

On Being a Fool

No question about it, a subject loaded with pitfalls and potential misunderstandings but one that needs re-insertion into a culture possessed by over-seriousness: I say re-assertion because for many centuries the fool has enjoyed an honored position to counter the grim realities of daily life, especially politics. Immediately there comes to mind court jesters of medieval kings. This formal association requires that we clear up a common misunderstandings of a fool right away. He is not a prophet, herald, angel nor devil. If you were to come upon one and ask what he'd like to be known as, surely you will not receive a clear answer but gibberish. Anything to get attention away from himself and onto another plane but a plane in which he participates and wishes us all to join him. This slipperiness complicates matters in our attempt to obtain an accurate picture of a fool. Intellectually we know the role of a prophet or a herald—certainly someone who behaves in a manner different from the rest of us—but it's different with a fool. Our traditional understanding is a cute little man dressed in tights with a cap on his head while he sits playfully and innocently at the foot of some royal throne. This preconception makes it difficult to find a real-life character because we've been habituated to think a fool as out of a Robin Hood movie. We wouldn't recognize a genuine fool if we came across one even though we have a vague feeling that such a shadowy figure had crossed our lives at least once. In sum, we've come to equate a fool as a person who acts shamelessly outside societal norms. If he persists in his behavior, he's marked forever and relegated (conveniently) to being unstable or worse, insane.

A person may go along well throughout life until he does something foolish after which he finds himself ostracized in a no man's land, a form of banishment, with invisible though very real borders. Today's technical society puts a premium on borders and the order required for their maintenance, so to violate them incurs swift and dire consequences. Being foolish doesn't necessarily imply evil-doing or malicious intent, but if you had done something just plain out of order, a penalty must be paid in full view of everyone else. Acting foolishly involves an element of disdain at the perpetrator's expense which makes the stigma less harsh than outright criminal behavior. Hence dismissal is all the easier. However, the dismissal is into a kind of social limbo which can eat away at you since you are no longer recognized nor appreciated. In that way people can get on with their lives as quickly as possible. We're dealing with a delicate subject because each of us has had the painful experience of acting foolishly or what's worse, being reminded of it by other people long after we've forgotten it. Once you've acted this way, you're pinned down and have a hard time getting out from under memory. Humiliations are familiar enough, but living with their memories is even more challenging. If you can't remedy the situation by getting creative, you fall into a tailspin from which it's virtually impossible to pull out. That's part of this essay, to examine the creative way of being a fool as well as to avoid the danger of slipping into a state of mental illness and remaining there, imprisoned, while free to wander about.

The ramifications suffered from acting foolishly assume many forms, and some of us are more prone to keep them in memory longer for one reason or another. Perhaps fear is involved, more about being deemed worthless by our

. One incident that puts this little essay into perspective was the slaughter of twenty children and six adults in Newtown, Ct on 14 December 2012. The media coverage took a near voyeuristic delight in juxtaposing pictures of the young innocents against the backdrop of grieving parents, all designed to soak up every bit of the tragedy. Not unexpectedly there was not talk about the possible role of evil or more specifically, that evil resides in each of us. Seems like a perfect pattern to keep the illusion going indefinitely.

peers, and for all intensive purposes, fear of being considered mentally ill. If you become the object of therapy, at least people are paying attention, trying to figure you out...but if you're not paid attention to, it's a stigma difficult to bear. Should you throw in the element of religion (which had been fairly strong in society until about a generation ago) things get worse. Being a fool is tantamount to being a sinner, and some remnants of this identification remain in our secular society. The Old Testament presents notable examples, one of which is Nabal whom the future King David encountered in 1Samuel 25. "For as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly (*nabal*) is with him" [vs. 25]. Then we have a more detailed description in Chapter Seventeen of Proverbs as to the nature of a fool, the noun *nabal* being used. Thus both Nabal and the *nabal* of Proverbs pretty much define our current definition of a fool, religiously speaking, and give the impression that religion is serious and not very cheerful.

Both examples contribute to the traditional notion of a fool backed up by religion which nowadays is not very attractive despite religion's earlier role as essential for keeping good order in society. However, this traditional element which has survived for so long has faded away in modern times. It's amazing to consider how such traditions, stable for so long, have not just faded but vanished practically overnight. You can't help but question the durability of any institutions and the traditions supporting them. It seems that no longer do they have the ability to inspire nor has there been sufficient reflection on why they had lost their inspiration. One thing is for certain. Today's pervasive questioning attitude coupled with cynicism has thrown everything into question. At the same time more adventurous souls find some glimmers of hope. Despite the rise and fall of religious traditions or more specifically, customs associated with them (these traditions remain very much with us and perhaps will endure in one form or another), a few constants do stand out.

One tradition with a religious basis has stood the test of time, namely, the practice of *lectio divina* which is the overall theme of this website. It's chief appeal is allowing you to obtain greater depth of insight when pondering closely both the Old and New Testaments without being doctrinaire about it. Even more appealing yet challenging is that you must slow yourself down and remain determined to keep free from the constraints of time. Persistence in this discipline enables you to discover other levels of meaning. The biggest challenge is failure to stay...reside is a better way of putting it...in this ultra-low mode of disciplining your mind. No question, an attractive idea, but even those who are familiar with this deliberately slow-paced approach to *lectio divina* must struggle to abide there. The urge to rush ahead and cover material is almost too great to resist, and succumbing to this temptation is one of the biggest obstacles anyone could encounter. Staying with the practice over an extended period of time reveals what is at stake, how our slow-paced reflection can contribute to the birth of a tradition, a task more formidable sounding than in reality. If you can slow down and remain in that mode over an extended period of time, something new begins to emerge, not on your own accord: new yet based on earlier custom. A concrete example helps, of course. Take the example of Ezra the scribe in the Book of Nehemiah, chapter eight.² After the entire community had assembled to hear Ezra and his associates read from the Law or Torah of Moses, the very next day leaders gathered "in order to study the words of the law" [vs. 13]. They reflected upon the time when Moses ordained that the people should reside temporarily in booths during the harvest. In other words, when the people in Ezra's audience did that, they followed the original elements of that original injunction and

² This example is dealt with more extensively in a document entitled *Liturgical Reflections 2013* posted under the header "Reflections." The date for this entry is 27 January, Second Sunday in Ordinary Time.

brought it to a new level, reflection and discussion upon the divine Torah recently expounded. Now the original feast of booths in the Book of Leviticus is transformed while the people remained faithful to the injunctions of the first level. Thus the original intent for the feast of booths becomes a time of intense prayerful reflection following upon Ezra's reading of the Torah.

The example of *lectio divina* as an important element contributing to the birth of a new tradition helps us see how we can deal with another contribution toward that end, the subject of this essay, what it means to be a fool. Obviously this is not to be confused with acting foolishly. Consider the two examples already touched upon, Nabal and *nabal* of Proverbs Seventeen, which show that religion can come down harshly on a fool and preclude positive reflection upon what he may contribute to modern society. Even though this attitude has set the tone for our understanding of a fool, a possibility exists that this negative perception may be brought to a new level. The task is more difficult today because it's set against the backdrop of a highly intellectual and scientific approach to life. In fact, you couldn't think of two more antagonistic elements. And so the project at hand, if you will, is how can you behave like a fool—not foolishly like Nabal of First Samuel and the *nabal* of Proverbs—and fashion it into a genuine witness.

Of course there are precedents. We know that during the Medieval period and continuing into the Renaissance era fools enjoyed an important role in royal courts in the form of jesters. At a later time they evolved into the clowns of modern circuses, thus becoming more tame and controllable and just right for entertainment of children. Once the Age of Enlightenment burst on the scene with the dawn of science and application of reason to resolve perennially intractable problems, the attempt to bring nature under control got under way. This much welcomed development was a breath of fresh air, understandably so. In addition to focusing upon nature, people started examining themselves as well as their religious beliefs and came to see that many aberrations in human behavior were not necessarily attributed to the supernatural. Behavior outside a life lived rationally was suspect which set in motion the emergence of many problems. As soon as one leak was plugged, another sprang open and so forth. One of the first casualties of rationality was, of course, the fool or jester. People didn't want reminders of human folly, especially so close to royal authorities. They had plenty of reminders around them and didn't need more. Although this role faded away, the Russian Orthodox tradition gave it a home which fit in well with that nation's tendency to mysticism and deep soul-searching, i.e., "fools for Christ" who wandered the countryside. Thus a considerable gap came into being, a gap of two world views: that of the pre-scientific era and the modern era which makes the role of a fool even more alien to our way of thinking. Unfortunately mental institutions have become the new "courts" or prisons for fools who are an embarrassment to modern society. The contrast between a technological based society and those off-limit places were filled with so many horror stories that it precludes any recognition of what a fool might be, traditionally speaking. Should we come across a genuine fool, chances are he'd be institutionalized: out of mind, out of sight. At the same time fear remains that these locked-up unfortunates will escape and reek havoc on society, the stuff of sci-fi movies.

Even though our Western religious heritage contains biblical injunctions against foolish behavior, today more than ever abnormal behavior is abounding. Plenty of explanations are offered; it seems the more they abound, the more questions arise without any resolution in sight. We may have become more conscious of abnormal behavior and are better able to diagnose and treat mental illness. Behavior that's suspicious can be identified and hence safely

removed from the realm of normal activity. However, one thread runs through all this...the seriousness and intensity with which people go about their business, quite prevalent in this fast-paced society. It lies in sharp contrast to those people who for reasons other than mental deficiencies do not conform to this (serious) norm and allow for manifestations of human nature's darker side. Willfully stepping outside the boundaries of seriousness is far from easy because you get little or no support. At the same time opportunities exist for those who are bold enough. Although the official role of a fool or jester is no longer extant, it remains possible to implement. All we have to do is consider that our personal foolish behavior can be modeled on that role but not conformed to it in the literal sense.³ A first step toward this end is to reflect back in time when we acted in unbecoming ways or outside standards set by the society in which we live. A whole stream of memories from our past comes rushing in and paralyzes us for doing something constructive with them. By our own resources we could handle these memories, but being put into our place by other persons is quite debilitating. Long after a particular incident of folly has past, the memory of it has not. It lives on in the minds of friends, relatives and acquaintances. Rarely are these memories discussed openly, but we know we've been pigeonholed not so much by physical ostracization but by a shift in attitude. Rightly we deserve many of these attitudes, but that's not of concern here. What matters is how we handle these attitudes, especially an accumulation of them, derived from our foolish behavior in order not to be consumed by the flood of negative memories.

You can live your entire life trapped in these memories and run the risk of being buried by them. Yet a point comes when you realize that you have X amount of time to live and must get on with it by adopting a positive outlook. At this point few options are open which may force you to make an unconventional choice. If any choice is to be made, it is to be done against the backdrop of that serious outlook of modern society whose sanctioned outlets are sports and entertainment. Engaging in these distractions is socially acceptable, so after an event is over you can return to your serious life without fear of recrimination. Actually, participation in them is a sign that you've subscribed to an important norm of society are following conventional, approved behavior. After all, everyone is into sports, but quickly you weary of this approved form of leisure which lacks real inspiration. Not long afterwards a more profound question arises: can my personal foolishness find a constructive outlet? This question arises in the face of instances reminding us of shameful memories from our past which prevent showing our faces in public. The way society distracts itself through sports and other means works quietly in the background to highlight these memories as through an indirectly perceived sense of isolation. It begins small but grows larger. The accumulative sense of desperation which started out small but increases gradually and imperceptibly at last breaks out on the scene in a moment of desperation. At this juncture you realize that you might just happen to be a candidate for becoming a fool. A liberating yet frightful realization. Liberating in that you've hit upon something profound, frightful in that plenty of people out there remain arrayed against you, and whom are you going to consult for advice?

So if you've been labeled as having acted foolishly, why not capitalize on it and become a fool outright, forgetting about social convention? Admittedly this leap has little or no precedent as far as our society is concerned, so you

³ Wouldn't it be nice if the US Senate and House had a modern, updated jester running around their chambers? They would give an interesting slant on proceedings and would help counter the overly sarcastic tenor of many commentators in the media. One example exists as of this writing (early 2013). The major of Reykjavik, Iceland (Jon Gnarr) was a former comedian and often brings to bear his talents on serious business. From what I've heard from friends and the local media, most Icelanders welcome this.

have to be creative about it. The first obstacle? Coming to grips with the contents of our memories whose vivid images make us shy away from challenging their negative influence. Better to stay with what's familiar (even if it's painful) than to move into terra incognita. One way of dealing with memories that create an ongoing negative impact is to consider the wounds of Jesus Christ from his crucifixion. Their physical reality remained after his resurrection, yet they were transformed...how we can't explain...but in a real way which contains a profound lesson. These wounds caught Thomas' attention who put his hand in Jesus' side. Jesus seems almost blithely unconcerned about his wounds while at the same time exposing them for the disciples to behold. So here we have Jesus physically marked in five places (hands, feet and side) yet demonstrates a carefree attitude about them, this only a few days after his death. His attention, rather, is focused upon his disciples and the mission they are about to embark. Jesus doesn't stop here but goes about the business of revealing himself for a period of time before ascending into heaven where the wounds trail along with him. And so this incident puts into new light the words "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" [Jn 20.29]. Such belief has the benefit of healing a person where it really counts, in the memory. After this incident with Thomas St. John says "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book." Chances are the signs (*semeion*) as marks or signals centered around his five wounds, of having the other disciples follow Thomas' example, a way for Jesus to cure their broken memories. If this didn't happen, they wouldn't be open to receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

A person who had acted foolishly can use this example for personal transformation because it's based upon sound spiritual, biblical reality. More specifically, the transformation at hand consists in retaining memories without being weighed down by them. The memories become a step removed, if you will...ghost images...which inform instead of being a hindrance. It's fascinating to see Jesus' attitude towards his wounds, almost matter-of-fact and with his attention not on them, which does not mean he treats these wounds lightly. Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection takes place "among them" [vss. 19 & 26]. In Greek this reads *eis to meson* or literally "into the midst" ('them' is lacking). The preposition *eis* or "into" is interesting insofar as it conveys the image that continually Jesus is moving "into" his disciples. It means his resurrection is ongoing, a concept difficult to articulate yet nonetheless is at work. Another major lesson is that while insights about this are not to remain private but have public ramifications...ramifications which are *eis to meson* and therefore public.

A fool has had plenty of experience with personal imperfections, painfully so. After he has come to grips with them and models them in accord with an image soundly based upon spiritual insight as just described, he finds himself more comfortable in a world of imperfection. More often than not this realization dawns suddenly even though for some time a person has been preparing himself. Much of the work is being done unconsciously and waiting for an appropriate time to burst upon the scene. All the while nothing much has changed, externally speaking. The world continues about its business, and people who had regarded this fellow as foolish continue to do so. The change, however, has taken place within, a miracle in its own right. Once it does, you stand back and marvel how much your attitude has to do with fashioning the world itself. Such a disposition contributes to resembling Jesus and his wounds: your personal injuries remain present (you can recall them in all their gory detail just like Jesus and Thomas) while your attention is focused elsewhere, always positively, upon other persons. While wonderful in its own right, it gets better. As noted in the last paragraph, your appreciation deepens *eis to meson* ('into the midst' with respect to people) and never comes to an end. So if you stick with this valid insight—valid because it's based on the person of Jesus Christ and scripture—you have the elements which comprise the

beginnings of a tradition. That means you're in a position to capitalize on them further. Another important ingredient is to see if your experience resonates with other persons. If it does, and they recognize some of the insights you had developed, you're on the right track.

So after a lengthy apprenticeship which consists in living with painful memories and having experienced the futility of them having led you around by the nose, you break out of this suffocation by modeling yourself, for example, on something or an incident from the life of Jesus Christ. This modeling isn't wishful thinking, of aligning your life with a person who had lived years ago, noble as he might have been. Just one contact with one aspect suffices as Jesus' wounds in his resurrected body. Actually we're dealing not with an image but with a presence that is both real and mysterious that understandably escapes the grasp of many people. This process is based upon Jesus Christ being the image or *eikon* of God meaning he is visible whereas the Father is not. Hence we're dealing with a continuous uncovering that never gets exposed fully but continues forever. Some inbuilt reluctance will remain about the claim that the uncovering process is divine and divine alone, a lesson difficult to grasp, even more so today. Not that we can uncover God in all his fulness, but a revelation here and then over there makes life all the more interesting. Such is where a fool operates.

A fool is quick to recognize the importance placed on borders by today's technological society which are guarded as fiercely as those belonging to tribal societies. A border means an area set apart from others whether neighboring or more distant. More importantly it implies separation from people who reside within these borders and are perceived as a threat in one way or another. Borders are incompatible with the manner in which divine revelation presents itself, namely, having no regard for anything that separates and imposes limitations. And so both God and the fool share a revulsion for borders. A fool can see through the threatening nature of a border, but this requires some training. Take the tendency of human nature to impose borders...not just physical ones but psychological and spiritual ones. Putting limits first here and then over there is so universal that barely we are aware of it. It is more secure to live with a clearly defined sense of self compared to being in a situation which is open to various possibilities. This has nothing to do with flaunting a rebellious spirit nor a disregard for the space of other people. Here is where non-fools, if you will, confuse the two and are quick to impose boundaries upon a person who acts differently from them.

Time is another dimension intimately tied up with space-related boundaries. Modern society considers time a very precious commodity, always in need of more, yet once obtained, vanishes as quickly as we lay hold of it. The problem, of course, is a greedy attitude stemming from an innate poverty, an ugly side of human nature preferably left unacknowledged. On the other hand, a fool isn't a bit afraid of his ugly side and has time in abundance to revel in it because he has suffered rejection. That makes him a bit brash, certainly not shy. The passage of time for him doesn't exist which is not the same as living in the opposite dimension, eternity, which is where you think he might be. If modern folks don't accept eternity (i.e., some form of existence outside space and time), everyone agrees upon the finality...the eternity...of death. Instead, the fool revels in a no-man's land between time and eternity, not wanting to be identified with either which squarely puts him outside being a god-like figure as well as a devil. This lack of identity with two sides of reality—life or death—means the fool may not have an identity at all. He may be human now and something else (divine? Dead?) later on or perhaps neither. It's up to the observer to decide, not the fool, who maintains a discreet silence on the matter.

At the same time a fool isn't subject to the dread of boredom from the passage of time even though he has as much of it as he desires. The source of this freedom is that he doesn't view time as a commodity, of something to be bought and sold. No one can manufacture this freedom on his own, hence it come to him pretty much as a gift. The most exciting benefit is that the fool can deal more positively with life's tragedies and more practically, with the minor depressing experiences of daily life. To the casual observer this sounds mysterious and supernatural because it is so alien. This person is correct in one important respect, namely, that without knowing it, he has attributed the gift to a transcendent source. However, most people stop there without further inquiry as to how this might be, bombarded by the need for instantaneous gratification and the unlimited resources at their disposal to satisfy their needs. To insert an element of transcendence into such a mind set is next to impossible, hence the write-off with regard to how a fool comports himself. Despite this, people can't be blamed. They are so overwhelmed by it all which is why despite their dismissal of a fool in their midst, the fool cannot retaliate but doing what he does naturally, acting foolishly.

To date we've examined a fool vis-a-vis his relationship with people, of how society perceives him, which usually is unfavorable and dismissive. The next step is to examine more closely the mechanism a fool employs to escape the human preference to remain imprisoned and subject to compulsions, many of which are assumed freely and not imposed from without. That touches upon the influence of memories. What's intriguing about a fool is that he has the ability to overcome the repetitive play-back nature of memory, the source of our anxiety. To do this not modeled upon conventional means is unique, almost unheard of, and requires considerable courage. Let's say concretely a person has had a number of humiliating experiences and has fallen into the rut of playing back their memories incessantly in his mind. This play-back affects the way people view him and contributes to a hardening of the heart. It can go on for years...decades...during which one seeks relief from psychology, spirituality or the like. He may obtain temporary relief, but that distress is deeper than what the remedies propose. A closer examination reveals that these remedies are on the level or form, of bouncing from one form to another, to put it a bit crudely. The reality which escapes remedy remains hidden below the surface. Here the very idea of form doesn't apply, and to it we may designate the term awareness. That word is more flexible and is used here in a more or less unprofessional sense, a stab of sorts, attempting to get at that within us which escapes definition yet is very real. So it seems the fool functions on the level of awareness, not that of form, to which most people are addicted. Then again, they can't be blamed for this, and the fool knows it.

Use of the term awareness allows us to perceive a reality which can only be called informal...having no form...and to stay hooked up with it, however briefly. We learn this perception comes about from time to time, is not continuous, yet is immune to time's passage and our attempts at grasping it. This subterranean world consists of what we intuit as a spasm, more or less permanent, underlying our ordinary waking state and sleep while impinging upon both. As for our waking hours, this spasm imparts general forms (that word again) of joy, sadness, and the like. However, the spasm differs from emotions by reason of its pervasiveness, more like a mood than a specific emotion, for example, of fear. This is not a theoretical exercise, and it's existence can be proved easily. Just close the door behind you and sit down for an extended period of time. You will find it right away by being bored with yourself and itching to do something. A general mood comes over you manifested through thoughts and emotions, but that underlying, hard to pin down reality is there, always there, and we know it. For the most part,

such in-forming is negative which draws us like a moth to a flame but at the same time we can't quite get our hands around it. The reason? This realm is a pervasive contraction that lacks form, and we approach it with an expectation ever so subtle, of expecting to find it as a form which we think is in our power to de-contract. As soon as we bring to bear our customary form-ing attitude on that contracted state (for lack of a better word) it recedes further into the background. So we come to the conclusion that never can we approach it through form-al means but by becoming aware of it little by little. That means sneaking up to it from behind, stealth-like. This stealthy approach is not a progression but a succession. More on that shortly.

As we draw closer to the spasm through our formless awareness of it, the intensity of that contraction becomes more apparent but now is exposed by a simple, discreet glance or regard. We discover little by little that this spasm is continuous, the very source of our moods which is its manifestation, albeit indirectly despite the intensity of the moods. This discovery is marked by a number of successions, not progressions. To progress means to advance with the intent of gaining some yet-to-be achieved fulness. Succession, on the other hand, involves diminishment of our illusory ideas about the spasm and its manifestations, in sum, our blindness as to its reality. The two can be confused, so clarity is important here. As for anything to be manifest, it must have form. By hovering in the spasm's vicinity we discover (again, little by little) that just being aware of it is a major step, but to hone our skill, our glance must be unflinching. Of course we do flinch, especially at the outset, but our discreet observations minus prejudice reveal that we've hit upon something central to human existence. The spasm is all coiled up permanently and seems impervious to relaxation. Persistence with discreet observations later shows that contrary to our presuppositions, we're not harmed by this spasm. That's probably why our first encounter is a delightful surprise. A spasm certainly isn't pleasant but a reality that works its way into all sorts of forms governing our everyday awareness. The spasm seems to lay deeper than our subconscious, perhaps the bed on which it lies. Bringing to bear upon it a simple regard from time to time relaxes the spasm. This is important, to regard it here and there (in other words, in intervals), even if the next interval is a few seconds later. The effects of the first glance can be felt by mitigation of our distress, of the forms which govern us, so we can imagine what a continuous glance might be like. Actually we have to be on guard against wanting a full and uninterrupted regard as where we wish to abide. Repetition of these gestures cannot be forced—that would be equivalent to wanting to progress—but are done naturally and in accord with each person's disposition. In other words, we're learning to think in terms of succession, not progression.

Now that we've made a clearer distinction between form and awareness and have come to appreciate that the latter is more suited for perceiving our inner spasm which confounds us because of our preference for form, however subtle, we are in a more confident position. There's no form to see since this spasm can't be articulated as such. The very gesture we had brought to bear upon it turns out to be erroneous, just as erroneous as having had neglected its all-pervasive reality. So after some trial and error we abandon our attachment to form, of attempting to see the spasm as such, and opt for a simple regard of it without rushing to judgment as to its nature. At the heart of our difficulty lies the ever-present tendency to put our emotional agitation into some type of form or shape that ends up obscuring the truth. As a result, without actually knowing it we prefer lies...forms...over the truth which allows the spasm to remain detected, ever eluding us. This spasm thus remains contracted and immune to relaxation. That's why when we approach it with our proclivity toward form, we expect to see it as having a form, even spirit-like, hovering somewhere inside us. Then when we get there, if you will, we discover that the spasm

lacks form. It turns out to be invisible, and all our efforts...progressions...are in vain.

In one way or another always we've been aware of this most basic of all realities but indirectly. So when we get an inkling of this spasm, it turns out much larger than anticipated, as large as the universe. One way of considering an approach to this interior spasm is to abandon our usual tactic of a frontal assault. An example? Consider the Genesis account of creation where "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" [1.2]. The Hebrew verb for "was moving" is *rachaph*, reminiscent of a mother bird hovering over its chicks in a nest (the verb also means to cherish). The bird hasn't yet alighted upon the nest nor has made contact with her young. Instead—and this is only for a fraction of a second—the mother is suspended in mid-air. As commonly known, *ruach* means breath, something invisible yet representative of the bestowal of life. We don't see the *ruach* in Genesis over the waters but can feel its effects. Because the spasm under discussion governs our lives and largely remains unexplored, we have to be careful about using analogies while approaching it, hence the suitable example from Genesis. As said above, part of why we miss the boat derives from our attachment to form. It's commonly assumed that all things must have some type of shape...dimension...for it to exist, and unfortunately we apply this to spiritual realities. We live in the world of forms yet don't reflect upon it sufficiently. And so attachment to form remains one of the biggest culprits preventing us from awareness of our inner spasm.

Interestingly the words just prior to the Spirit's *rachaph* recount that "the earth was without form and void." The famous *tohu* and *bohu* are the negative counterparts to form against which the Spirit's *rachaph* is set. In fact, such an image can influence indirectly our preference for form, of imposing shape to that which lacks it. Even if we succeed, always the threat remains that *tohu* and *bohu* will reassert themselves not unlike the flood of Noah's day. While the rain came down in torrents, even more threatening were the primeval waters seeping up from beneath. Also *tohu* and *bohu* may be taken as images of the spasm under discussion which essentially appears neither positive nor negative, let alone a combination of both.

So how does this talk about an inner spasm relate to the subject matter at hand, namely, a fool? Because we're dealing with relatively unexplored territory, it's helpful to send a scout ahead...someone from us but not fully of us...to see what might happen. We can choose this volunteer by reason of the apart-ness from society he had demonstrated. One characteristic possessed by our candidate is among the rarest of all commodities, time and leisure to reflect deeply on the matter at hand. He's in an ideal position because no one takes him seriously, so he is pretty much free from the usual burdens and obligations, especially domestic ones. That means most likely our fool will be unmarried and unburdened by a family. He can't have what sticks to him later stick to his wife or children thereby making life difficult for them; in other words, future fools.

Although the fool functions in isolation, always from the corner of his eye he is aware of what other people are doing and has the constant temptation to be like them, of returning to the safety of the flock. For some time now he has seen that the conventional way of living from which he had been exiled is boring and prosaic. It doesn't get you anywhere special even though it is punctuated by an occasional exciting moment. He figures rightly that everyone else is burdened by responsibilities, sees where these obligations have gotten them (often not favorable, but nevertheless people continue their bland existence). Based upon raw statistical evidence before him, he decides it's worth pursuing a different call. The fool figures that even though his venture is fraught with difficulties which go undetected on the common radar, he will succeed because he is rooted in the conviction that he has nothing

else to do and therefore has nothing to lose. The notion of success never enters the fool's mind, let alone failure. That's why a fool never can be an angel nor a devil but something-somewhere in between.

Thus we have the fool hovering over...*rachaph*...that inner spasm due to the leisure he had bought at great personal price though the reward turns out to be more than expected. We couldn't call him a hero or even bold; the role is thrust upon him by circumstances mostly from outside though his response to them is just as important. That's why a fool prefers living on the threshold, Janus-like. And like that Roman god, he has the ability to look in opposite directions simultaneously while not losing his identity. For an outsider this is not so much supernatural but a bit creepy and confirms earlier preconceived suspicions about him. Already the fool has been functioning like Janus: one face towards those who have ostracized him—even if this came from his own behavior—and another face that has become more sensitive to what lies within himself and which we all must confront. He has detected, albeit vaguely, a profound cramp made manifest by our desire for predictability and willingness to submit to an authority even if it goes against the good and is harmful to our well-being. This submission is a safe haven which makes decisions for us and relieves us of freedom and responsibility. The fool will have none of that.

Because a fool is more sensitive to the source of our emotional agitation and the repetitive nature of the fireworks which the spasm gives off, he is able to confront fully the fact that he had allowed himself to be duped earlier in life. Not only that, he had lied about it and denied any consent. But now he is willing to face up to the facts. To discover that one has been living a lie is embarrassing, even if acknowledged in private, and presents another obstacle to further inquiry beyond the spasm's agitation. These fireworks stand like demons guarding the entrance of a cave and assume the form (that word again) of memories that immobilize the inquiring person. Despite the obstacles, the fool presses on with his inquiry past the demons to the source of these unceasing ups and downs, roller coaster-like, to which he had been passive for too long. They must come from somewhere and camouflage the interior spasm responsible for giving them birth both during one's waking hours and in dreams. Actually, from the spasm's point of view the two states are identical, and to reach this conclusion is a major step in the right direction. The fool is beginning to think like the spasm, to put it a bit awkwardly. This insight enables the fool to perceive the sameness of what occurs within us by day as well as by night...in sum, twenty-four hours a day...and for the duration of one's life. At the same time he is struck by the tragic awareness that many persons are not disposed to see this. Pressing on with impartial inquiry as to the spasm turns out to be the best ministry possible on anyone's behalf provided that you're willing to stick with it.

As soon as the distinction between emotions and the spasm is made, the spasm seems to intensify which makes you wonder if you're doing the right thing. Such doubt turns out to be a questioning of our inbuilt proclivity toward the notion of progress, of thinking in terms of advancement step by step to some great spiritual reality in place of insights based upon the idea of succession. So when our advancement hits a wall or two, we're left pretty much clueless and without friends who understand our predicament. We get the impression that the spasm, the source of frequent violent, incessant thoughts and images, doesn't wish to see the light and throws up obstacles from its lair in order to remain concealed from sight. Herein lies the advantage of being a fool compared with an ordinary person. He has nothing to lose since for all intensive purposes, he has already lost everything. Just as important, the fool has plenty of leisure at his disposal. It had been purchased at considerable personal price allowing him to excel at understanding what troubles most of us, disintegration of energy in the form of thoughts (more accurately, passivity

to these thoughts) instead of focusing upon the spasm from which these thoughts emerge with lightning speed. The fool discovers that this newly unearthed spasm is blind, impersonal and common to everyone. Confrontation with the impersonal is enough to turn even more people off, yet the spasm's impersonal nature turns out to be the best asset at the fool's disposal. Obedience to what is impersonal bestows an unheard of freedom because it ties you in with everything else that's going on. So when you look about the universe, everything is impersonal, so come to that conclusion and decide to run with it. In fact, you do so immediately without hesitation. After conforming to this impersonal reality you find a liberation which is quite surprising and very unlike popular misunderstandings. What you've called "personal" for so long turns out to be very limited...a secondary reality...compared to what's going on all around you. Not long afterwards it dawns on you that the reality you had deemed personal turns out to be frightfully narrow, the realm of petty minds and spirits. The acid test, of course, is to see which side is happier.

Because the spasm is impersonal we tend to view it negatively even though it lays at the heart of our existence. Hence unsuspecting people easily can associate it with manifestations of compulsive and superstitious behavior impinging upon our free will. While this apparently negative side to the spasm is deplorable, it has a positive side which isn't acknowledged but very active in our lives. Contrary to popular opinion, slavery is a desirable state. When you're subjected to the will of another (a person or a larger entity such as the state), you are rewarded. You're taken care of for the rest of your life even if you might be required to hand over yours. Slavery is the ultimate security blanket and guarantee of cradle-to-grave care. To relinquish one's will freely causes a thrill difficult to duplicate, let alone describe. Any thought as to what may happen in the future is done away, giving the certainty that it's the best of all possible modes of living. Doing it along is impossible which is why slavery is a corporate enterprise. You have plenty of support and never lack for consolation. Interiorly speaking, submission to another person or entity summons your energy to the fullest and directs it towards the outside world, freeing you from self-absorption. Hence slavery is more preferable to freedom chiefly by its communal celebration, and much of this tendency to relinquish freedom lies in a misunderstanding of the intensely coiled spasm laying within each one of us. Should we take a long, hard look at how quickly we're ready to cast away personal freedom, even at a whim, the very thought debases us while at the same time being a wake-up call.

Into this hapless situation enters the fool. However, he comes fully prepared knowing that he can handle every detail. The reason? There's nothing flattering about our interior spasm as manifested through addiction, compulsion especially the desire to relinquish personal freedom. If we don't submit to these tendencies, automatically we're at war with them, no quarter asked nor given. The fool is acquainted with the three forms of obsessive behavior since he had his share of having been led around by the nose. This is especially embarrassing when done in public, for it creates a collective memory which can paralyze you to take no action. In other words, the collective nature of this perception tending towards servitude has its roots in misinterpreting the nature of the spasm we're discussing. Particularly devastating is that the spasm's manifestations eat away at the sentiment of gratitude. Actually a conspiracy seems to be at work, one larger than we can imagine. I say conspiracy because gratitude is both so human and so transcendent that evil can't bear any manifestations of it. You could say, then, that gratitude is the perfect proof for the existence of evil.

As for the fool, instead of subscribing to programs designed to mitigate effects of this spasm—and this includes

various forms of spiritual ascesis and discipline—he prefers to gaze as steadily as possible at their source which is the spasm in and by itself. Addictive, compulsive and superstitious behavior do not exist in a vacuum; they must come from somewhere. If they do not, solutions to the problem would have been solved ages ago. The longer and steadier the fool gazes towards the source, the clearer he perceives an entity best described as being curled up tight as a ball of yarn, never being able to relax, yet from whose tightness all sorts of energy spews forth. Continuing with his gaze, the fool see through the deceptions we come up with of identifying the spasm with a disintegration of energy going off in this way and in that, lacking focus.

Most people who perceive this disintegration as chaotic spurts advance no further since they think they've run up against a dead-end. Besides, a person almost always is affected by the energy released by this spasm in a less than desirable way, so he seeks to put as much distance between it and him as humanly possible. Hence, the difficulty of comporting oneself once you've closed the door behind you and are all alone. Obviously this is a time to take stock and hopefully continue staring down the disintegration (or better, through it) and get closer to the spasm. A boldness bordering upon recklessness is called for at this juncture. Authorization might be a better term. That means a person authorizes...gives authority to...the gaze originally directed at the spasm without flinching and remaining as calm as could be. This authorization is akin to the act of bestowing freedom and is far more challenging that it initially appears. Try to imagine authorizing the gaze we're talking about day in, day out, under all circumstances. It is no easy task. But continuing forward (in reality there is no forward, but we'll stick with it for now), the fool begins to perceive that this spasm is a desire, an *eros*, at the heart of all organic life which in part is sexual. Furthermore, the disintegration of energy coming from the spasm, by reason of being secondary, has a lesser reality and belongs to the realm of forms to which we are partial. Because the "space" between the spasm and disintegration is so tiny, the primordial error consists in identifying the two where such an identification is not called for.

Anyone can intuit this spasm. It requires preparation in the form of cultivating inner peace and quiet which, if continued a while and cuts through the barrage of thoughts and emotions, reveals a vital force marked by constancy. Such an insight comes even if the gesture of intuiting is short in duration or imperfect. We could put it another way. This spasm greets us at the end of a day when we close the door behind us and are left alone. Chances are we shun this encounter because we fear being paralyzed by it. Better to stick with the disintegration of energy released by the spasm because we prefer forms which create an artificial wall of separation between us and the spasm. Here precisely is the arena in which a fool excels. Because he lives in a kind of in-between land, he is adapt at seeing the difference between the spasm and disintegration of energy. Earlier painful experiences have primed him for it. If it weren't for humiliations leading to the more permanent state of humility, we would have reason to question him. Such is the acid test of his validity. Yet to an observer the fool might not appear humble but more chaotic and even nonchalant. It's a disguise, of course, which the fool puts at his service so as to maintain his life style. He takes great care to cultivate a perception of immaturity which enables him to maintain the intensity demanded for maintaining awareness of his foolishness vis-a-vis that internal spasm. Such immaturity is a genuine gift, albeit a strange one, and is the perfect cover. How it plays out for the benefit of mankind is anyone's guess. Doubt is part of the fool's vocation. Yet he intuits that the value such doubt contains, mysteriously present and, greater than anyone can imagine.

Immaturity must be cultivated, not assumed. To cultivate evokes agricultural imagery: care and tenderness shown to plants as by watering them and giving the right fertilizer, else they will wither away. We all know what immaturity is and to our embarrassment, can enumerate personal examples we'd rather forget. But to cultivate immaturity implies an active stance with memories from real-life where we suck out their essence and insert them into a new form. This doesn't go according to a preconceived plan but is done spontaneously. People both marvel and ridicule the fool for this, an unthinkable gesture. Improvisation might be another way of stating it. It's all quite subtle and very different from the more familiar devious behavior though an outsider may confuse the two. The immaturity which is cultivated preserves the fool from the consequences of a split personality, of trying to live on two planes simultaneously. It's similar to but different from an actor who is two persons at same time. After he has put himself into the person he portrays, he remains himself while not be consumed. This difficulty seems reflected in the troubled lives of actors, perhaps having had to sustain this duality not just for a single character but a slew of them over the course of one's career.

What keeps a fool steady, even prosperous, is the cultivation of gratitude which was introduced a few paragraphs above. In his mimicry of our human tendency to miss the mark constantly—and that is the Hebrew definition of sin, an archery term—the comic relief at work gives rise to a spontaneous, intense burst of gratitude. When you look at life, everything militates against this sentiment, implying its high value and as close to the definition of transcendence as anyone could wish. We don't know why this is so but recognize it immediately when we come across it. Gratitude involves an intensity difficult to maintain over the long haul and hence can be forgotten easily. Also it's hard to feign due to the way gratitude unites the person feeling so with the person or object, source of this sentiment. You can't be grateful all the time; too much energy is required, so attempts as acting such are best avoided. What's important is a readiness to allow the constant, subterranean readiness of gratitude to burst forth here and there. To be ready means sustaining that fool-like behavior which is both appealing as well as devious.

These reflections upon a fool's behavior assume more significance the closer we approach that inner spasm common to us all. While words such as "approach" are required, in truth there is no physical drawing near to the spasm. It's a question of how to handle the dissipation of energy from the spasm which intensifies the "closer" we get. And "closer" is maintaining a steady gaze forward, undeterred by any dissipation of energy thrown at us. The fool's active stance before these dissipations is radically different compared to most of us who are programmed to remain passive, stuck almost like a deer in a car's headlights. We think this is how we're supposed to comport ourselves, immobile before the spasm. However, things are otherwise. The correct approach is to be active by way of our understanding and intuition and to think like this borders upon a religious conversion.

To think otherwise, in a reactionary way, is a serious mistake, one to which we all are vulnerable. Yet as soon as we adopt an active glance—we are dealing with a regard not of the visible order and hence not belonging to form—the situation changes in our favor. The best part is that the shift occurs almost at once, and the effects are immediate. We're able to "get closer" to this spasm and after awhile discover that it de-contracts on its own. Although it appears we're doing the gesture, some other reality is operative, for this is the actual "place" we come across transcendent reality. Suddenly we're grateful for our discovery, can't pin it down (nor care to) which tells us that we've hit upon something really significant. Though some awe and dread may be part of our encounter, they remain secondary to this profound gratitude. So here is a genuine example of getting in vital touch with a reality

wholly other than ourselves. To put it in terms of God at this juncture is a bit awkward, simply because we associate things divine with certain forms of religious piety. That's all well and good, but the intent is to "get at" the mechanism of how we approach transcendence, neither to describe transcendence nor bring it down to our level which is one of form. Even though we've bumped up against transcendent reality, that which is wholly other than ourselves, it's disconcerting to discover how consistently we lie about it or more to the point, deny its reality. History may be defined as a record of escapes from it, simultaneously tragic and boring. We can't escape the fact that the spasm, ever in our sight, escapes us yet is present in, around and through us. Maintaining an active regard concerning the spasm is the key, not to be passive. And giving in to being passive makes us miss the mark altogether. Dissipations are all we get.

A delightful discovery awaits us provided we maintain this active regard. After a while we realize that yes, we have hit upon a true norm to govern our behavior compared to the passive one which is natural. A norm is that which has been pre-established before we came on the scene and reveals the essence of our humanity as having its root above or in the transcendent realm. That which is natural belongs to what is below and ever strives upward. This distinction becomes increasingly apparent as we move toward our inner spasm and discover that we prefer inner conflict and turmoil than allowing the spasm first to grasp and then to immobilize us. A norm is intimately connected to the sentiment of gratitude because when you're grateful, you express it spontaneously to another person and take delight in doing it. Both you and he...and others down the line...intuit at once that yes, here is a genuine norm for our behavior. Therefore we follow it. At first these gestures are intermittent. They don't form a continuous stream throughout life but punctuate it from time to time, becoming more consistent the more you become grateful. So we could define the chief human norm for human behavior as gratitude. That which is natural can partake of the same sentiment yet is considerably weaker and tends to fade away. Besides, it's "natural" for this to happen, not "normal." So the normal is gratitude shown to someone whereas the natural has a weaker sense of gratitude, is intermittent, because the natural man focuses more upon methods of survival. A "natural" person always is striving upward to gain more of what he has already. A "normal" person...and this is the wise fool...doesn't have to strive upward because already he possesses something wonderful and seeks opportunities to express his gratitude. And he does this with his two feet planted firmly on the ground, not in the clouds. All this sounds a bit complicated but in reality is simple. The complication consists in our inability to slow down and consider what's actually going on within us, for far greater importance than what's going outside us. Once the inside is taken care of, everything outside falls in line. Never do we obtain the resolution between normal and natural to our satisfaction. However, of what concern is that to a grateful person in all his grubbiness?

The fool's active regard toward the interior spasm sets him apart but only apart that others may follow him. That means he's thrown back—and this appears paradoxical—to the natural plane of reality. This is the world people wish to escape by striving upwards and looking towards the future. More than anyone the fool knows that in the concrete it's easier to hit upon this spasm by following the blind, automatic behavior of nature in all its gritty details. He prefers the animal-like world of sensation because fidelity as strictly as possible to it oddly enough precludes the dissipating energy of the spasm which erroneously we perceive in terms of forms. Close contact with the spasm allows him to react to the outside world like a robot in good working order. The fool revels in determinism, one the most frightening ideas that has been contrived. It's the root of the vast impersonal universe in which the personal has the tiniest of places, and when you put some thought to it, forces us to miss out on a lot

of excitement.

The frantic activity of the natural world is blind and perhaps the most economical manifestation of energy that exists. To capitalize on this requires a particular kind of attention. It is direct, impartial and universal which means you take in everything out there in a single unifying glance. This is akin to being asked, “How are you today?” One person may get an account of your physical health, another of your mental condition, and another of your social life. Each person singles out a slice of your life to the neglect of the whole. But trying to describe your robot-like obedience to the natural world is like asking “How are you today from every point of view?” Impossible to respond adequately, let alone grasp in the conventional sense (A person who subscribes to determinism would never be so cheery in the light of these questions). Yet this universal question describes the regard a fool adopts to approach our inner spasm. The forms as energy that assail him as thoughts and emotions are like those individual questions. They don’t have a clue to respond to the fool’s inclusive regard and hence bounce off him. The important point is that the fool doesn’t succeed in doing this all at once. He is content with making this universal discreet regard at one time here and at another time over there. The intervals between such regards and the contentedness they produce come together gradually...without effort...each loaded with one degree of gratitude or another.

This regard, universal vs. particular, sounds like it smacks of a progression, of going from one state to another and so forth. However that notion contributes, albeit in subtle fashion, to our ignorance of what’s really transpiring. Progression is gradual and is inferred as in one of those questions asked in the last paragraph. You ask one question and then advance. You ask another and go forward a bit more and so forth down the line. All the while you’re laying out a map to when these questions accumulate into a critical mass and give way to a discovery, final and inclusive, of that transcendent principle at work within us. Unfortunately to think in terms of progression is a delusion, albeit a common one. It consists in considering a series of indefinite steps, not successive changes, in how we function or deal with that transcendent reality. The term “successive” is better adapted than one pertaining to gradual changes because it reveals our blindness for that which is particular over one which is universal. The reason? The spasm under consideration that pervades all aspects of our lives eludes us because it doesn’t belong to the objective world. Hence it requires a special kind of glance, the one under discussion summed in the question, “How to you feel today from every point of view?”

While the question just posed cannot be answered...and that is precisely what’s at issue here...indeed a response can be given, and that response assumes the form of gratitude. It is the only instrument at our disposal to deal with the spasm, more specifically, to overcome our passiveness and not allow ourselves to be jerked around as on a leash. Gratitude can be shown rather boldly, almost with shouts of joy, which effectively stop not the active energy (that’s always spewing forth) from the spasm but our passivity before it. And we give obedience to everything the natural world throws our way without making distinctions. “Without making distinctions” is the hard part. Right away we wish to impose our personal judgment as to this is good, that is bad and so forth. To relinquish this is among the hardest of all detachments but worth the effort. Images, of course, will arise, but our attachment to them will dissipate just as quickly. In other words, by becoming aware of our successive levels of blindness will do wonders as to their banishment.

“And then what?” may be asked, but that’s a question based on a preference for progression, not the patience required to dispose oneself to the un-peeling operation associated with succession. In the concrete, obedience to creation consists in following all that rises and falls before our eyes while declining the urge to impose images or forms—secondary reactions—on what comes into existence. Gratitude is like this if we examine it. On the surface this sounds like we’re traded in our free will for a form of mechanistic behavior, but not so. Even an outside observer not having a clue as to what’s going on would notice a difference between this behavior and one based on a point-by-point awareness of the physical world. The former is done blindly whereas the latter with an all-pervading sense of gratitude. It may not be manifest outright but always is present. Just examine past occasions when you’ve been intensely grateful. Following in strict fidelity all the details of life and without judging either favorably or unfavorably (harder than you think, try it), you can see that one event succeeds another as they work towards lifting our innate blindness. But if the same adherence to detail were done with an eye towards progressing (and hence possessing) to the transcendent principle within us, we would miss it. Transcendence remains one step ahead of us. Always.

I’m not sure if any conclusions can be drawn from these attempts to uncover a dimly perceived yet all-pervasive reality which I termed a spasm. The arguments put forth may come across convoluted and less than professional. Yet at the heart of the essay is an attempt to examine as closely as possible that which awaits us when we close the door behind us at the end of day. It’s something we all have to face. We all bear about within us something we know is coiled up really tight yet have a hard time describing. In passing I had used the Greek word *eros* perhaps not so much for this spasm but for how we relate to it, with direct passionate response. That term has been examined by classicists and could be developed a bit more. That will wait for later. So if one day you acknowledge this spasm and decide to see if it exists (no problem there; it pops up right in front of you, albeit formless), you’re in for a real adventure. It cuts across our desire for excitement, transcendence and holds the promise of the best sentiment anyone could ask for, gratitude.

The issues raised here have been framed in light of a fool and what such a person just might be. He turns out to be our most reliable guide by reason of having come to grips with personal humiliations and employs them to a better end which, of course, results in gratitude. A fool is neither an angel nor a devil but an in-between person. He has confronted an issue every person on the spiritual path comes across. That is, when you’ve advanced and have achieved some peace, almost immediately there follows a crash where you get humiliated. Our advancements seem like a set-up for getting screwed in the near future. But if we look at these steps, of how we’ve achieved them, many lack what may be called a raucous sense of gratitude. Anyway, that will come in due time. Gratitude could have been the subject of this essay, but at least we ended up there and hopefully will continue to cultivate it. This profound sentiment makes us strong in understanding in our attempts to understand our inner spasm. Then we realize that we are able and quite easily to lose ourselves in it, that is, reside in our fear of sadness or anxiety without any image which is fearful, sad or anxious and thus without thoughts which produce movement.

+ The End+