

## On Exercising Authority

As soon as we hear the word “authority” we’re set on edge, instinctively considering it a threat we must either avoid or keep our distance. If embodied in a person, it’s even more intimidating. Already our minds are working overtime to come up with ready-made excuses in order to explain our actions even if nothing is wrong. This is true in both the secular and religious spheres. In sum, we’re put on the defensive which suggests we might have a tinge of guilt lurking in the background, something to hide, even if long forgotten. Even though we do submit to persons legitimately placed over us, we can cultivate a sublunar life...one on the sly, away from authority’s prying eyes. While we know full well this parallel life will be discovered sooner or later, we persist with it<sup>1</sup>.

In contrast to our struggles, we see some of our friends and associates submitting whole-heartedly to those over them, a gesture worthy of our admiration. However, sometimes our conditioning can see their submission as blind, the sign of a boring life and not willing to take risks. Then there’s the majority of people who take liberties, albeit minor ones, going off for a while on their own tangents with the hope of not being caught or at least not being reported. In religious life living on the edge is a dangerous game because prime value is placed upon obedience. While in real life the vow of obedience is generally exaggerated, the fear remains of being reported by one’s peers. Usually this information reaches a superior anonymously without you ever knowing the source. If you’re not careful, this can lead to resentment and unconsciously make you push the bounds again...and again. Indeed, not a good way to comport yourself in community life. We can agree with this objectively, but the tendency to conceal oneself comes on gradually instead of being a conscious act of defiance.

Religious authority is set up in a hierarchical fashion, that is to say, from the top down. That makes it different from secular authority which is more linear. In the popular imagination the top is the pope and the bottom is the lowly layperson with clergy and religious sandwiched in between. Lay people receive general instruction on how to follow their religion which in actuality is quite flexible. Those in orders or religious communities follow a tighter way of life where the practice of obedience is more common though this is seldom burdensome unless you have something like a personality conflict with your superior. Then religious life becomes a real drag. While the word “hierarchy” has negative connotations for modern folk imbued with democratic ideals, a lot of this comes from mis- or even dis-information. Surprisingly, there’s far more consultation and back-and-forth involved than imagined. Part of the reason lies in popular misunderstandings about the word itself.

“Hierarchy” consists of the Greek noun *arche* which means beginning in the sense of a first principle responsible for everything else. It is not unlike the pattern of six days of creation laid out in the Book of Genesis culminating in a divine rest. The adjective *hieros* means “holy.” Thus we end up with a beginning which is holy...a holy beginning...after the Genesis model. This holy beginning is set apart from the secular or

---

<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> Obviously there are immoral and illegal modes of behavior. However, those are not of primary concern here, just the run-of-the-mill ways we avoid submitting to authority.

physical world and gives order to it. Those living in it, regardless of their position on the ladder (an unfortunate but often used term), participate in the *arche* which is *hieros*. And to be *hieros* has nothing to do with the level you're on relative to all the others, something quite difficult to get out of our minds. Your eyes are supposed to be upon the *arche*, the beginning, which bestows this holiness regardless of where you're at. That's a nice, concise definition of hierarchy and by implication, the authority bound up with it. It can be another thing to put into practice. Such an understanding is important, however, because we've lost the sense of this ancient term and have replaced it with strong authoritarian associations. And the word "authoritarian," as can be seen readily, is related to "authority."

This brief article is intended to explore the meaning of authority as participating in that sense of beginning or first principle noted above, *arche*, whose original sense fits in nicely with "hierarchy." That is to say, "authority" is the origin for the English term "author" which commonly means a writer. Such a person is creative with words and can have as his subject matter anything under the sun. The task is to make this material interesting and appealing, especially if it's technical and beyond the reach of most of us. Obviously, plenty of that is around. The Latin *auctor* means more than the English "author" and implies a person who brings about the existence of any object or promotes its increase and continued prosperity. Thus *auctor* has a ring of *arche* about it...of first beginning...and to exercise *auctoritas* means to produce or invent something, ideally what no one else had done before. Of course, there are abundant examples of overlays to these terms which either have interpreted or corrupted the original sense. That's what most of us are hung up with when we hear the word "authority."

What if we could restore some aspects of the original sense of *auctoritas*, using "authority" in this appealing fashion? Should we follow through, the most immediate benefit is that the conventional exercise of authority and persons exercising it are put in their proper place: important but ultimately not necessary. That takes a huge burden off our minds, enabling us to move forward. Because authority as coming down from above (secular or sacred) has been so drilled into us, seldom if ever do we perceive it as arising from within us, of being part and parcel of our human dignity. This type of *auctoritas* is woefully underdeveloped yet has many exciting possibilities. We may have some fears and qualms about activating it, thinking that in doing so we're setting ourselves up against authority commonly perceived and therefore are on the verge of a major fall. We have to get over this fear. One way is, as has been pointed out briefly, to examine how *auctoritas* can tie in with an *arche* which is *hieros*, a beginning which is holy. And in this instance we are participants in that *arche*. Once we are, it makes no difference we hold on the scale. In fact, bothersome images of it fall away and cease to have impact for such a person.

Even before considering the inherent creativity within authority—as—*auctoritas*, it does well to examine the overall background from which it emerges, if we can put it this way. Creativity doesn't come from thin air but is rooted in something more comprehensive of which it is an important expression. One way of describing this larger reality is the constancy or persistence of being which we perceive, often in a negative fashion. That is to say, never can we escape our being-in-the world. It's a bit odd to speak like this but is intended to bring home a point. No matter where we go and what we do we're stuck with being...our existence...which means

our awareness of it. The two go together like the proverbial horse and carriage. Let's take a more striking example. Suppose we've been the center of attention, literally on stage, for one reason or another. Once we're off stage, we make our way to our room, close the door and find ourselves with our awareness just like everyone else in the world, rich or poor. It was present during our fifteen minutes of fame, but we weren't conscious of it, or just barely. Only when we withdraw ourselves do we realize the persistency of our existence and awareness of it, the two coming down hard on us when away from the attention of other people.

For so many reasons this being and awareness involves considerable pain and loneliness. Partly it's due to the sudden contrast between being the center of attention and withdrawal from it. On a more mundane level, it involves interaction with other persons followed by being left alone. The interplay between the two sets up a cycle most of us experience yet don't reflect upon it. Being with people precludes the inner demons from taking over our lives and helps overcome our innate sluggishness. Right away we rush to a conclusion, apparently so obvious: involvement with people is the solution to all our problems. Also it is the cause of all our woes. Society puts a premium on the first and shuns the second, something we're used to and don't question. It works on the assumption that our composition, what makes us as we are, is not so much defective but wanting.

So when we're alone in our room (and that can be taken symbolically as well as literally), why don't we allow our happiness to shine forth? We begin to question whether or not we're born miserable and condemned to live miserably instead of being happy. This is so simple yet profound a question. Instinctively we know happiness is there, yet everyone ranging from family to society at large are whispering in our ear that we better get out and interact with people. This persistent, soft voice is trying to persuade us that our being and awareness of our achieve fulfilment only by helping other people and these people helping us. No one can contend with that. Even the Gospels proclaim it. Yet we're dealing with a Siren song that isn't evil but hasn't the slightest idea that our being and our awareness, if left alone, will blossom in a manner differently than what everyone has drilled into us. And as just noted, that plan is usually for the greater good. So our considerations about the exercise of authority, of *auctoritas*, are to be taken with this background in mind.

Another fact that comes into play is our overall manner of perception. It's so comprehensive and like the bright blue sky above, barely do we give it a thought. So let's explore this absolute pervasiveness without complicating the matter. Often we greet a friend or even a stranger with the familiar "How are you?" and receive the equally general response, "I'm fine, thank you." We have here a broad, inclusive way of introducing ourselves, not expecting a detailed account of the person's life nor of him being obliged to present one. Once this brief introduction is out of the way, we get down to details without further ado. The relationship starts to become complicated but not in a negative fashion. At the root of it all we have here two people who share the same being and awareness as already spelled out. So this most common of all greetings represents a gateway into the nature of *auctoritas* we're attempting to refine in terms of creativity, not just as the ability to perform something well.

Let's take the universal form of greeting outlined two paragraphs above one step further. When we meet a

person we don't stick with generalities but hone in on something of common interest, else the conversation quickly devolves into meaningless chatter. For example, we might ask about the pain in our friend's shoulder manifest by the expression on his face or the way he walks. A bit later in the conversation we may ask how life is going and get a response tinged with anxiety about an impending divorce or some other non-physical anxiety. The difference is that the latter affects one's entire life compared to a pain in the shoulder which is localized and far easier to handle. The totality as well as elusiveness of a non-physical affliction is common in our modern society and offers no true cure. Let's take this inquiry one step further through our initial greeting which focused upon visible and invisible afflictions. What we propose to ask is somewhat similar but so new and global that in actuality we'd never pose such a question. The question runs something like "How do you feel right now from every point of view?" We're hitting our friend with everything we got and expecting the same in return. The difference is that we're aware of our intent when posing the question whereas our friend hasn't a clue. All he can do is either look dumbfounded or remain silent.

This approach is quite aggressive to the point of being ridiculous, a kind of super-Socratic question. So if we're confronted with it, our attention is galvanized without being concentrated (sounds paradoxical but can be proved true immediately by going out and doing it). It has the unsettling ability of uncovering our passivity to events and more importantly, passivity to our own thoughts. Such is the heavy veil hanging over each and one of us that needs to be lifted. Complete removal may be impossible but tugging away at it here and there is reward enough because the more the veil is lifted, the happier we are. Again, go out and experiment. The results are immediate. So posing the question of how our friend is from all points of view simultaneously, not sequentially as he'd expect, is bound not just to take him aback but to set memory of the question deep into the recesses of his mind. The person posing it sounds like he's making a poor attempt to formulate a joke or to mimic Socrates. Far from it. On the other hand, the person being asked may detect some humor in the question, even in the manner in which it's presented, and hopefully intuits that something deeper is going on. He knows that any answer is useless even if he feels compelled to give one.

But can we really give an answer to the illogically sound question "How are you feeling right now from every point of view?" The same may be applied to the person asking the question; we can assume he has the answer but won't divulge it, remaining silent with a Cheshire cat-like grin on his face. Of course, that unnerves the person being addressed which is radically different from making him feel threatened. In an instant all the physical pains of that shoulder and non-physical memories of the divorce disappear because attention has been shifted elsewhere. And that elsewhere is quite mysterious but very real, the point we wish to reach or better, we know that we're already in but haven't realized it yet. Usually we don't reflect upon why this is happening because all sorts of thoughts and emotions continually hem us in. But if our global-like question elicits an equally global response, we know that we've hit the mark. So it's a question of aligning both on the same plane. Introduction of the slightest inequality makes the whole enterprise fall apart which makes this enterprise so exciting even if we fail. That, alas, happens 99% of the time, but on closer examination, the notion of failure doesn't apply. That's because already we have the "answer" to the "question" in our very bones. It's a matter of un-learning our innate responses. Such un-learning is not so much painful as laborious. How could you experience pain when shedding such ignorance? A good question, really, which

arises when we engage in the process.

Because the question asked is so out of the ordinary, no small wonder that no one can respond to it (in truth, it can't be answered). Attempts to clarify the question don't work, for that would be moving from its universal claim to something more specific, and that defeats the purpose of our enterprise. Perhaps most of us don't stop and ponder what our response would be to "How are you feeling right now from every point of view?" Analysis is useless. Actually something of the opposite happens. All our thoughts and attendant emotions come to a sudden halt with no where to go. This halt lasts a second, really, but long enough to make us know some new reality has entered our lives. Memory of it abides in our recollective faculty despite the fleetingness of our experience. And that gives rise to another question, how conditioned we are to the passage of time. The brief halt we just underwent says something of how we process information and adapt to the world. From this halt emerges our desire to respond to the question in the normal way, in parts or systematically. We know at once this isn't the way to go but haven't had sufficient time to reflect on it, otherwise our response might be different.

The question "How are you feeling right now from every point of view?" is a frontal assault so total that our response can only be one of surrender. In fact, that's what happens when our mental activity suddenly grinds to a halt. However, we require more reflection to appreciate the dynamics which are transpiring because the last obstacle to be overcome is time. Within this nanosecond, if you will, something wonderful has happened which we hadn't experienced before. Or to put it more accurately, we knew we had this capacity (for lack of better word, at least for now) within us but never could put a label on it. The capacity of which we speak is more like a "super memory," one larger than all the rest of our memories combined. We discover that it continues in existence just like our being and our awareness, all three being inescapable. The only difference is that this "super memory" hadn't been brought into the open. In fact, writing about this is problematic because just writing about it makes you want to stop and not so much reflect but move towards that mental-emotional suspension you're attempting to describe. It's also coupled with reflection in the usual sense but a light kind, difficult to articulate, since it's upon something that lacks an object of reflection. And so writing about it turns out to be a drawn-out process (ponderous in the literal sense of being heavy or weighty) but certainly not arduous because it's punctuated with these delightful breaks.

So the universal question we are posing puts a halt to everything, literally everything that enters our mind. That's how comprehensive it is. Putting it this way sounds a bit weird, an exorbitant claim. A natural response, of course, because of our overwhelming love and preference for forms (more on that later). Such a halt of our mental-emotional processes comes about in a mere nanosecond, yet its memory abides longer than other memories. For this reason it becomes the starting point of this, the most fascinating of all inquiries. We begin by proposing an impossible task, even ludicrous at first glance: is it possible...desirable...to effect the suspension of our mental and emotional faculties? And what does this have to do with authority as *auctoritas*, the take-off point of this essay? Any talk about this so-called suspension flies in the face of common sense with regard to *auctoritas* posited as creativity. However, the value in an over-arching question as to our well-being consists in gathering within it a whole series of mini-questions. Asking one question at a time to elicit a

response doesn't do the trick. It's too limited. But if you make a total frontal assault, you're overloading the system of the person with whom you are speaking. The only way to handle it is to shut down much like a circuit breaker does when there's a surge of electricity so the system doesn't blow. That's the goal, really, and to see if *auctoritas* of a unique kind can emerge from it.

Judging from the experience of others who have tried this out, the first complaint, if you will, is that it's too good to be true. Then the overwhelming, gratuitous goodness we've hit upon takes an unexpected turn. It gives rise to awareness of one's personal sordidness pictured through the common spiritual image of a light shining on a clear surface which reveals all the ugly specks and defects. This can hit really hard at first...stymie you, really...and is reminiscent of the mythical dragon guarding the cave which holds the inestimable treasure you're seeking. However, sticking with it is invaluable because you're confronting reality as totally as you can. You have two opposites coming together which must learn to live with each other else they will devour you alive. Here time-as-duration makes a strong impact which manifests itself as a painful experience of our existence and our awareness of it. We seek to make sense of this heightened awareness which is only natural. A Gospel parable might help here, the seed which falls on the ground. It springs up for a while but withers away due to lack of watering. And watering is a good image of our frequent need to stay still in the light of gratuitous goodness and our ugly little selves. You don't water the seed all the time but come back on a regular basis. Once we've gotten over the initial shock that the seed won't grow on its own but requires labor, we get into a pattern of watering which smooths out over time. This constancy is the best means to overcome our inability to focus long enough on the task at hand, perhaps the most common complaint out there. So while you're doing this watering, you wonder about the other seeds that fall with varying degrees of success. They represent the advancement of a lot of people which ends up withering away due to the ground being shallow, a symbol of inconsistency. It implies the inability to follow up on the considerable joy of one's original discovery as well as the inability to make one's efforts more constant. That's why so few seeds die in the ground and produce fruit.

At the core of the parable of the seeds is how to handle time-as-duration. We have a representation of the tension between the time when a person receives the seed, rejoices over it and doesn't know how to insert it properly in the ground or within oneself. There it's supposed to die and give birth to a flowering plant (and we haven't the slightest idea of what kind of plant will spring up). Our inability to see the temporal connection involved reflects our impatience for immediate results. And so like the seed that bounces off rocky ground, we go back to not knowing how to incorporate our initial insight and its accompanying joy with the passage of time. We're living with an intense dualism of our first memory of that suspension regarding our mental faculties and the awareness of our sordidness which for some mysterious reason comes on really strong. Yet looking deeper, this tension is an invitation to move to a deeper level. Bouncing back and forth between the two tires you out quickly. There comes a point, just as sudden and as magical as that suspension of our faculties, when you step back or better, step out of it. The best part is that upon reflection, you're not doing it on your own power. Something...someone...is doing it for you. Such is a common testimony.

So at this juncture it does us well to do reassess what has been going on. First comes a suspension of our

faculties followed by some confusion and tension between its pleasant memory and our current unsettled situation. The two are so different that we fail to see any resolution between them. Then there follows an awareness that we've been delivered of this predicament. Should we stumble along the way and fall on rocky ground like those seeds of the parable, we won't be able to tap into our innate authority or *auctoritas*, the source of creativity. One of the best ways to overcome this split between receiving the seed and our response is by example. Reading accounts by some of the saints is helpful. They give a first hand account of how they handled the passage of time, coped awareness of their sinfulness. In sum, they dealt successfully with the garbage we all share including the way time seems to drag along at times. Checking our experience against accounts we know are trustworthy is a great comfort because it allows us to accept the two sides of the dualism at hand. The more we examine it, the more we see a mutual dependence of one upon the other. While we naturally favor the positive, we become more unhitched from it and show more the same towards the negative things that impinge upon us. We can try this out in the field at once. Nothing special is required, just going through the course of a given day to observe what happens or more precisely, how we respond to what comes our way. Stress is upon "observe" which implies impartiality. Our observation becomes more impartial the more we practice it until it becomes more natural to how we comport ourselves.

Talk about an educative process! What's fascinating about it, besides its practicality, is that we uncover a permanent state of awareness which seems pretty much equivalent to a state of being. It's difficult to see which is which, or which came first like the chicken or the egg, so pardon personal ignorance in the matter. At least we can count on this identity as reliable and testable by experience. Below it, behind it or concomitant with it (whichever appears suits us best) exists a realm just beyond our reach. To speak like this intimates that such awareness is part of us but somehow is removed from our experience. At this point accurate description breaks down, so we have to employ proximate language. What's important is that this awareness transcends us. Our constant bumping up against reality is a way of communicating this reality. And so all the while it filters everything we think and feel, thereby giving form to our actions. A problem with accessing this realm is that it lays on the boarder of form and that which is formless. In other words, it straddles both. We feel its presence by a certain tension that's always with us, never allowing us to relax or better, de-contract. Because we're so acclimatized to thinking in terms of form, often we miss the mark at identifying this next-to-impossible realm. It controls us and appears almost always to exert a negative influence. Why this is so is attributable to its nebulous character, for anything murky or lacking form goes against our natural grain. So the problem lies with us or our ego-centered lives which thrives on form. A common example: on the surface we may be cheerful enough but if a negative experience crosses our path, it triggers the release of energy. Once put in motion, it keeps on rolling for a considerable time manifesting itself in negative thoughts and emotions. Finally it peters out and we're left with asking ourselves how and why this had come about. It's all very fast and subtle, not easy to articulate and ever present. At least we can put our finger on the prime suspect, that is, the incredible speed involved. Always we're confronted with a *fait accompli* and left holding the bag.

Let's say we're going about our own business when this negative, formless or semi-formless reservoir bursts on the scene as something like pre-thoughts and pre-emotions. It moves from formless-ness to form before we

grasp the movement so we're left holding the bag (always a *fait accompli* as noted above). We know this from the general, nondescript kind of gloom we've compelled to endure in the form of the release of negative thoughts and emotions. So why is it gloomy, not the other way around? All the while we're minding our own business not being able to do anything positive as we endure being wounded at every turn. It's like the man banging his head against the wall. When asked why he does this, he responds by saying it feels good when he stops. Surely there must be a better way. This is not natural and failure to perceive it as such is beyond quite a few philosophies and outlooks that have arisen in more recent centuries. They're all attached to form and can't imagine reality outside this overarching category. If they hit upon the idea of formlessness, they would be reluctant to endorse it and hasten in the other direction. i.e., towards form. This can be put in a more positive light. What we experience as a constant wounding or cutting of ourselves derives from our partiality. It remains incomplete because it's filtered through our limited self-awareness. The energy, however, that jumps out at us is not personal (perhaps non-personal is better). It has no regard for any person which sadly has been interpreted as anti-person. Yet if we could make this our own...not personalize it, if you will...instead of enduring those continuous wounds and cuttings, they would disappear at once. Quite miraculous, to be sure, but accepting reality as-it-is and all at once is miraculous or at least to most of us who've lived with blinders on. Check out Plato's famous example of a cave, always worth looking at in one way or another.

This focus upon the limited though painful aspect of what happens when we move from our innate preference for form to formlessness, however imperfect at first, seems like we're being asked a lot. We have no idea what we'll receive in return for this shot-in-the-dark. But we do know with greater clarity that our attachment to form in is the main source of our misery. This insight changes everything and can't be stated emphatically enough. At last we've begun to learn how to put ourselves on the same level as that formless which defies identification. Because this realm appears static, imitating its static-ness becomes the task at hand. In this way we avoid the interaction between static-ness vs. the continuous outflow energy (for lack of a better word) which assumes the form of thoughts and emotions. To put it more precisely, our incomplete efforts which are at the same time marked by a learning process, allows us to shorten the process considerably. Like everything else in life, the saying "practice makes perfect" applies here.

We can't be expected to make constant the interaction between the welling up of formlessness and the forms that come into being. However, we can increase the opportunities for them to become more frequent. This may start off somewhat haphazardly and a bit rocky, but the more we persevere with awareness of what's going on, the more our thoughts and hence emotions are immobilized. Certainly this can be tested. For example, when humiliated we insert ourselves within the swelling up of emotion and fear instead of the earlier way of lashing out and feeling crushed. There's a rawness to this experience transcending manifestation or devolution into form, quite disconcerting to the uninitiated. Staying with the rawness reveals that it is formless just as something positive that happens to us. "Paralyzing" ourselves in the initial flush of excitement precludes being humiliated. Staying with it evolves into humiliation, again, something anyone can discover. As we all know from experience, what is formless doesn't make us restless. Instead, it's our rational and emotional fireworks that interpret awareness of this formlessness, repeating either the original humiliation or exultation over and over again. Not long into this release we feel as though someone were by our side



mocking our efforts.

And so the challenge is to engage in the suspension of our mental-emotional life, making these gestures, short but sweet and not worrying about their extension in time. It doesn't matter how often we make these gestures... several dozen per hour or whatever...as long as they're done with the intent of returning to the task. This requires more courage than at first glance since we're careening from one extreme to another all day long, back and forth, without resolution. Willingness to take up this task in the face of pain reflects our inability to abide in a state of immobilization. Once you stop doing everything (this extends, of course, first to thinking), everything around you rushes forward like so many cars racing around a track. Here we've at last hit upon a real but simple way to counter the passage of time which is another way of confronting our disjointed-ness which consists in careening from pillar to post. The suspensions of our mental-emotional faculties are incontestably real, however brief. Gradually their reality supplants that of our natural linear way of thinking and behavior. So at issue here—and this didn't seem as obvious as before we came to realize our predicament—is the faculty of our memory. When speaking of memory here, it's in terms not of memorization or the ability to retain facts but more along the lines of recollection. That's a broader, more inclusive way of looking at it and seems to be the definition of *anamnesis*. A lot more can be said about this, but not so much here, for it'd be straying too far afield from the intent of the article.

The more important point to accentuate is to examine what hinders our exercise of *auctoritas* or creativity. With regard to memories, they do impinge upon our current behavior, but memory (singular) as *anamnesis* does not. Rather, *anamnesis* informs and directs us aright. However, this directing is on a plane other than the one familiar to us. It's so unfamiliar that we don't realize it, so we fall back upon the familiar one as our standard. Putting this more accurately...and that's not as easy as it seems...the way we handle things from birth is natural. Later in life we hit upon various options which are natural to us, even if they turn ugly and unnatural. That's where we are stuck: on the natural plane, going from natural thing to another natural thing while attempting to get out of it, knowing that there's no escape. So after a period of constantly wounding ourselves on our memories (this doesn't seem possible with regard to *anamnesis*) we fire ourselves out. Then perhaps...just perhaps...we might become lucky to realize that an option does exist. "Might become lucky" are tricky words, giving the impression we're participants in a game of cosmic chance. It implies that we might fall on our faces and cry out for help which is neither manly nor a modern thing to do. So if we're fortunate to get in this situation, we witness a sudden shift. Emphasis is upon sudden, not gradual, for we're realizing for first time that the existence of another plane of behavior is open to us, then our confluence with it followed at last by forsaking the one to which we've been addicted. And being addicted is not a strong term; in fact it's quite accurate.

Let's return to that important distinction laid out between form and formlessness. In essence we're not saying anything new but reminding ourselves of the same thing only in a different way. When we become aware of this distinction and realize that our very nature, though consisting of a form, is rooted in formlessness, we are implementing our recollective faculty of *anamnesis*. We are recalling that which gives form to our lives, not this fact and that. *Anamnesis* operates in an awareness of what we proposed above, namely, that never can we

escape being nor our awareness of it. The two accompany us day and night, night and day. This awareness become especially burdensome when worries press in as we all know from experience. From this “companionship” flow all our thoughts and emotions, almost always detrimental. They are such because they cannot sustain a continuous awareness of our origin. And that origin is beyond our reach, hence the reason why we prefer to call it formlessness. It contains a harmony between our being and our awareness which hitherto had become painful to bear, especially when left alone or when night comes on. The two are inextricably linked, yet constantly we had wasted time attempting to tear them asunder. An impossible task even though we persist. Actually the more one reflects on it, the more humorous the situation looks. This isn’t to mock the conflict to but to reflect upon it from the vantage point of recollection...an *anamnesis*...which bestows a life-giving form upon us. The form is life-giving because it comes as closely as possible to the realm of the formlessness or better, realizes its roots there. So that seems to be what the word *anamnesis* means, not the ability to recall facts and information on the linear plane of our existence but something far more.

This interplay between formlessness and form brings out a subject touched upon in other essays (on this same *lectio divina* homepage), namely, the desirability to exchange what is natural for what is normal. We’re so accustomed to living within the mental-emotional world that rarely, if ever, do we reflect upon its constitution. It’s taken as a given, pretty much foundational, and has no need to be questioned. But what brings about this questioning of something so taken for granted? Asking questions implies being in distress or being dissatisfied and hence seeking resolution. Not that our natural constitution is defective, but it doesn’t satisfy our desire for something that lacks bounds or is infinite. In other words, it has more of the same ol’ stuff only organized in different ways. Although we can arrange this stuff *ad infinitum*, quickly we get bored. We find nothing of the unbounded there. While we might not be able to define this unboundedness to someone who queries us, surely we know of its existence. It’s a given fact of life out there for all to see (provided that one can indeed see it). So once we get a taste for this unboundedness and define it negatively, that is, define it opposite to what’s familiar to us (form), we end up with the notion of formlessness. Simple as that. Since most people aren’t tuned into this realm despite it’s all-pervasive presence, we can’t posit it as belonging to the familiar realm of nature, of what’s natural to and within us. Instead of formlessness becoming natural to us, it becomes normative or a guiding principle for our lives. In sum, we’re talking about a norm. Now we’ve entered a wholly different realm but one that feels comfortable, as though never we’ve left it. This strange perception of suddenly being at home rests in the fact that no longer are we alternating between formlessness and form, of being and awareness. Time has been suspended, the real bugaboo that’s been on our backs throughout our lives. Being relieved of it is like a huge weight lifted off our backs so at last we can stand up straight which is not our natural position (borrowing the terms discussed here) but this straightness which is normative, the norm by which we conduct ourselves. And the two, of course, are connected by our faculty of *anamnesis*.

What was said above puts the situation nicely, but what about being out in the field, the place where we live or the real world? Can we try this out and see what happens without causing ourselves harm? Starting off slowly is the best approach, experimenting a few times a day (there’s no such thing as a minimum or maximum amount of time; what counts is doing it). When we make such a gesture, right away we perceive a formless type of energy lying just beneath the surface of our awareness which evaporates as soon as we grasp

it. So the second lesson we learn just as quickly is to relinquish the tendency to grasp what is formless. Soon we discover it's impossible, yet for some unknown reason we persist, possibly out of habit. A bit of perseverance rooted in our innate curiosity will give way to a suspension of our faculties. This seems to be too good to be true despite our limited efforts, for if it were otherwise, we might get discouraged. After all, reality isn't divided into bits and pieces. It is our perception that's so divided, a point we needed to be reminded of. So running with this reveals what's actually transpiring: there's nothing wrong with reality. Our perceptions are disjointed even if punctuated with direct insights into what it means to live in accord with formlessness informing our formal domain. The lesson learned from all this? Never had we known true relaxation. Always we've been in a state of tension to one degree or another.

Once we get comfortable with this arrangement we turn to the next crucial step, a fuller realization of where we're at. Before we've come to appreciate life concerning the suspension of our intellectual/emotional faculties we thought that everything worked in accord with nature or in accord with an order that is natural. And that order had gone unquestioned, a given applicable not just to us but to everyone and everything around us. An infinite amount of creative activities are available on this plane, no question about it. All we have to do is look about and see someone either more creative or less so than us, a situation in which constantly we're either judging or assessing our lives. Thus our lives pass without much due reflection, and then we die. It's very...well...natural to think and act like that. Once we've had a taste, even small, of that suspension of our faculties we find ourselves in a very different order, not unlike entering a new dimension. Here no person can teach us how to comport ourselves. There comes to mind Jesus' words, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God'" [Jn 6.45]. Reference is to Is 54.13 where the Hebrew verb *lamad* is used which often applies to reading the Torah in a prayerful manner. So when the Jews heard Jesus refer to Isaiah's words, they knew what he was talking about...pouring over the Torah and commentaries on it while in the synagogue. So it is with us.

We can take up the special sense of *lamad* as being instructed by God and see it as a wholly different way of conducting ourselves. Here an order does exist, but it is not natural (nor is it unnatural). To say something like "trans-natural" or the like is stretching it, still remaining on the order of nature. Because of the complete newness of our situation we have to look for another word to describe it. Let's call it normative. To be such means we operate according to a norm hitherto unknown to us which sets the pace for everything we think, say and do. It's inclusive, to be sure, leaving nothing out, not even nature, which continues on its own path without alteration. A norm is a standard which sets the tone for everything else. It represents a reality other than the natural one which now we see for what it is, a kind of blind advancement or movement well out of our control. It's a plane on which there's nothing new under the sun, to borrow from Ecclesiastes. A norm as used here refers to that suspension of our intellectual/emotional faculties, that which governs...is normative...for everything without exception.

We can perceive directly this proposal of a norm which hitherto had gone undetected and is easier than we suppose. The difficulty laying in the way is our innate tendency towards complexity which suits us just fine on the natural plane...the one of nature...but is a severe impediment on the in-formal plane. Because perception

of what is formless is not natural (nor is it unnatural in the sense of being alien to us), we require a new category, if you will, to articulate it, hence the choice of the word “norm” and its auxiliary, the adjective “normal.” We determine the existence of this reality by the immediate presence of happiness and peace which have no real object. They just plop in our lap without our asking and come in a way we haven’t experienced before. Furthermore, they create an enduring memory which informs us during the times we aren’t living according to this norm. Such is the realm of forgetfulness which is not lethal in small doses but quickly can become so should we allow our minds to stray. This seems to be the famous realm of distractions...its very cradle...which spiritual writers have discussed down the centuries. Lethal not in that it will affect our natural lives but will erode the norm by which we are made to live.

Granted, we’re dealing with something that sounds very subjective. However, the superabundance of peace and joy makes everything else insignificant, not unlike the Gospel pearl of great price for which we sell everything at once and without hesitation. So this new reality which we realize at a point later in time than our natural lives always has been with us and in fact “is” us. Only now it comes to the fore and guides us along. Such is the paradox laying at the heart of our lives. The natural one starts at birth, grows into maturity and then declines into death. The normative one isn’t subject to this process or advancement; such concepts are strange to it which at first makes us wonder who or what is strange since we’re so dominated by the natural realm. Here we neither advance nor progress, for how can we move to the point in which we are? A question which is absurd yet worth asking since it makes us think hard on the need *not* to subscribe notions of advancement. Of course, this rubs against the grain of human nature and modern society but such rubbing just might make us realize the uselessness of our pretense. On one hand, experiences of life turn out to be tragic, that constantly we’re missing the mark, and comic on the other hand, that there’s something genuinely funny about all this.

Each of us is endowed with creativity to one degree or another, and we get great joy in exercising it. However, the realm of formlessness which has become our new and only worthwhile norm offers a type of creativity or *auctoritas* we haven’t been able to conceive earlier. The one familiar to us uses material from the plane we inhabit and tends to work upwards, if you will, with some kind of goal or model in mind. And going up suggests the possibility of a fall or more like a crash. On the other hand, the creativity proper to formlessness...and it sounds like a contradiction, for how could something without form make anything...works from above downward. This is an important distinction, to be sure, and allows us to give birth to a kind of “super creativity” hitherto unknown to us. Actually the latter type of *auctoritas* doesn’t take material and fashion it into something new, so we don’t require any tools to exercise it. That frees us up to implement this new type of creativity at anytime, anywhere and with little or no resources available. One could say it’s not unlike the famous adage of creating something out of nothing, quite miraculous.

The uniqueness of this normative creativity or *auctoritas* is its ability to authorize thoughts and hence emotions before they appear. On the other hand, authorization on the natural level comes *after* the emergence of thoughts and emotions, thereby continually missing the mark. This miss may occur ever so slightly but always it’s a miss...never on target...and thus comes after the fact. Such creativity is a kind of imitation of a reality that

already exists. Perhaps this is why some ancient philosophies speak of a demiurge or intermediary between complete transcendence and the created realm. The appeal seems to lay in our innate desire for something in between the two extremes, for to live on one excludes the other by reason of the intensity involved. And so despite the appeal of a demiurge, it's ultimately off the mark because this hybrid lives on the natural plane while thinking its true home is the normative one. In short, it cannot set a norm because it lacks knowledge of this insight.

In real life we alternate between the two modes of being, the natural and normative, which correspond to the balance of opposites on the micro and macro scales such as summer and winter, night and day and so forth. Yet over time we realize that the normative wins out even though in actuality it always had been such. It's a matter of us playing catch-up while avoiding the subtle temptation to see it otherwise. Never have we left it, the biggest illusion of them all. This can be verified by the example of two questions discussed earlier. The first is something like "How does your shoulder feel today?" We respond right away and without hesitation, quickly moving to this or that in our lives. The second question is "How do you feel right now from every point of view?" We're both confused and amused because it can't be answered. It's like the well known example of a fish not unaware of the water in which it lives. No other reference point is available except if the fish ends up on dry land. The second question takes in the totality of our existence, not individual parts, as is the case with the first. Due to this totality, it can't be answered. Yet the question has value in that it jolts us from the scattered pieces of our existence and makes us look at them not from a natural point of view but from a normative one. In other words, we've hit upon a new norm or principle which becomes our governing principle. And it does this without coercion. Not only that, we're delighted to have hit upon such a refreshing insight. From there springs endless opportunities for creativity...of *auctoritas*...which consist of the most ordinary things and gestures of our lives. The best material turns out to be negative experiences which spur us on to view them not the same as good ones but on the same plane. It's kind of like looking at yourself and everything from the outside in. As just noted, this look isn't constant because time still dominates our perception, but it does alternate with our natural way of comporting ourselves and without interfering with it.

So if you have this normative viewpoint and the attendant *auctoritas*, you've pretty much made it. The question of "Where do I go from here?" loses relevance because already you are there ("Wherever you go, there you are"). This point can't be hammered home enough because it's indicative of how addictive we've become to the passage of time. Such an insight is enormous and can't be appreciated at one go. We have to continue our natural lives for some time before it sinks in, a way of preparing us for the normative way of life. The best part is that never have we been outside the normative one where the essence of that second question in the last paragraph continues to govern...to give a norm to...our lives. So over time (again, a bit deceptive because of our weakness of perception) we find the most common experiences, including our bodily functions and gestures, as participating in this norm which is one of formlessness. More precisely we're on the border when form emerges from formlessness much as the example of that second question of all-inclusiveness emerges from the first. The freedom here is absolute. This is a bit scary at first because hitherto we haven't experienced real freedom except here and there as constricted and conditioned by our thoughts and subsequent emotions. So despite the ups and downs involved, the ride is well worth all efforts. Somehow at

the end our lives we end up analyzing these two question. We could have gone years...decades...not questioning our place-to-place movement (applicable primarily to our thoughts) and come up empty-handed. But if we've interrupted this natural flow with an attitude represented by the second question, things turn out differently. If you're lucky enough, you might see this before you die. If not, you end up dead anyway.