducted himself in Jerusalem, I have no information. At the same time it’s an irrelevant matter. The quote in and by itself is sufficient.

While climbing the ecclesiastical ladder as a Jesuit all the way up to cardinal of Milan, Martini doesn’t seem to have been ambitious in that regard, for he seems to have a natural inclination toward the so-called hidden, contemplative life that put things into perspective. Quite a few years...actually a full lifetime...was spent in intense activity though right from the start some contemplative elements must have been present. It sustained him throughout those years of ecclesiastical ascendancy and intense activity until culminating in his becoming “a private man” (I wonder how he rendered that in his native Italian). At this later stage in life Martini is fully confident that prayer and study (he prefaces both with the adjectives ‘personal’ and ‘silent’) will be of greater value for the world.

Martini gives no explanation, for none is needed, simply the conviction based on personal testimony that it is true. This may be difficult to accept since we're so accustomed to digging up dirt with regard to those leading public lives. Martini is rightly disinclined to let on, more interested in following that contemplative streak to see where towards the end of his life it might lead him. Also we can assume that his words about being a private man resounded with more people than we imagine, for instinctively they knew he was pointing to something much deeper. Such is the appeal when it comes to things we can't grasp and analyze immediately. Similarly it gives rise to a certain discomfort which touches upon what we don't know, a kind of mystery we can either reject or be present to.

Allowing a simple but profound quote as the one from Cardinal Martini to sink into one's awareness has the power of throwing perspective on our own lives, especially when we get older. It allows us to see them in the form of drama which consists of every stripe, positive and negative. Thus the cardinal's statement represents that time in life when we're invited to leave drama behind and enjoy life free from its ups and downs. He may not have put it consciously in such terms. However, we can assume he was aware of it and was on the threshold of making a decision to leave it behind. Such is the overall theme of the current essay which will be delved into shortly. First a few remarks about something else that had been dealt with before this article and has some relevance to it.

An article written a short time ago entitled *Putting Anamnesis into Practice (Hopefully)* was instrumental in giving birth to the current one. Loosely put, the one at hand is a kind of spin-off on the adverb in parentheses, *Hopefully*. This word suggests possible fulfillment of something which may or may not come off as one would expect. In other words, a gap exists between expectation and the final result, a risk which adds excitement to what we are undertaking. Such is the case with accessing our recollective faculty which goes by the Greek word *anamnesis*. We don't know for certain what may lay there until we go ahead and make the leap as had been described in that previous article. It turns out that the leap depends upon witnesses...not even those alive but who have written accounts of their experiences thousands of year ago. Furthermore, *anamnesis* may be considered aligned with the Judaeo-Christian idea of a person being made in the image and likeness of God.

Differences exist, however, not the point of this article nor of the one before it. The parallel is simply thrown out there as it has some bearing on the topic at hand, namely, the dramatic element in our life and the need to shift to one that's poetic.

Our faculty of *anamnesis* is the source of our existence and the actions flowing from it, insight into this having been around since the days of Plato who brought it to the fore. In recent years—very recent, in fact—awareness of it has disappeared almost completely and hence needs to be re-discovered as something worth striving after. Due to a host of societal and cultural factors, our access to the faculty of *anamnesis* has been shut off. Not that *anamnesis* did this on its own accord, if you will, but we've allowed roadblocks to be put in the way which appear insurmountable. Many of these roadblocks find their origin in constant access to digital media which casts a pall over everything we think and do. The most immediate effect is a debilitation of our memory as commonly understood. In no short time this has worked its magic (black magic?) on us by stupefying our ability, let alone our desire, to see how past actions come to bear upon present circumstances. In other words, the constant barrage of images can cast an impenetrable fog over us if we don't know how to manage them. The result? We can see neither backward nor forward, only what's on the electronic device before us which has become our new identity. And that presence is a far cry from the one talked about in spiritual circles.

The most amazing thing about all this is the rapidity with which these developments have overtaken us, one generation...two at the max. Currently we're too caught up in the immediate after effects of technological advancements to get a proper assessment of where we are now. As for this being caught up, it's permanent. It doesn't seem we'll ever be let down. What we do know is a sense of loss though we can't quite yet put our finger on it. And if the rapidity of advancement is any indicator, it's going to get worse. As for digital technology, it has preserved invaluable documents pertaining to such things as *anamnesis* for anyone to access. Although it seems a handful of people are interested, it isn't enough to make a difference. And so these documents linger somewhere in The Cloud. As for digital media in and by itself, it excels at presenting images, still or otherwise, appealing directly to our eyes compared with other senses though we could throw in the sense of hearing at it

pertains to music, etc. Music, in turn, stimulates the process of image-making, so it's closely related to sight. The senses of touch and taste aren't represented because technology hasn't advanced far enough to make both readily available (at least for now).

One way of approaching this new conundrum is to consider the notion of drama, that reality which is wholly other than being a “private man,” to borrow Cardinal Martini's phrase. Without a doubt, he had his share of drama and was glad to have shaken it off when he took up residence in Jerusalem. As for a definition of drama, the following lifted from the Internet suffices: “an exciting, emotional or unexpected series of events or set of circumstances.” The Greek verbal root *drao* is the root of this noun meaning to do or to accomplish some great thing. Even though our lives don't consist of such *drao*, we're fond of thinking they are. Then there's the possibility that our drama will be upgraded, as it were, by turning into tragedy which makes it all the more exciting despite the “tragic” end.

A more common verb along the same line as *drao* is *poieo* (from which we derive ‘poetry’) meaning to do or to make but has to do with the production of something, of bringing it into existence. Keeping in line with our understanding of “poetry,” *poieo* is more creative whereas *drao* is involved with the doing in and by itself. By reason of this self-absorption, *drao* and hence drama is more showy and less concerned with deeper things, if we could put it as such. From this ancient interaction between *drao* and *poieo* starting way back with the Greeks we have now two basic ways of interacting, one complementing the other.

Once more referring to Cardinal Martini—and this is elaborating upon his move from Milan to Jerusalem—we could say he opted for a life of poetry after having experience many years of drama. Obviously some tragedy was thrown in there as well. When you're responsible for so many things, it's impossible to write poetry. All you can do is record the action...the drama...circulating around you and leave it at that. Any translation into poetry has to come later when the dust has settled down. And one of the best ways of recording past actions with a view of retaining them well into the future is to put your experience down in poetry, not to compose a drama. Although something poetic may be more taxing to read, we retain it in our memory far longer and more easily. As we all know, to do so is a gift and requires being

disposed for it. This operation is directly opposed to the circumstances we're in today as influenced by media briefly described above. It has produced a certain interior befuddlement, of not being able to recall the past adequately to affect where we're at now.

It seems we're afraid to abandon drama in our lives because of an apparent lack of options. In light of what has been said, a somewhat humorous observation by Yuval Harari¹, right to the point, is worth considering: "Humans are rarely satisfied with what they already have. The most common reaction of the human mind to achievement is not satisfaction but craving for more. Humans are always on the lookout for something better, bigger, tastier. When humankind possesses enormous new powers, and when the threat of famine, plague and war is finally lifted, what will we do with ourselves? What will the scientists, investors, bankers and presidents do all day? Write poetry?"

Of course not. That gift...poetry...will have been lost and before you know it, not even recognized. As we all know from concrete experience, the lack of satisfaction Harari mentions is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing in that it we're driven to improvement and a curse in that if not reigned in properly, it will become a treadmill of despair. Couple that with the just mentioned influence of the omnipresent media, and we're off and running with no end in sight. Harari's quote is indicative of today's restlessness. Even though we haven't achieved bliss on earth, the three rhetorical questions he poses with a certain whimsy remain in the back of many of us. We're at a loss as what to do once things within our scope of activity have been accomplished. Animals have it easier. When they've eaten, are tired or had sex, they go to sleep. In our case, we become restless and can't stand being in our own skin. However, we've discovered something new about ourselves, that we need to be in constant action. Standing still is pretty much a death warrant, so bring on the drama.

In such circumstances—even before they reach a critical stage—we turn to drama in order to alleviate our anxiety. We do it automatically while having in the background a nagging question as to why we're engaged in this. We perceive somehow that we're straying from our true nature or the path that has been laid out

for us, however you wish to put it. A nagging conscience might be an alternative of putting it. Nevertheless, we go ahead compelled by that urge to create activity, preferably with some dramatic flair to it, doing it over and over again. Finally we wise-up and realize it gets us pretty much nowhere. All along we've been engaged in that classical sense of drama...of *drao*...or alternating between comedy and tragedy.

Personal interest in the phenomenon of drama came about indirectly, that is, after having written **Expansions on Second Kings** from the vantage point of *lectio divina* which is posted on this same homepage. This text followed on the heels of First Kings, the two more or less taken as one unit. Second Kings is quite boring, if you will, in that it deals with a continuous alteration of two types of kings and the playing out of the drama each represents. Essentially it boils down to kings “who did good in the sight of the Lord” and kings “who did evil in the sight of the Lord.” As you'd suspect, the latter is more dominant. You're confronted with twenty-five chapters of this which makes not just for a depressing read but one which seems never ending. However, should you persevere to the end, a pattern emerges which isn't so clear from a cursory reading. The Hebrew verb and noun *davar* (same spelling for both) saves the day. The verb translates as to speak which appears somewhat bland and the noun as word, the result of this speaking. However, *davar* involves speaking-as-giving-expression when applied to the Lord and can be equated with the Greek concept of *logos*.

Davar is a counterbalance to the evil of many kings which can be traced back to King David when he had contrived to have Uriah slain in order to take his wife Bathsheba. Even further back, the prophet Samuel gives Israel a king which went against the strong protestations of the Lord, the tragic result being Saul. And so these two events conspired early on to set the stage for (and here's the key word) the drama that would plague Israel's subsequent history. When taking this example into consideration as a microcosm of so much human activity, we'd find many parallels despite a separation of some two thousand plus years. Without it there would be no history and therefore drama to occupy our attention.

A closer look at the nature of drama reveals that it comprises a whole series of interventions which constitute the very fabric of history and makes the telling of a story interesting. In fact, without such interventions, no history, no drama. Let's say

we have two persons or parts in the process of interacting, the most basic form for such give-and-take. Now we introduce a third element which may or may not be similar to the existing two. It serves to shift direction of this give-and-take activity, often intensifying it further. And so a new impetus is added to the drama while we don't give further thought to the matter, preferring to accompany the action without asking deeper questions as to what's going on at a deeper level. Failure to ask why is simple. We're too caught up either enjoying or loathing the action to examine what's going on behind the scenes, as it were.

As for the third element that has been introduced, always it's the same nature as the other two despite any variations in form. In short, it's best perceived in terms of a mechanism. This third part initiates an action which spurs the original two elements, basically in an un-reflective fashion, because in essence it's mechanistic, robot-like. Nothing new under the sun has been introduced despite the almost infinite forms and activities that can ensue. Because there's intervention on this plane and we're dealing with the unfolding of a drama, "stage" not an inappropriate term to use. This word, of course, is very familiar to us as coming from Shakespeare.

A first glance at all this seems like going into too much detail as to what appears so obvious. Nothing earth shattering seems to be going on, just the usual drama. However, it's necessary to pause and take stock of before proceeding to change the make up of this situation. The effort is worth the while because by taking pains as to why we prefer drama in our lives we're better able to uncover the root of what makes us unhappy. Always, whether consciously or not, we're looking for ways out of the situation we're in even if it's favorable, for we remain unsatisfied and can't pin down what this restlessness consists of. In more desperate situations we look to "divine intervention" which more often than not fails to arrive. A closer look shows that this is a desire for making the just discussed third element something divine which by nature it can't be. No problem, however. We persist and divinize it regardless because we want a way out. After playing around for a while, things go awry, and we're baffled as to why.

First and Second Kings are loaded with examples of such divinization, the most famous one being the prophet Elijah's contest on Mount Carmel with the Baals. Each and every king in both books struggled with these Baals and other divinities

native to Canaan as well as imports. Some tried to root them out completely while others supplanted them worship of the Lord. Despite the best efforts to eradicate these gods, worship of them popped up here and there. In fact, many an Israelite king both worshiped and fostered devotion to them. In contrast to these divinities is the above mentioned *davar*. As noted, the Second Book of Kings with its endless alteration between good and bad kings contains sufficient drama which by reason of its essential sameness, makes for boring reading. Then we have the saving intervention of the divine *davar*—word-as-expression—which comes in between these two. Without that, Second Kings wouldn't be worth the effort.

Davar doesn't share the same nature as the two poles but is wholly other and may be called a decontraction. I chose this word deliberately because it suggests a kind of shrinkage, a making small enough to squeeze in-between two elements without barging in with dramatic flair. The result? A suspension of drama which to the uninitiated seems devoid of life whereas in truth it's the other way around. What we get is something brand new...transcendent...which takes away the tension that had existed between the two poles and reconciles them in a way no one previously thought was possible. Not only is the tension removed but expectation or the continuance of what has become familiar as a playing-out of a dramatic situation. However, the tendency to slide back into old, familiar routines is always present. Hence Israel's slippage into worship of local divinities despite being exposed to the divine *davar*. The prophets were well acquainted with this and seemed to be among the few who haven't succumbed.

There's a temptation to look at this notion of decontraction as an opportunity for some kind of intervention which essentially boils down to perceiving it as partaking of the same plane as noted above. The reason? It's territory already familiar to us and is either an unwillingness or ignorance to accept that we could call not begotten or better, non-begotten². Anything that intervenes is a type of constraint, beneficial or otherwise, bidding us to engage in some new practice to achieve a desire goal. This is inserted firmly in our heads without us questioning why, as though it were some authority knowing better than us which doesn't turn out to be true. And so the familiar drama continues marked mostly by some form of struggle which is another fact we take for granted. To accept an intervention without it seems inconceivable.

Always we're looking for something difficult instead of realizing that the decontraction under consideration represents a letting-go.

So if something intervenes by way of decontracting itself we find that we're unequipped to be aware of it except by a kind of displacement in the dramatic interplay of familiar elements or the two poles mentioned above. In fact, we don't expect this by reason of a certain defect in our attention. Besides, no one around us seems inclined to what could be called an art of decontracting. If so—and there certainly are such sensitive people—they are invisible to our eyes. Somewhere Jesus says that the coming of the kingdom is without outward drama, and the same may be said to apply here. A displacement means a disturbance, albeit subtle and fleeting, exactly what the divine *davar* does, to speak in biblical terms. A prophet will step in a situation and really not do anything except utter familiar words as “Thus *davar* the Lord” or “The *davar* of the Lord came to me.” The distinction between the Lord and prophet is always clear from the very outset. One example among many is when this *davar* came to Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry. To date he hadn't a clue as to anything that would chance his life. By simply utter a *davar*, the Lord is able to intervene and change the interaction of what had been going on...in other words, introduce a transcendent element.

So the situation seems to be as follows as taken from daily life. We're disposed naturally to detect an intervention in our lives when it's more or less exceptional by nature. It boils down to a predisposition for drama because we're closed to that subtle shift dubbed a decontraction when it makes itself felt in daily life. In order to perceive it we have to learn a hands-off approach in our attempt to intervene which seems like an ascetical practice but in reality it is not.

But what more precisely is the nature of this de-contraction? In order to squeeze in between two elements, one has to shrink down, change size, as it were. That means assuming something other than a shape familiar to us. “Discreet” is the watchword, but it's more than this. We have to cultivate a way of looking which authorizes us to behold any and everything impartially and unconditionally. On one hand it's difficult and on the other hand easy because it gets directly at how we comport ourselves all the time which consists of passing judgment on this or that. Our tendency to judge is the chief hindrance to shrinking down in order that we may get

in between the two poles of a given situation. It diffuses the drama going on their not by doing anything but simply being present and beholding everything.

You could say that this shrinkage of our attention is a kind of authority we bestow upon ourselves. At the heart of this word is the Latin *auctor* or he who brings about the existence of an object or promotes the increase or prosperity of it whether he originates it or by his efforts gives greater permanence or continuance to it. This definition can be adjusted to fit the situation at hand, an all-encompassing glance in between a given situation. At the same time it doesn't favor either one of the two elements which is not even recognizable by them. No modification in outward behavior results which admittedly is what we're primed to look for. Instead, everything goes on before like the Psalm verse, "There is no speech nor are their words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all their earth and their words to the end of the world" [Ps 19.6]. Reference is to the heavenly luminaries present all the time but visible only at night. Neither is their existence nor course affected which doesn't mean that something profound hasn't happened.

Looking at this de-contraction more closely, it turns out to be an operation of our inmost self...our awareness...where our habitual mental film is suspended or to continue with what was said above, has shrunken down to being virtually imperceptible. Here we consent automatically to ride along with our awareness free of this inner dialogue which has an almost magical impact on where it had inserted...had shrunken...itself. The glance at hand is a kind of doing very different from the conventional doing on the dramatic plane where we live out our lives.

This insertion-by-shrinkage (for lack of a better phrase) doesn't use anything from the plane in which it inserts itself. That is to say, it doesn't use a mental image including a mental image of no mental image. Here is where our power of *auctoritas*, of authority defined above, exercises itself. We consent to everything without exception in the drama at hand, and as we know, always there will plenty of it. We all want this and can "have" it because it is within our reach. However, the way to "get" it is not through means familiar to us, hence the parentheses. At the same time we consider the incredible closeness of this *auctoritas*, it appears so far off. To overcome this brings up another mis-perception to which we fall prey continuously, namely, that we must engage in some kind of training or ascetical practice. If we did,

we'd simply become part of the drama at hand all the while wishing we weren't part of it. These attempts may be boiled down to our most basic attachment, to forms whether gross or subtle, material or spiritual. Even to posit a reality other than form sounds absurd, but when taking into account what has been presented thus far, that's essentially the point...to disengage from any and all forms. It's impossible to do completely, but even getting a taste of it is worth every effort at our disposal.

Although this short article deals with drama, the real subject matter is poetry and how shift over to it. Poetry is less inclined to the laying out of plots and all the rest which is very familiar to us, both boring and exciting. Yet as we know from personal experience, reading poetry is less than desirable. It requires a shift in attitude, a closer attention to detail, and because this isn't our natural state, it appears quite alien. Flaky, disconnected from the real world and hopelessly romantic may be some of the ways to describe it. Yet such reports are superficial and reveal more of the gritty, dramatic world which we inhabit.

As for living a poetic life—and this is stretching it a bit intentionally—it's more than being aware of the two poles necessary for creating drama. More importantly, it means the ability to shrink oneself tiny enough so as to squeeze in between without disturbing the order at hand. The poetic shift, as it were, consists in cultivating awareness of any and all things that transpire without having the desire to intervene (and that means without the desire to be dramatic). Everything goes along naturally and as usual. The major difference is that it's not longer bland or plain. Drama has been nullified. More specifically, it's like this to the initiated, to those who haven't cultivated that impartial awareness. If you do have it, however, it's all the difference in the world. Same stuff but arranged in a wholly different manner. Perhaps that's why drama and prose look at the same thing as poetry and come off with two radically different perceptions.

When writing this article, imperfect and inconsistent as it may be, often I had an urge to pause and not so much to reflect but simply be present minus thoughts, a real delight. That seems to be indicative that the poetic element is active even though nothing external has changed as noted above. It consists in an uninterrupted pleasure to take in any and all things, no matter how mundane they are, and to

marvel at how they are held in existence. Hopefully Cardinal Martini would agree, this being what he means by being a “private man.”

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1 **Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow, p 21**

2 An article about this notion of non-begotten is found elsewhere on the lectio homepage and is re-introduced here, albeit briefly.
