

Time and its Displacement

Times flies. An expression we hear on a daily basis and use just as frequently with little or no reflection. It belongs to a handful of concise, pithy sayings which reveal all-pervasive truths...common wisdom in a nutshell, if you will, that helps guide us throughout the day. The two small words—one noun and one verb—forming this one sentence are indicative of two things: the dream-like experience of reality as we rush through life plus a constant reminder of our impending death. Dream-like in that when something significant has happened, good or ill, it seems as though it never has taken place, especially true after some time has passed by and other things have crowded in upon us. In other words, memories are strong, even burning, in our minds but are bound to fade away. They leave little, if anything, left over to account for.

One poignant example comes from hearing about World War II veterans. Even though memories of the war are fresh to them, they are alien to us. These men are dying out rapidly and hence direct accounts of that momentous event will become even more removed. A more extreme case involves World War I vets. All have passed away by now which means their memories reside even further back in time. Many of us are alive who got them first hand from these men. You can extend this as far back as you wish in recorded history until you lose touch with concrete individuals. At some point or other they tend to merge into one, humanity-as-a-whole if you will, which has garnered a handful of memories and transmitted a handful of them to the present. Their ability to speak directly to human experience destines them to survive well into the future, “times flies” being one of the most popular.

Furthermore, the passage of time has less impact when we’re older than in younger years. In old age we’ve adjusted to the fact that little time is left, and it will produce an equal amount of fleeting memories no different from earlier ones. Indeed, The End is in sight. You ask yourself what is reality after all, a question that reveals we’re all philosophers at heart. Some may argue away the experience of time’s passage as not true objectively, but that’s irrelevant. We’re concerned here more with the common experience of time and can leave the rest to scientifically minded folks. So if time really does fly by, life passes by with equal rapidity. Such is the theme of Ecclesiastes, his cry of “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Yet a nagging question remains. We persist in believing there’s more to life, even in the face of overwhelming calamity, but can’t quite put our fingers on it.

Older folks are more sensitive to the expression “time flies” because for them death is closer at hand. They feel loneliness more acutely because most friends and loved ones have died, all now just a memory. Should they talk of them to us, we conceal our boredom because those people are another step more removed from our experience. And if we apply that to another person and so forth, memories really get watered down, all so quickly. If you wish to expand this to the nth degree, go to an old cemetery. Memories of living persons with regard to those in the ground are tenuous if at all extant. Usually a historical fact or two bridges the generations, not much more.

Until you reach the age of fifty, time more or less spreads out evenly and on occasion endlessly, making you not so much aware of its passage. Supposedly you have plenty of time ahead of you. After the age of fifty time begins to accelerate until you reach a point when, despite not knowing the day of your death, you know for certain that the time ahead of you is shorter than the time that went before. Still, after having paused to reflect, we persist in our fixed ways without doing much, remaining passive to events. Once in a while something will interrupt us but not for long. Quickly we return to the status quo. Herein lies the real rub, that we haven’t awoken up to this fact. At the same time we wonder what we can or should do when we hear that expression “Time flies” repeated throughout a given day. Get religious? Worry day and night? Eat, drink and be merry? The indecisiveness that comes over us deadens our sensibility and needs to be uprooted but never violently. More on that later. In addition to time being felt up close and personal, it assumes an objective character when applied to scientific measurement. Chances are scientists will agree that so-called objective measurements have their origin in someone’s subjective perception which gradually became normative. It makes plain sense for everyone to have a common orientation.

These brief observations on a common experience contribute to a theme of interest here, that today more than ever we’re experiencing a clash between subjective and objective perceptions of time. The impetus that gave rise to this essay was a series of conversations with friends I’ve had and am still having about scholarship in general. Essential to such pursuits is having the leisure...the time...to read primary sources (chiefly as relative to religion and philosophy). Leisure is vital, for it implies being relaxed and having fun with a text, almost unheard of nowadays. Should this attitude be propagated, it would come under suspicion. A waste of time (which, after all, is flying). The pursuits in question aren’t limited to a few ivy tower types but open to everyone, really. Not long ago scholars in the truest sense were common, not now, and could be found in any walk of life. They had a certain air about them, always engaged in their work but in an easy-going manner that welcomed anyone to join them. Today you have to look far and wide to find someone in this

traditional sense, and if you do, you've hit upon a treasure not to abandon.

This ability to put leisure at the service of mankind has fallen off dramatically right before our eyes against the backdrop of an irony typical of our technological age. We're freed up more than ever from manual drudgery, even getting information from a library which meant making a trip there and further afield if the material were highly specialized. Thanks to the Internet, we have access to just about every document in the world regardless of the field. You'd think such a boon would give rise to a Golden Age, something akin to what the angels in heaven are enjoying but not so. In addition to being swamped with information, the very nature of the electronic medium, notably social media, is disconcerting because once we have engaged with it, we've lost our ability to concentrate or better, to focus. Things just aren't the same after we've come off even a moderate exposure to this technology.

Prior to our era when the use of computers was less common, the issue of having time for leisure wasn't discussed much. People were just as busy but with a major difference: they weren't as distracted...multi-tasked out, if you will. Now that everyone is connected, the leisure of yesteryear has withered away with astonishing rapidity. And leisure here has a specific definition put at the service of mankind which goes by a specific name familiar to the ancient Romans, *otium*¹. In actuality there is time, but you have to fight for it mightily because the nature of modern connectivity militates against *otium*, fracturing our ability to focus and read slowly. You wonder if some people were aware of this process when it was underway. Some would say yes, but many people admittedly were attracted to the new technology. It would make for a fascinating study in conjunction with those scholars as defined in this essay.

Although the possibility of pursuing a lifestyle based on *otium* exists—and that is what we're getting at, a whole manner of life—we don't have as many examples on which to model our lives. Some of the scholars just mentioned are still alive but most seem to have disappeared from sight. This population, always a minority even in their heyday, were able to inspire others by their quiet manner of life. People did listen to them because they weren't connected...wired...to this or that mechanical device. Always you could count on them working away on their projects because such work was a way of life which fostered original ideas and insights. The handful with whom I'm

¹Scholé ('scholar') is the Greek equivalent to *otium* and derives from the verb *scholazo*. Both terms are opposite to *negotium* which means business or better, being preoccupied by it.

contact today are known by their colleagues and acquaintances for their relative isolation, that is, media-wise. But compared to many of their fellow teachers, students are constantly at their doors seeking advice on this or that project. These scholars do advise but on a deeper level bordering upon spiritual direction². One could almost put them in the same category of beloved grandparents or aunts and uncles. Hopefully these younger folks will look more deeply and later in life hand over what they acquired from such treasured mentors. Even better, they may be inspired to take up that lifestyle and so carry on the tradition³.

So if we wish to recover this fairly recent disappearance of scholarship which rests upon the cultivation of otium, first we have to be aware of the starkness of the landscape about us. We know something is missing by reason of a pervasive lack but can't put our fingers on it. One thing is certain, the suddenness with which it has happened. It seems that for every year since the disappearance of this tradition a decade will be required to restore it. No exaggeration. In other words, it's a long-haul project. The task at hand is arduous and is to be undertaken by persons who, keeping the Internet and the media at bay, must fight for the requisite otium to actualize their goal. It may be good to start off small or on your own. After you've gotten into the habit of cultivating otium and do it for a while all by yourself, something strange begins to happen against your own will or better, beyond your own will. Suddenly a like-minded person will come on the scene. It may even be through the Internet (!), and when such a meeting occurs, it's as though you have known that person in the flesh. However, such encounters are rare and always will be so. In other words, you have to have faith in what you've committed your life because it's a full-time occupation, rather, a vocation.

As for electronic media, it makes all kinds of stuff available immediately, too much stuff for anyone to handle. Even if we narrow this stuff down to our particular interests, that is to say on the

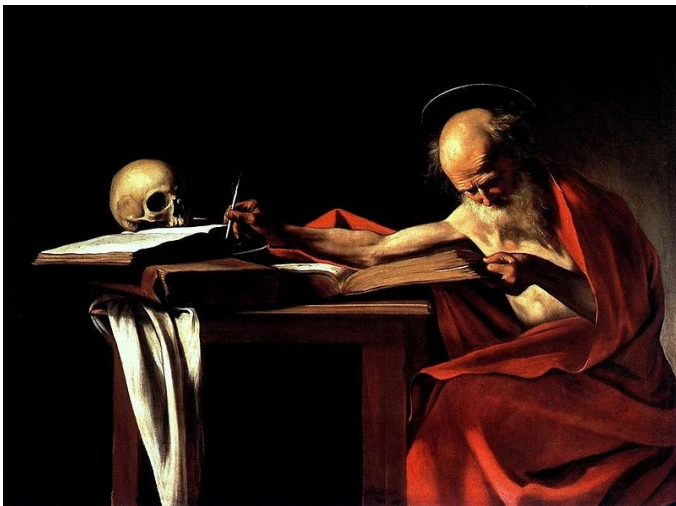
²Always you would speak with such persons. Compare this with the universal talk to which is revealing. Speaking with means a dialogue whereas talking to is one way, no dialogue. Pay attention to how often the latter is used, quite revealing yet scary.

³I have met such young people, very inspiring. However, they face a daunting challenge. Scholars of the old school made a living through teaching. Nowadays you can't make a living and have the requisite otium. That leaves one venerable category in Western tradition, monks. However, with dwindling numbers, they are hard pressed to find otium, a reality they inherited directly from the ancient Romans. All this makes for a scary future, closer to us than we imagine.

scholarly level, it's not put to full potential. The reason? In addition to the quantity we're too occupied with the social aspect of the new media to sort through it properly. We check our email or whatever intermittently while doing our scholarly thing which erodes our ability to focus (Here's when secondary sources...Cliff's Notes...are the most attractive). Our predecessors had no such distractions and were able to delve more deeply into their material even if it were more limited than what we have now. We simply can't get the idea that quantity = quality out of our minds, even if reminded of this distinction. Those with less could concentrate on primary sources instead of the secondary ones, the latter lending themselves more to an environment marked by constant interruptions.

And so we have a strange paradox: immediate access to abundant material in one's field, including primary sources, yet an inability to make the most of them. That's why we need to keep firmly in memory our predecessors who can inspire us to disconnect from the pervasiveness of electronic media⁴. However, that's equivalent to untangling ourselves from a ball of thread. The threads are thin and easily snapped one by one, but the more you push and pull, the tighter they become. To become disentangled requires the opposite tactic, namely, standing as still as possible so that the threads fall off by themselves. By no means is this easy though it sounds like it does. Standing still in this specific way is at the heart of otium and contributes to the sense that time flies but positively because time is seen for what it is, a mental construct. In other words, this standing still doesn't destroy time but simply displaces it, something we'll expand shortly.

The modern era is depicted sometimes as one where discipline has vanished. Partially true because



⁴For inspiration you might search around for a favorite scholar say, from the 1950s or 1960s sitting at his desk. Of course, he would have the obligatory pipe in his hand or mouth. If you're religiously inclined, one of the best inspirations is a copy of St. Jerome at his desk such as this one by Caravaggio (the human skull is optional, of course). Regardless of your choice, post it on the wall in front of you. Look at it every time you go for the "connect" button on your computer and stay disconnected unless it's really necessary.

it flourishes under a different guise with two aspects, one where training is tantamount (physical and mental) and the other where compulsive behavior is fostered, albeit unintentionally. And that compulsion can be viewed mistakenly as a form of discipline. Many people are highly disciplined without realizing it because their work demands it as well as adhering to a strict schedule in their personal lives due to the constraints of time. Such training makes its best case with respect to the physical plane where it's assumed freely such as belonging to a gym or the like. Following a regime, of course, adapts us well to life in the modern world which puts a premium on organization and that, in turn, is intent upon getting immediate results. Nothing is left for chance, and when chance does intervene, you scramble to eliminate it. Still, chance hovers over our lives like a specter ready to pounce and ruin everything. Perhaps that's why waiting in traffic or at the doctor's office is symbolic of this intolerable waste of time. The real fear is that chance will consume not just us and our little world but the world as a whole.

As for compulsive behavior, the fast-paced way of living bombards us constantly with information squeezing more tightly our limited time for reflection. It is a simple pattern where we begin with a particular piece of information, quickly we grab it, move onto the next piece and so forth. It may or may not be done systematically but in a compulsive fashion with no time to reflect on what we're doing or where we're going. And so the discipline required to lead a productive life as we've come to understand it and the stuff thrown at us constantly makes us behave in a compulsive way. There's no relief from this bombardment unless we bring it to a sudden halt...again, that phrase typical of our age, get unplugged.

Now try to interject otium into this mix which is very different from our customary habits of leisure. You might as well attempt to mix oil with water, that's how contrary otium is to our modern way of life. Despite the periods of relaxation we enjoy, it's never thorough. Always an underlying tension exists just below the surface. In contrast, the special state of otium disengages the body, mind and spirit from particular things while at the same time is present to them all. You've become disengaged from all things yet are present fully to them, a preparatory stage, for example, for engaging in scholarship as done by the old school mentioned above. Compared with this form of otium all other forms of leisure are lesser imitations. If you're more attentive to examining yourself, quickly you discover that at the root of our difficulties is a fear of standing still, of avoiding it at all costs. We're dealing with the biggest dichotomy ever, one against which all others pale in comparison. On the other hand is the attractiveness of being busy...negotium mentioned in footnote #1...even if on occasion it's distressing. In other words, we're caught

between two forms of distress which batter us from pillar to post, a typically modern predicament.

So if you're attempting to do any scholarly work in this unfortunate environment—many have ended up there without knowing how they got there—no small wonder the first symptom you encounter is a reluctance to read primary sources⁵. You want to but can't. Neither can you pinpoint the reason for not do so. These sources had been composed in an era free from the double-edge distress just described, for otium in the classical sense had been built into the culture. Granted it belonged to a privileged few, but that few had the obligation of allowing its fruit to trickle down into society. In those societies other pressures were present, but people could manage them; now we're up against the all-pervasive nature of electronic media which has a perverse way of keeping us stuck in distress #1. That is to say, the distress of busyness...negotium...not the one proper leading to the expectation of being still.

It's easy to test this in real life. Try to read with close attention a text which is philosophic or spiritual by nature, preferably one of those "primary sources." Please note: this doesn't mean the text is "difficult" but might seem that way because it necessitates adopting another mental framework⁶. We may start off okay but quickly run into an experience that can be described as a shattering which produces intense mental discomfort. We wish to read the text but can't comprehend it because it militates against our desire to breeze through quickly and then move on to something else. On top of this, unconsciously and almost perversely we're wishing an interruption through electronic media as an email. Obviously the text we're trying to read doesn't do this but we do it to the text, meaning that the problem lies at how our attention is affected. That's why never such texts could be composed today and why some people look at them with awe, as though aliens had created them. It's the stuff of scientific fiction with a twist. On the other

⁵Observe closely what's going on here! Awareness of time is more or less suspended, and we don't become aware of this fact until we leave the task. Then there comes to mind "Time flies" but in a sense very different from our predecessors. So it seems that exposure to electronic media alters our perception of time's passage which, in turn, bears directly upon our ability to focus. Otium, obviously, is a state impossible to sustain.

⁶This is true when it comes to reading the dialogues of Plato. For the most part these give and take exchanges between people aren't "difficult" yet remain hard to follow. The problem can't be attributed to over two millennia of separation between them and us but to our inability of reading slowly enough for comprehension.

hand, research of a scientific nature doesn't seem to run into this problem. Perhaps it's because physical things are involved which don't touch our spirit. They can be manipulated with the help of electronic media and do not take us off course from our research. Thus it's unfair to compare scholars as presented here with those engaged in science. The former often end up short changed, unfairly so.

The most obvious remedy is to withdraw from one of the chief causes of distress, electronic media, which unfortunately means assuming a new form of the same. Even if it isn't a cause, at least it's an enabler of distress. We do this because we know no other choice. So if the media is the culprit, put distance between you and it...get unplugged, as the saying goes. While this sounds desirable, the required unplugging has to be done correctly, for it's more difficult than at first glance. If done improperly it's not unlike going cold turkey. Some people can handle that but most can't as we know from the problems of withdrawing from addictive behavior, this being one of them. It's worth our while to take the proper steps because an unplanned withdrawal can lead to an uneven sense of time's passage. We want to avoid breaking awareness of time into bits and pieces, some long and others short, which we do when going online, offline and back again.

To undertake such a project is something most people can't even begin to comprehend. But once we've withdrawn from exposure to media, we confront another problem. To our chagrin we find that all sorts of memories are clinging to us and infecting our current behavior...not especially negative memories but more an incessant bombardment by them which proves most stressing. In ages past these would be called distractions associated with attentiveness to philosophical or spiritual reflection which leads to contemplation. To counter them people built up a whole array of defensive procedures which had been refined over the centuries. While still familiar today in some circles, they have lost their effectiveness because mental images are assaulting us with a special intensity, chiefly from exposure to the media, social and otherwise. Actually this is such a new phenomenon that for the most part we haven't yet formulated a proper response. Since we've forgotten the old practices, we lack a foundation on which to build. This is tragic because there's a renewed interest in things spiritual which needs some guidance⁷. Anyway, the steps offered here

⁷Perhaps...and this is a "technical" perhaps...spiritual training should be put off indefinitely. The real need is reclaiming those elements that were associated with study and otium. If that isn't done first, any instruction in spirituality and the like are less likely to take hold. One could say the world needs philosophers more than saints. I.e., those who are lovers of wisdom.

are temporary and imperfect pointers to how we can dispose ourselves better to a life of otium which means cutting the social media cord or at least letting it atrophy on its own.

So where can we locate the proper remedy, not using that word in a derogatory sounding or arrogant way? It lies in the understanding alone though not in the usual intellectual manner with which we might associate this faculty. What concerns us is very concrete, of how to break out of debilitating images and their constant rolling around inside us fueled, for example, by social media. That means watching them as constantly and closely as we can without passing judgment. These two adverbs are important, for if we don't watch every detail of our lives, the tendency to judge rushes in, takes sides and makes us opt either for the good or the ill. Such is the meaning of understanding as employed here. Debilitating images arise from the double-edge nature of distress mentioned above which help sustain them in existence: distress from work (so bound up with the Internet) and distress from the fear of standing still. Yet if you speak with any person who has made the first but giant step to shedding this distress in favor of an inner stillness, you'll find him to be a happy person pretty much all around. And this is just the first step, so you can imagine what the others are like.

A chief aspect of the modern world is bland uniformity: not too hot, not too cold but a vanilla-like mediocrity to which everyone can subscribe and accept, deadening in its effect. Fostering this blandness comes on gradually. We experience distractions arising from the media, allow our minds to get scattered and hence discover that we can't be attentive to any scholarly task with a sense of joy and enthusiasm. These distractions aren't the violent ones with the potential of throwing us into confusion. Their persistent assault consists of harmless or neutral thoughts that wear us down, distractions coming at us relentlessly wave after wave, a fact that can't be emphasized enough. No small wonder we lack the know-how to put up sustained resistance. If things get too hard, we relieve ourselves by returning to the media, the hand that had been responsible for striking us in the first place. Any relief we experience, of course, isn't destined to last, only get compounded. It's like an addict who withdraws from drugs. He can't take it any long and returns to where he finds relief, albeit temporary. Then he's back to his old habits only more intensely. So if there ever were a desert or no-man's land, here it is, which goes by the name of mediocrity.

The usual approach to dealing with these distractions is to undertake a form of discipline which sounds like the most reasonable course of action, and Christian spiritual has developed sophisticated disciplines which have been tried and true for generations. Let's say you've decided to adopt some

of these disciplines, especially against assaults coming from the media, and are doing pretty well at it. Then something comes along to trip you up which means now you have to undo the damage done. That consists of much back-tracking, if you will, a new wave of thoughts attempting to counteract other thoughts and so forth. Everyone is familiar with the drill. Then after wallowing in negative thoughts and the rest, allowing them to stop gradually like a pendulum to an old clock, finally you get on your feet. You dust off your feet, take up the discipline where you had left off until you fall again with yet the prospect of restoring your original condition, all very tiresome and Sisyphus-like. In the meantime memories of these multiple defeats are accumulating until one comes along with special force that confirms what you've felt pretty much from the beginning, that you're a failure in life.

In sum, discipline is a grim affair with a limited success rate, always trying to overcome that failure syndrome which should have been addressed in the first place. Because some form of spirituality inevitably is involved, you have an angry God looking over you making the defeat border upon condemnation. One could almost say that discipline invariably leads to defeat with this hanging over your head. Because you feel yourself lacking in this or that virtue and know that you can't live up to the example of other persons, this mind set puts you squarely as inferior to either this one or that one, never feeling at ease among them. And discipline can never do away with this, only alleviate it for the time being.

But what would happen if suddenly you were to wake up one day knowing that you were whole and entire, that you didn't have to work to acquire anything because you had been born with all the necessary equipment? This premise sounds way-out, a fantasy beyond our reach, and rests upon a unique insight which lies right under our noses. And that premise consists in our being ever responsive to that which is transcendent. It's how we are built despite the tricks we employ to get around or deny this reality. Why people have such strong reactions to transcendence is one of life's great mysteries despite abundant examples in history⁸. The claim laid out here to counter this misperception isn't as far-fetched as it sounds. Consider, for example, the Western religious view that man is made in the image and likeness of God. While that remains part and parcel of our heritage, nowadays it's little appreciated as foundational to personal and communal growth. It's amazing how this teaching had disappeared literally within the span of little over a single generation. The rapidity of its disappearance makes you wonder, however, how deeply it had taken root despite the

⁸These examples are more symptoms than a description of the actual ailment.

apparent dominance of Christian culture⁹.

This same culture protected these teachings and allowed the flourishing of scholarship relative to this teaching. But as noted above, the transmission had been carried on by only a few persons here and there who, in turn, bore a responsibility to pass it on to a larger audience. Though this tradition flourished, it became increasingly rarified or academic, having abandoned the grass roots level where it belongs. But in contrast to today, people drew inspiration from this old-time scholarship imbued with the Christian spirit or more concretely, got it from those who lived what they taught and taught what they lived. Even though we've ended up with a real crisis at hand because this hidden witness, so vital to Western culture, had vanished, you'll find a few people tucked away here and there who have kept it alive. They managed to do this simply because they love what they are doing and are immune to external circumstances. Yet such people will remain, their small number albeit diminished. Otherwise society would implode without any threat coming from the outside.¹⁰

So the new understanding we're talking about has nothing to do with discipline, a dangerous way of putting it which has New Age connotations where everything and everyone is one meaning that we can live and let live. By no means is this the case. We put it this way to show how unique is the approach presented here, despite the imperfect way of presenting it. The type of understanding of interest concerning us deals with managing that two-fold distress, one from without and fear of being still within. More properly, it centers around the place where we're destined to end up—each and every one of us, no exception—after we've tried everything else. This indeed is a one-way street with no exits which many people intuit but can't quite put their fingers on. The understanding works by gazing indifferently at our inner life, embracing both all that is good and all that is not so good. In sum, this gaze is easy because it doesn't suppress any side of our human nature. Neither is it something that has been added nor something we must strive for.\

⁹We just discussed the disappearance of scholars in the old-school sense. All at heart were religious though this may not have been manifest. So it's fair to lump together their disappearance with this teaching on the Genesis one.

¹⁰The precariousness of our current situation can give rise to an odd sentiment. Despite the fear that what has been so essential to Western civilization and religion is crumbling all around us, we have safe, almost cozy feeling. It's not unlike being on a ship during a violent storm. While the storm rages all around, we feel safe and sound in the belly of the ship despite the very present danger.

All such words are typical of striving and hence discipline meaning that they are to be let go, quite a radical gesture. We may call such a gaze contemplative and lacking the ability to pass judgment. Furthermore, we may be tempted to label it as passive but this has nothing to do with it. The gaze...the ancient Greeks called it *theoria*...is active which precludes our fear of becoming a nebulous blob. The act of looking at something both without and within us has a way of transforming the object of its regard, the true test of its active character. It does so instantaneously though we're not aware of this immediate effect, a paradox of sorts. Actually this understanding sounds too good to be true because it has direct access to a larger reality we can't quite put our fingers on but know to be active by reason of the peace and joy that comes upon us without our asking for it.

What turns out to be special about this type of understanding is that by reason of its apparently focus-less gaze it transforms the object of its regard. This doesn't sound possible because again, it goes counter to our preconceived notions about discipline where you get serious and turn your attention upon something in order to obtain it. At this juncture we can introduce the word transcendence and use it more or less tentatively because alternatives are lacking. In other words, transcendence = what's unknown, but we perceive this unknown as embracing us not directly but indirectly. Attempting to view it is not unlike looking at an object at night. You don't look at it directly but indirectly where your eyes must be relaxed as opposed to being tense. On the other hand we can resist this reality right under our noses with a vehemence that's at once shocking yet revealing of human nature's desire to rely on its own resources. As noted above, why this is so is one of life's mysteries¹¹. Yet once you have exposure to transcendence along the lines presented here, you get insight into the reason why though may not be able to articulate it. So here is the Holy Grail sought by everyone yet missed completely, a genuine paradox, one we live with daily. You have to be careful talking about this because the transcendence at hand isn't personal in the human sense; to speak of it impersonally is just as misleading, though it tends in this direction but not according to our ingrained ideas about what is impersonal. That's why we have to appeal directly to experience and that application of intelligence which sees through the rise and fall of distractions without being caught up in them.

So cultivation of this understanding (keeping in mind cultivation in the original agricultural sense

¹¹The mystery can be "solved," however, provided you look at the West's religious heritage. However, people don't want to find transcendence there.

which makes it more down to earth) differs from other human endeavors, however noble. Actually there's no precedence as anyone who has experienced it can tell you, either by accident or against their will, for the common view is that it comes as a sheer gift. That doesn't mean such people are special but are individuals who have been humbled profoundly and managed to come out the other end of trying and embarrassing circumstances. They may not be healed fully, but that enhances their appeal because they have fulfilled the ultimate criterion. Modern society frowns upon embarrassments, not having the slightest clue about the meaning of humiliations, let alone transcendence. But for a person seeking greater understanding, transcendence and humiliations work hand-in-hand, not an especially desirous combination. While transcendence may be conceived as beyond our immediate reach, humiliations are ever present. Humiliations pull down, if you will, transcendent reality, not reason as some might suggest with a tinge of arrogance. That means understanding, the faculty sensitive to these things which are difficult to grasp, is a practical means of examining one's state of mind at the precise moment when we're being humiliated, neither before nor afterwards. And how to maintain that understanding in a stable manner is what we're attempting to get a better handle on.

To remain humiliated, putting it somewhat awkwardly, is the task set before us which ranks among the most despicable things a person could wish for. Although this topic may be relegated to the background and alluded to indirectly, it can surface in the context of spiritual training and discipline. Talk about it makes people shy away or automatically get bored because the usual approach is to be exhortatory with vague injunctions. Also those propagating it are in the role of cheerleaders who are less concerned as to what they are saying than how well they are saying it, an example of preferring form over substance. They find comfort in a superficial enthusiasm which relieves them from thinking on their own. Take that away, and they're at a loss. The humiliation under discussion has nothing to do with this. Just consider the injunctions you get at your local church or the like. Often the end result is a sense of un-expiated guilt. Dealing with a humiliation as presented here can be extremely puzzling at first because you'd expect to follow some prescriptions to get out this most unfortunate state as quickly as possible. Thus being humiliated is not to be shunned but fostered, and that requires a different approach...so different that we lack the means to foster it.

At this stage of the game some congratulations are in order because we've recognized the positive side of humiliations even if this recognition is dim and we retain plenty of doubts and fears. It's a delicate situation because we can go either way: abandon inquiry altogether or advance to the next

step. Both curiosity and poverty are essential to propelling us on, so there's nothing mysterious about it. Curiosity needs no explanation; it's innate. As for being poor we've reached the end of that proverbial rope and have no where else to go, nothing to do. A chief characteristic of the predicament we've gotten into is that no one around us shares our humiliation, leaving us to the only option, exploration. Actually everyone has experienced humiliations yet not many have learned to transform them into the abiding state of humility. The fear and shame are too overwhelming. Staying with the experience of being humiliated or more accurately, being aware of its memories, the real culprit, can affect us physically because we can't get them out of heads. They roll round and around unceasingly. Their presence is made known by a rush of blood to our heads, a blush on our faces and a desire to shun social intercourse. So when we bottom out and have the courage to abide there a while without desiring to escape, we discover a unique detachment from the circumstances which brought us into this sorry state. Even better, there's no real desire to leave it. Where are we going anyway? We now hit upon a hitherto un-experienced awareness...no better word for it at the moment...which can be described as continuous. Always it has been continuous, only now it's front and center. We haven't appreciated it in our "pre-humiliation life."

Being humiliated is a common experience, but what each person does with it is a different story. Of special interest is remaining with the newly discovered awareness of still being alive and retaining the ability to function as usual. While outwardly everything is the same—our heart continues to beat, lungs move in and out, our eyes blink automatically and we cross our legs without thinking of it—inwardly a shift has occurred and a momentous one at that. Once you make this shift, again minus those strains associated with discipline, the distinction you had been in the habit of making between good and evil, what I like and don't like, loses its importance and can even vanish. It's too good to be true, really, and sounds like something you'd dream up, a product of wishful thinking. The experiences in mind are of the everyday, mundane variety, nothing dramatic as one might expect. By no means do they merge into a blob-like entity, a common misperception. The chief characteristic of these mundane experiences is the way they come at us incessantly and inform our lives from sunrise to sunset, let alone in dreams. In other words, no interruption, no rest. Such activity gives the false sense that we're alive. If it stops, we stop...and die.

Constantly judging between good and evil, like vs. dislike, is natural, a sign that our moral sense is alive. Living on that level for a while makes for boredom as we learn from everyday experience.

The constant back and forth prevents us from getting out of this situation and if we could, we don't know where to go. But what we're focusing upon here isn't a unique form of excitement or stimulation, but a trap that's more subtle than we take it for. Actually the reality we're leaving behind is not unlike the skin a snake sheds by withdrawing from it. The "skin" remains behind whereas "we" have moved on. And the trap consists in not being able to make this distinction. Yet that "we" is different from the conventional one because it lacks personhood. To speak like this means we've entered a different universe, and the antennae of caution go up quickly because society has presented very different images...all perverted, very much so...of what it means to lack personhood.

To our great surprise the life in our possession after having been humiliated endures sound as it ever had been. Nothing theoretical about it. Anyone can experience this. All you have to do is go out there and get slapped around. Make sure it comes from your own stupidity and not deliberately in the sense of performing an experiment. The results are immediate, immune to deception or the like. Although we may not be aware of it at the moment of humiliation, we've passed over a threshold into the truth. Often humility is defined as truth. We may not experience it as such because our attention is upon the painful side of humiliations which takes time to become fashioned into humility. More precisely, the time gap is illusory because our knee-jerk response is one of repulsion and creates this sense of time. If we were to bother ourselves about the mechanics of getting out of there we'd fall into the pernicious trap of looking for a discipline where there's no need for one. This is not unlike a prisoner attempting to break through a barred window while the door to his cell is wide open. It's a matter of turning around and walking out the door, simple as that. Sounds a bit laissez-faire but is not. Neither is it a casual snub at so many traditions with a venerable history of spirituality. Such an attitude consists of a sustained, disinterested attention which does not place stock in discipline, admittedly a hard insight to grasp because it goes against our grain which, in turn, is reenforced by culture.

So this unique awareness arising from humiliations is surprisingly easy to maintain. It contrasts sharply with the complexity in our attempts to extricate ourselves from their effect on us, in other words, discipline. Understanding how this could be...that we're deceiving ourselves in grand fashion...is a major obstacle. As mentioned in the last paragraph, all that's required is to go out there and get humiliated in order to keep yourself on the right track. Few people are willing to do this, obviously, yet the opportunity for humiliations come at us relentlessly. We have no need to search for them. However, an active attitude, if you will, helps matters along. Humiliations don't

have to be big but preferably a whole series of little ones in the course of a given day (it isn't up to us to decide but to simply offer a preference). When a person surprises you with a humiliation, you're thrust into a place you'd rather not be. He goes off while you're left dealing with it, all alone. Always humiliations come at you this way, through a person and never expected, a valuable lesson easy to overlook. And that consists of being passive to humiliations instead of being active to them.

A slight interruption, if you will, but pertinent to the discussion at hand. We've introduced the ancient Roman practice of otium which had been sustained over the years as essential to a thoughtful examination of the West's cultural heritage. While its practice had fallen off, people remain who do engage in it, but you have to search them out. Given the busyness so endemic to society the atmosphere to practice otium has been polluted. The opportunities for this are so diminished that you have to be independently wealthy or sponsored by someone who's sympathetic to your interests. Monks used to be bastions of otium. Not now because they're just as busy as the rest of us. Yet there's another door to the practice of otium which is available though not propagated. It's founded upon the experience of being humiliated as spelled out in this essay or better, a whole series of them but specifically of a public nature. That means people have gotten glimpse into your innate foolishness and have written you off chiefly by a pattern of foolishness they've seen emerge. Their attitude towards you remains pretty much as it had been: kind, courteous and friendly. However, when it comes to putting anyone in a responsible position, they'll overlook you. That means you're left with your humiliated old self, and you could spend time wallowing around in it. Then again, you can use these humiliations and the perceptions people got of you through them for a greater good. No one pays real attention to you so you end up with plenty of otium. You're in a very special circumstance, not planned nor asked for, but it has all the essentials for otium and then some! Now you can proceed with your work unencumbered and have a positive though hidden effect upon society that otherwise would not have been imaginable. Because this approach is so out of line with everything we take as fine and noble, each person attracted to it has to work out the details on his own. However, don't go out there with the intent of being humiliated and then passed over so you'll get otium. It simply won't work that way and even could lead to very unfortunate results.

So this brings us to the very crux of the matter. Going through life you'd think that we are active with regard to things and events, but this is an illusion. Closer attention reveals we are mostly passive to them. The day's activities form a kind of discipline (including checking email and other

activities on which our schedule will depend) which bestow order and regularity, molding us to it that all will follow smoothly. In fact, when we come off a day packed with structured activities and events we feel that even if things didn't go our way, fidelity to the structure had played an important role. We'll go through the same thing tomorrow, the day after and so forth. We feel this to be especially true when events cause our schedule to unravel. Then we question what life is all about, a familiar drill. Such events have the benefit of awakening us to the fact that our attention functions mostly in the passive mode; so apparently does the rest of the world, quite a discovery. To question our habitual functioning in the passive mode is to question the foundations on which our lives rest. So when some event humiliates us we're shaken from this passive mode and have an opportunity to take an active stance. Practically speaking that means we focus on everything in a non-judgmental mode. Indeed, that's harder to practice than to speak about.

In practice we're becoming sensitive to the artificial mind-set into which we have slipped without realizing it. This artificiality is all around us, part and parcel of our daily lives. It only stands out when we compare them to our awareness brought about by a major humiliation. In the latter we've gone through the predictable breast-beating after which—and this doesn't happen all the time but only when we're primed for it—we discover that we're still alive. We can verify it by a heightened sensitivity to the world about us as through all our senses. They have been purged in a manner we hadn't anticipated nor could anticipate. This, of course, is a one-on-one contact with reality. Then we turn around, as it were, and see that what had preoccupied us before being humiliated were all sorts of artificial constructs, many of them of our own devising. A closer look reveals that we had been passive to them 99% of the time, an embarrassing realization and humiliation all unto itself! We can revel in our new-found status at the bottom of the heap yet must refrain from "teaching" others, if you will. There's a spontaneous desire to spread the good news, but once you take that stance, you're prepping yourself up for another knock-down. Stopping the process now and avoiding the familiar roller-coaster ride is the best approach.

Now this informing attention which usually stems from unpleasant experiences differs considerably from the normal attention we bring to bear on a daily basis. By nature the latter one is passive to events which we carry about without us ever realizing it. Here's an important point touched upon earlier, one that needs to be stressed because we're so conditioned to function in a passive mode. If

suddenly confronted with the truth of our acquired passivity¹², usually through a humiliation, the normal response is one of surprise which automatically puts you in the trap of being caught up with the negative images produced by the humiliation. Here one can't be blamed for sentiments like "Why me?" because no other reference point exists (yet). A person might get the slightest whiff of a benefit derived from experiencing humiliation, but we've been so brainwashed that it is to be avoided. Hence the beneficial mental and spiritual state it produces remain unexplored. We don't stay...linger...with it sufficiently long enough because our impatience and shame shuns us away. Should we experience the benefit of this condition, it's best to hang around with it despite any temptations to share our experiences. This tendency points indirectly to the fact that despite our huge progress, we haven't gotten far enough to remain indifferent to the understanding that brought us there in the first place. Getting past this unavoidable obstacle leads us to a genuine encounter with otium. Because we're left alone apparently unaided, rarely is this leisure explored which means we need to interpret it correctly in order to make it more permanent in our lives. The otium at hand differs so radically from the way we're accustomed to perceive leisure that it appears as a mal-formed imitation, a fantasy we've concocted from a whole series of humiliations. Surely that appears the exact opposite way to go in order to procure leisure.

After we allow all these obstacles to emerge and run their course (in actuality a boring, laborious process), it's time to see where this alternative form of otium leads. Actually it's better to stick with the Latin term instead of the translation because what we're dealing with is so unique. Clearly "leisure" in English or any other modern language has its own connotations. The otium in which we find ourselves unwillingly always succeeds the turmoil produced by humiliations, not the other way around. It's unique in that after a profoundly embarrassing situation has done its number on us and has thrust us into a space we prefer not to be, we have the best opportunity imaginable for our understanding not to remain passive like a lifeless block of wood. Instead, we perceive it perhaps for the very first time as having an active, not passive, stance towards life. This is manifest in the all-embracing, non-judgmental attention to everything that comes across its field of vision. It is a learning process, to be sure. We learn how the broken continuum of this attention can be

¹²"Acquired" passivity because we're born to take an active stance. The passivity is piled onto us unconsciously through society and our upbringing and is considered the norm. However, when we get glimpses into the alternative—chiefly through those humiliations we're harping upon—we discover that this passivity is not the norm but a kind of deviation from it. "Kind of" in that being passive isn't evil or the like, just defective or is partial instead of being whole.

overcome. By “broken” is meant we pass in and out of this attention, going from being passive to active and then active to passive, actually multiple times. It may last a good part of our lives, giving rise to the false perception of duration. Yet returning again and again to that otium effected by a profound humiliation we know instinctively we’re in our native land. Then we’re not so much concerned whether or not time is displaced (the title of this essay) because we’ve become indifferent to the alternations we experienced as well as witness in people around us. In the meanwhile, we have one eye furtively glancing at someone who had been reduced to being a fool as described above, sitting there happy as could be in his otium.

Indeed, this is an educative process but difficult by reason of exposure to technology and social media which grab our attention first a little here and then a little over there...in other words, in bits and pieces all jumbled up with no coherency. We feel this uneasiness around the edges, if you will, not directly and have a hard time putting our hands on it. That, combined with the unconscious discipline into which we’ve grown, makes dealing with the broken continuum of time no mean project. Once we’ve recognized this and have adapted ourselves to the alternate way of comporting ourselves through a diffused awareness, what need is there for discipline? We only have to turn to the humiliations that brought us to this realization or better, the pure awareness that grows out of them.

The otium prized so highly is tightly bound up with humiliations, admittedly a very hard connection to appreciate. Who wants to go that route, really? Should we probe a bit more deeply, the task of otium is to make us aware of the distinction between “cause” and “effect.” Both words are in parentheses because we’re dealing not with logic but with conditioning with regard to our need for discipline to effect that blessed state of otium. If we’re attentive to what goes on within us when we’re being humiliated and stick with that special awareness that comes to birth once the images of our humiliation have passed, we discover a new freedom, one from the notion of discipline. Our otium isn’t an effect brought about by a cause (the humiliation per se) but is discovered as something that always has been present but unrecognized within us. It happens because it is so, all quite in order.

Now the task...a word smacking of discipline but used loosely...is to leave the humiliations behind and rest in the otium they have produced or more accurately, have revealed as already present, part and parcel of our nature. Actually this is a resting in truth itself because everything we see about us jumps out with a previously unappreciated clarity. The best part—and this can’t be emphasized

enough—is we know for sure the truth doesn't come from us. That makes residing in this otium the very definition of human nature. And the rock-solid proof is that we're not bored with what's transpiring, the bane of modern living. Obviously the continuum spoken of in the last paragraph is never perfect. We know this and experience it but not as painfully as in the past because when a new humiliation comes our way, the passage from it to otium is much shorter. All this throws into new light talk about spiritual growth, sin and the rest without disturbing the soundness of good religious teaching as handed down to us.

What's so great on one hand and not so great on the other is that our lives don't change a bit externally, so don't look there for any transformation. There's enough mystery in what normally passes for the mundane (the great side). Yet to one who is uninitiated, the sameness of life is depressing, more of the same without the expected dramatic transformation (the not so great side). Oddly enough, the training we have sought all along had existed under our noses from the beginning. It may be said (and here we're using a traditional word) that we have faith in what we've uncovered, that it's unique yet common to every person on earth. "Faith" isn't an adequate word though we'll stick with it due to tradition, of desiring to keep in line with Christian spirituality. Often faith is taken as subscribing to something in the blind sense of the term, what you don't see but hope exists out there, somewhere and against all odds. This is not true for the otium under discussion. It lies hidden on the other side of humiliations and can be tapped into any time provided you're willing to go through the abasements.

Such a hands-on approach reveals the inadequacy of how, for example, we relate to Christ's incarnation, of God becoming a human being. While the lingo is familiar, how we understand it tends to stumble either into theological concepts or devotion¹³. The end result of both is a whole

¹³Consider, for example, Pope Francis' first encyclical, widely praised. When you read through it, the document is replete with the usual spiritual and theological catch-phrases, nothing new. In fact, all official or formal church statements are couched in uninspiring language. Those who propagate them know this yet are putting them forth in good faith. Part of this situation can be seen in light of the Catholic reliance upon the sacramental system, wonderful as it is. While taught to believe that our faith rests in the sacraments, virtually nothing is said about reading scripture in the mode of *lectio divina* even though you hear exhortations to do so (actually it's fairly new). One can't help compare Catholics, not so much Protestants, with Orthodox Jews. The latter are ensconced in their yeshivas pouring themselves out over the Torah and other religious texts in a way that would blow away any Catholic or Protestant reader. Then they bring this experience to their family life and work place, all forming an unbroken circle. This

series of exhortations to do such and such. It can turn people off without examining that any middle ground may exist. This has nothing to do with a person's lack of intelligence or desire to believe. Instead, it's being hung up on terminology. And that terminology, while valid, is abstract and subject to the heavy-handed nature of exhortations which gives the false impression that faith is abstract. In this view faith lies "out there" whereas we are "down here." Both the intellectual and devotional approaches provide people with access to faith but are perceived by many as somehow being off the mark. For this reason the approach taken here is an attempt, albeit imperfect and unprofessional, to restore credence to what is innate to us all.

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observation is meant to highlight the need of overcoming the gap between an intellectual approach to scripture and tradition on one hand and a devotional one on the other, a far serious challenge to remedy than at first glance.