

The Present Moment...Sort Of

If there were ever a title subject to numerous interpretations it's this one. As for "Sort Of," it's inserted as a kind of after thought to the first part of the title. We hear the present moment discussed frequently, even in passing, so it's a phrase quite familiar to us all. Sometimes you wonder if anyone really knows what they're saying or are mouthing ideas they've either heard or read. Yet the present moment captures the essence of spirituality across religious and philosophical persuasion. I had played around with coming up with a different title but decided to stick with the current choice for two reasons. First, the just mentioned popularity of the subject matter is one of those irreducible things that defies the alteration of words. Secondly, "Sort Of" is a qualifier if nothing more, hence the reason for the three periods. "Sort Of" aims not to debunk the subject matter *per se* but to question a number of assumptions held about it.

Choosing a title for an essay is important because it encapsulates the theme on which you're about to write and then share with a larger audience. In fact, it remains in the back of your mind throughout the writing process as a guide to keep you true to the goal you had set out. Let's see if this holds true, especially with regard to the "Sort Of" part. At the same time this shouldn't be taken as a self-imposed threat but as a helpful guideline.

Shortly after coming up with the theme for this essay I hit upon a book entitled **The Cave and the Light** by Arthur Herman. It's about Plato and Aristotle, arguably the two most influential philosophers in history, and ultimately each person (or at least each Westerner) identifies more with one than with the other. This identity applies even if we're completely unfamiliar with them. Not only that, our choice can lead to considering one philosopher as better than the other. This has the unfortunate consequence of leading to endless comparisons. Put briefly, Plato represents that which transcends visible reality while Aristotle remains within it with the intent of examining it. Unfortunately people sometimes are attracted to the difference between them instead of seeing this difference as a source for creativity.

In the context of this essay, Plato would have us find the present moment not in the nitty-grittiness of life but somewhere beyond it. On the other hand, with Aristotle we'd find the present moment within the stuff we already find ourselves. As for that stuff, we're fascinated by it and realize no there's no need to seek anything beyond

it. Plato, on the other hand, would view this approach as limited, even illusory, but would be hard pressed to come up with practical ways of living in the concrete world. So is it Plato or Aristotle? Such has been the choice for some twenty-five centuries.

Obviously both have their strong points and weaknesses. Also, taking one or the other path leads to two different world views as subsequent history has shown. Perhaps now early on in the twenty-first century this Plato vs. Aristotle dichotomy may have run out of steam and requires a new make-over. It may be time to put away the either/or choice and see if any new insight can come to birth. In the case at hand, that would apply to our understanding of the famous present moment. As for the choice between the two philosophers, later in this essay I opt for one of Plato's **Dialogues** as a modest way to shed light on the latter. This choice, of course, has nothing to do with not using one of Aristotle's works!

A lot of material dealing with spirituality uses the phrase "present moment" because it's religious-neutral and can fit in with one's faith practice or lack of it. Current interest may be traced in part to weariness with the largely "mental" aspect of modern culture. I say mental as opposed to intellectual insofar as society has become driven technologically and digitally. Within this overall environment we're compelled to use our brains in a more intense manner than in the not so recent past. This puts us in constant tension without a moment to relax and has far-reaching repercussions.

Here we hit upon a paradox. It seems that the hyperactive use of our brains turns out not to apply so much to our intellectual side but may be responsible for dulling it. Besides, this activity remains neutral at best with regard to our overall betterment, let alone growth in virtuous living. More to the point, our mental powers are directed to processing tons of information, thereby stifling our capacity to think clearly about life's deeper issues. Besides, it both distracts and tires us more quickly than we realize, a phenomenon we're familiar with. This obviously requires further exploration at a later time. Actually in today's modern world the mental and intellectual realms often find themselves at odds with each other, the former making continuous demands upon the latter. The case seems rarely the other way round.

It should be noted that for a long time the word "intellectual" has had a bad rap because it elicits a view of life more or less divorced from reality. However, that

prejudice seems more applicable to the way “mental” is used currently. It should be noted, too, that the mental side is not so much vilified but parodied. The image of a so-called geek comes to mind because his savant-like intelligence encapsulates him in his own (virtual) world. The same pretty much applies to an absent-minded professor.

As for actually living “in the present moment,” should anyone try it, quickly the endeavor turns out to be Mission Impossible. In fact, it borders upon near to total failure even though this phrase has become something of a contemporary mantra and substitute for conventional religious practices. Nevertheless let’s stick with it because on occasions we get glimpses of an experience that justifies its use. This happens even though we run the risk of mistaking our own preconceptions for what is real. So despite the elusiveness of the so-called present moment, quite a few people expend energy on it, having been fed by what they read.

Clearly dissatisfaction with what’s going on in one’s own life plays a major role. Just about everyone feels some type of loneliness or alienation but can’t quite pin down the source of this anxiety. The natural tendency is to seek a cure even if it’s as elusive as the “present moment.” We could say that memory (or more accurately, recollection) of some type of experience that can’t be articulated in the conventional way has to do with the reality behind its popular manifestations. However, the understanding of this form of memory is quite different from how we use this term in daily life. More on this later, for recollection which goes by the name *anamnesis* is a key element in our perennial search for something better.

On occasion a cursory glance of something extraordinary in our lives does register by imprinting itself upon our memories more permanently than others. This happens in the literal sense of the word—*extra* or beyond, outside the ordinary—and transcends our capacity to define it. It is precisely this tidbit of experience of what’s essentially unknowable that prevents us from relinquishing our quest. And so we may conclude that despite our efforts and frustrations, this little insight is all we’ll get. It’s an occasional morsel not unlike bait held out before us, egging us on to something we really don’t know about. Nevertheless both our insatiable appetite for something larger than ourselves and a need of what we don’t have cannot be suppressed.

Although we can't lay hold of it, we have an inbuilt affinity for the mysterious presence such experiences elicit along with a gnawing sense of in-completion relative to our pursuit of the elusive "present moment." Then there are the experiences we hear from other persons. Either consciously or other wise we keep an eye on someone we consider more advanced, but obviously we can't incorporate their experiences into our our lives. And so we teeter on the edge, between giving up and slogging ahead. If we choose the former, we fall into despair. If we choose the latter, it's pretty much the same scenario only we've attempted, albeit subtly, to imitate the experience of someone else. Both lead to consider dropping the matter altogether. Yet the question remains. Is there an alternative? The answer is no because never can we escape our consciences which remain unsatisfied.

So we're led to take another look at the phrase "present moment" and all the baggage associated with it. At the beginning of this essay it was said that we can't and shouldn't alter the current phrase by reason of its familiarity. This doesn't preclude questioning the use of words because they have considerable power over how we understand the world. So then, is it possible to attribute, albeit tentatively, any substance to these fleeting experiences which we believe fall under the so-called present moment? Also we'd be interested in knowing better the motive behind our pursuit despite the elusiveness of our goal and lack of comprehension of what we're after. Apparently some kind of intense desire is at work, perhaps in our subconscious, which, even if frustrated, remains ever attentive. That leads us to consider adopting an alternative way of tackling this situation.

In this article a number of approaches are offered to get at this present moment business. They're presented in a mostly experimental and unprofessional way but motivated by a desire to understand better something discussed so frequently. One approach that may help is the word "tension"...not so much a hindrance to perception of the present moment but as a given, a fact of life, something that's always within us. We do know of its presence operating indirectly in the background. It's hard to say if it had been with us since birth or has been acquired. Regardless, we're stuck with it. This tension is an essential part of our constitution and keeps us on our toes throughout a given day regardless of the activity in which we're engaged. It may be defined as constantly maintaining our relationship with the outside world and not loosing our balance. Also it doesn't seem far removed from the instinct to survive.

While tension is constant, for the most part we're simply unaware of it's effect upon our lives. But if we stop and try to perceive it better, we might find not so much being able to dwell within this elusiveness reality but instead settle for living in its vicinity. Paradoxically—the importance of this can't be stressed enough—the tension at hand is the very agent keeping us away from the present moment. The most we can do is approach it even though we remain a hair's breath away. We might pause and wonder if we can get closer, at last overcoming this final miniscule distance which is so tantalizingly close. After some exposure to being so close yet far away we discover that the tension at hand is a built-in natural limit. Yet if we continue abiding in its vicinity, it just might turn out to be our best friend.

To hone in better on this peculiar but wonderful insight we can start with the most general category familiar to us all. That boils down to time and space. Although it's our natural habitat, we have a persistent desire to step outside its bounds, instinctively wondering if something else lays out there. How, when or why this is so doesn't matter. We're at a loss to explain something so basic. So to effect this stepping out amounts to suspending space and time. That means doing away with any notion of before and after, here or there. Saying this is one thing but actually doing it is what we're really after.

Despite the inherent elusiveness, even absurdity of the idea, it's easier than at first glance. Why shouldn't it be? It's part and parcel of how we're built. We know intellectually that never are we outside the so-called present moment and at the same time have trouble attaining it except for brief glances from the corner of our eye. Yet it's important to realize our perception is indirect, usually brought on by a sudden incident of minor or insignificant proportion. At the same time it's sufficient to act as a trigger producing this insight. Ninety-nine percent of the other stuff of life, that is...the before and the after, the here and there of what we've deemed as the present suddenly falls into insignificance. Certainly this is no small insight.

Now that we've narrowed down the field of our perception to what seems absolute zero, that is, by "eliminating" space and time, we feel strangely snug in our new-found confinement. All our customary expectations have been squeezed from us, literally so, leaving no room for deception. That goes primarily for our innate tension described above. Here this tension has been exchanged...how is impossible to know but it happens...for our new-found vice-like confinement. Actually "how" belongs to the side of tension, not that of confinement. While the confinement which

is tantamount to the suspension of space and time usually is brief, we carry memory of it about all day long. If asked to describe it, we'd come up with something like having been in a long-lost paradise. Long-lost means, of course, we've been there before.

We've begun to learn not to so much to grasp the present moment but be content with occasional glimpses of it. Relapses into our innate tension are bound to happen which we can acknowledge and live with not while being bothered by them. Since this present moment turns out to be more than a thing or event, somehow we feel it's endowed with an intelligence far beyond ours. It will respond to our detachment in a way we couldn't have imagined previously. That is to say, it will be delighted just as much as we and go after us instead of us going after it. No question this is a Miracle of Miracles and not something we've concocted out of a hyper-active imagination. This presentation of tension differs considerably from suffering traditionally perceived by religious practices, etc. How can there be suffering when we've let go of something that has kept us bound? So instead of the usual spiritual practices of renunciation, understanding of our innate tension and the possibility that yes, it can be suspended, seems to be the answer to one of life's age-old conundrums.

When returning to our normal life, this being defined as concrete, immediate contact with reality physically speaking, the bonds of living in a spiritual manner are loosened. This goes against conventional religious practice where would prefer to have some kind of holy thought or image guiding us. Instead, our preference is for a robot-like existence instrumental in liberating us from what people value the most, free will. As for free will, certainly it exists but in comparison to the confinement just presented, is of secondary concern. An outrageous thought at first glance. However, the only way of telling whether this is valid or not is the extreme joy and freedom we have where the option to practice virtuous living is put aside because it's part of the package, something already given to us.

Technology in the form of computers as used by the media feeds directly into our native tension insofar as it's an irritant thrown into the mix. The continuous flow of information which parades before our eyes quickly becomes close to impossible to disengage from because it's so captivating irrespective of its content. The images themselves have a magical power to draw us inexorably toward them. Then without realizing it we're held captive by a rapid fire succession of further images that continues without end. Such constant excitement precludes us from having deeper

insights, always keeping us on the surface of life. Even when we wish to delve deeper, it gets harder to do, and we come away discombobulated as to how we got ourselves into such a situation. And so we return to the parade of images which technology is eager to sell like some shady salesman ever ready to support our restlessness. This turns out to be a genuine affliction affecting younger people who've grown up with technology and who haven't any other point of reference. And to think it came on the scene a generation or two, not more.

But if we're lucky enough to have insight into our captivity holding us by an infinite variety of images, we can perceive something larger lurking in the background. We may attempt to lay hold of it but never can. So instead of wasting time with the impossible, we let go, easy as that. We don't "go" anywhere but interestingly find ourselves hanging around this larger reality. In brief, we're taking an active stance yet one different from the other active stance to which we had been accustomed to with regard to the present moment. Understanding that the two are similar though separate is of the utmost importance. We know well that being active in the sense of exerting ourselves as through a discipline or practice turns out to be fruitless. As for the other type of active awareness, we don't resist the flow of images always coming our way and always will come our way. And so there emerges a sacred space (and time): sacred in the original sense as something wholly other than normal experience which qualifies it as transcendent. What's fascinating is that it happens without our intervention although we have to dispose ourselves properly. That disposition is not so much a training but realizing that most of the time we're passive to events, even under the illusion that we're active, and are clueless as how to shift into the necessary active form of attention beneficial for us.

Another way of putting this is that we become aware of our location within an in-between land of images and a lack of them (that's where Diotima's speech later on is of value). Passage between the two realms happens in a nanosecond which doesn't seem as far-fetched as it did earlier. In fact, it's within our power to perceive more immediately than this, if you will, or when there's no passage of time, let alone moving from one fixed location in space to another. It can be argued that all this is the product of an overly active imagination or wishful thinking. However, it has nothing to do with entertaining thoughts, something we have drill down upon. Rather we're more interested in what happens under the condition when thinking is suspended. That sounds awkward but essentially is the goal. Proofs of any sort are irrelevant here. Far from being dismissive about proofs, their irrelevance

acknowledges a realm where thoughts don't apply (and before this weird proposal we believed everything valuable consisted in thought). As for proof, a person can go out and experiment to see if what is proposed works and return with a report.

The problem with trying to nail down a proof in the conventional sense is the relationship between the fleeting nature of our perceptions and the suspension of our awareness of space and time. To begin with, we have an incredibly difficult resistance to disengage from a thought, any thought, regardless of content. This is equivalent to denying the very fabric of existence, so basic that we don't entertain it. This fabric is anything that pertains to form, and form is pretty much the whole thing, nothing excluded. Fear is natural, for who wants to suspend the fabric of space and time which are the basis of thought? Might as well remove water in which a fish swims around.

Here we have the making of a double-bind. On the one hand, even if we've managed to suspend awareness of space and time (we know it's valid only afterward), immediately we end up losing it a second or two later. However, we can try again, no matter how briefly afterward, but now we've learned to do it in a more discreet fashion. What's to be avoided is reconstruction of memories we retain of the experience and trying to project them into the future. In sum, to create a map is to create a reality which is virtual. When we strive to attain living in the present moment we're active in the sense of entertaining thoughts about it which are second-hand at best, thinking these images are The Real Thing. At this point we're bordering upon idolatry by our attachment to images.

Here the second half of this essay's title comes into play, "Sort Of." This appendage of sorts qualifies the first part—by no means negates it—but simply says that despite our efforts and wishful thinking, the present moment is out of reach for us all. Instead, we get glimpses here and there which increase by reducing the distance between it and us. Once we know that the gap is unbridgeable we can take it easy, even congratulate ourselves for having made it thus far. We've come to know that rarely do we enter the present moment or more accurately, rarely do we manage to abide there. "Abide" is a good word, for it implies some type of permanence different from those occasional glimpses occurring a nanosecond after the real experience.

This contentedness in itself is a great reward. Since we've learned not to deceive ourselves, we're closer to that place where images of the present moment are more like quasi-formal perceptions where our sense of touch plays an important role. The physical sense of touch is analogous to our experience for we bump up against something which leaves an impression...a kind of indentation, if you will, which differs from the usual store of memories we carry about. Engaging in this process (actually it's hard to attribute an accurate word) can be done anywhere and at any time, best done quickly and at one shot. If we don't succeed, wait a bit and try again, for it's in our best interest to do this many times in the course of our waking hours. We could apply the words of the title "Sort Of" here in a positive sense as an acknowledgment of our perpetual falling behind, albeit very closely, to the present moment.

We have to be on guard against nostalgia for the past which may creep in, that is, in the form of pleasant memories. The present moment in and by itself lacks nostalgia because all forms of memory are non-existent to it. In fact, here we don't even care about the past, let alone the future. One of the greatest temptations consists in wanting to make permanent the memory when our mental faculties have been suspended. Recognition of this fact is to our benefit in another way. This desire to make permanent is a form of idolatry, of worshiping something that simply doesn't exist. So it's to our benefit to recognize that any and all our memories of the present moment, even if rare, are insubstantial.

The opposite of nostalgia is hope which is based upon remembrance of where we had come from. In the concrete that means allowing memories when our mental faculties had been suspended to inform our decisions minus any desire to usurp them and make them permanent. This seems quite rare but greatly desired because largely we've forgotten the value of memory as *anamnesis*, awareness of our origin. And that origin is not simply physical but rooted in something other than what's natural. Against any odds thrown at us we know this is our True Home because we have this guarantee, albeit intangible, of something very good laying in the future which transcends even death.

So we've come to think of recollections of the present moment in terms of *anamnesis*, not conventional memories, however subtle they may be. While such recollections remain a hair's breath away from the present moment, in essence they share its reality albeit in a slightly diminished form (inaccuracy of language once

again becomes more evident here). And so these recollections always keep us a nanosecond away from our goal. You might say that's what they have been born to do. Instead of taking them negatively, they are in effect an invitation to a "place" where we are to take up residence and be content being there. No question it's a strange place for neither do we hear, see, touch nor feel anything. At the same time we're fully aware of what is transpiring about us. If we're faithful to this practice of recollection or *anamnesis* which can occur multiple times a day, the nanosecond distance between us and the present moment shrinks down even further. In sum, we've drawn a complete blank with regard to the past but one that's strangely cozy and impervious to any threats or misunderstandings thrown our way. Or to be more accurate, the greater the familiarity with this strange place, the greater our resistance to pressures from the outside world which hasn't the remotest clue as to what's going on inside us. That's because it prefers memories over recollection.

A concrete way of approaching this helps, of course. Say someone offends us, right or wrong being secondary. Immediately a torrent of vivid images passes through our minds, taking up residence within us and in effect governing our lives. Even the adverb "immediately" doesn't fit the bill. It's as though no time (nor space as we reflect upon it later) exists between the anger which had been manifested and the anger received. Both have become one and the same. We may know intellectually that a space exists between the two but emotionally it's a different story. The first reaction resembles a recoil when we're dealt a blow from the outside to the inside, the anger manifested usually by a rush of blood throughout the body. Yet once we put some distance between us and this experience we see that we're passive to the blow that comes our way (that being an understatement), but it had to be made here anyway. The passivity resides not in the anger but in the images which ensue from the anger in their literal rush upon us. Then as we all know the images not so much multiply (they do but to a limited extent) but repeat themselves endlessly. Here is the real heart of the matter. We're trapped on a wheel and if we're honest enough, enjoy being so trapped, wanting to keep the wheel in motion. This leads to another discovery: better to be in motion than come to a complete halt.

It doesn't take many spins on this wheel to discover that we're slave not to the person who was angry with us but to our reflections upon what he had said or had done. It's another instance of knowing something intellectually but refusing to accept in reality. We're not so much interested in a new batch of images nor in their

refinement which always keeps us in motion. Coming to a standstill is anathema, the equivalent of committing suicide.

Chances are, however, we won't end up killing ourselves. The pleasure we derive in repetitive thought processes precludes that. If we did commit suicide, the problem might not be solved. Given intimations that something larger than ourselves is at work as we perceive through our faculty of recollection, of *anamnesis*, this something seems to carry over into another realm, that is, it seems to transcend death. Purgatory viewed in the light minus the baggage associated with this word makes more sense, for essentially it's a place of cleansing. The same may be said for suspension of our thoughts and therefore our emotions. However, that's a different story than what concerns us here.

Being trapped in an unending cycle turns out to be the most abject form of subjection on the planet. So how do we extricate ourselves from this mess? If we look at ourselves objectively, say by pretending to be someone else, we discover that no one is out there beating us up. However, should someone want to do this, all they'd have to do is stand by and observe us doing it for them. It goes on day and night, night and day. Then one day a small but significant experience comes along and jolts us from this prison. Then one day it wakes us up not so much from this self-imposed bondage but to a realization of how foolish we must look. The only thing that saves us from diving into the nearest hole out of shame is that most other people are in the same predicament. Since everyone is doing it, we might consider this as the normal state of affairs. At least it's a relief to know we're not alone, that there's a weird sense of safety in numbers.

After the initial discovery that everyone is in the same predicament there follows not so much a let-down but boredom. That is to say, we find no end to the cyclic existence of thought, reaction, more thought, more reaction (etc.). Even the most recent rush of images gets boring and predictable, so we settle into a pattern with which we can live. Boredom doesn't fall into the category of emotion which implies its opposite, excitement. By reason of its pervasiveness, boredom wears us out more thoroughly than any emotion but does so quietly, operating in the background. Because boredom can't be defined directly, we must look at it from a different angle. However, achieving that angle is difficult. We can begin with a simple overall observation of where we're at, that gray "blah" atmosphere in which we live. At this juncture it's best not to fiddle with it, simply observe it as a whole. Then with the

passage of time—generally it happens more quickly than we anticipate—we behold an alternative. The miraculous nature of its appearance stems from the fact that we’re not the one’s who have elicited it.

And so we move from being a slave to boredom to being in charge. This shift is instantaneous and again, doesn’t arise from our own efforts. The key is maintaining a watchful, non-interfering eye. Actually we don’t perceive the shift as it happens but afterward, for all perception is based upon space and time. In essence we’re dealing with an exchange of our innate preference for passivity with its accompanying negative thoughts which follow that cyclic pattern already described for an active observation of them. This is quite different, of course, from controlling them. It’s the ultimate acid test because we know beyond doubt that some other agent is at work for our personal well being, albeit behind our back. Knowledge of this other agent which is *anamnesis* therefore precludes any action, for we know we’re not up to the task and relinquish control, quite hard to admit in actuality but a great relief one done.

A biblical image might help flesh this out, Hebrews 4.12: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Because of this verse’s relevance to the present issue, let’s break it down. For example, the divine word or *logos* is the agent which inserts itself into our lives at the critical juncture just described. *Logos* is a pretty good word because it means something more than what’s uttered, more like word-as-expression. According to Hebrews it has five qualities:

1) Living (*zoon*).

2) Active (*energes* suggests the ability to see an action through to completion),
3) sharper (*tomos*) with respect to a two-edged sword (*machaira*), smallish in size, like a large knife. *Machaira* suggests close combat by reason of being two-edged in order to cut one way and another in a confined space.

4) Piercing (*diikneomai*) which separates soul and spirit (*psuche* and *pneuma*) which because of their immaterial natures are difficult to separate. Keep in mind that the agent doing this separation is the *logos* as a (small) *machaira* designed to work in confined places. In brief, *psuche* is vital force, the seat of feelings and affections; *pneuma* is the principle which animates the body, the spirit. In addition

to piercing these two incorporeal features of a person, the *logos/machaira* applies to a person's skeletal structure: joints (*harmos*) and marrow (*muelos*).

5) Discerning (*kritikos*): the only New Testament use of this adjective, from the verb *krino* which connotes obtaining an accurate opinion which most likely but not necessarily attains the truth of a matter. In the verse at hand, *kritikos* applies to the heart (*kardia*) which is two-fold: thoughts (*enthumesis*) and intentions (*ennoia*). Both terms are similar; *ennoia* seems to compass feelings in addition to mental action. Since the verse at hand situates them in the heart, the fountain and seat of human life, *enthumesis* and *ennoia* assume a special intimate sense.

Walking around with all this stuff on within us seems like a formidable task. However, it boils down to that inner glance which precludes passivity to thoughts and images as done swiftly, discreetly and as many times as we can do it in the course of a day. Thus all five form a seamless unity. In essence they're characteristic of that *logos* or agent independent of ourselves. The definition of *logos* as something expressed applies to a voice; hence the five actions are as equally subtle and ethereal-like as the agent they describe. If we take them all at one go or as embodied in *logos*, they have an unusual, almost trans-human way of shaking us from our habitual passivity to events over to being active with regard to them.

Throughout all this what transpires in the world doesn't change. It goes on as usual which means it doesn't interfere with our lives but remains pretty much neutral. In sum, if we refrain from meddling, we come off fine and go along with events. This may seem to fly in the face of the conventional view of ascetic practices, of using some technique to effect a change either in the external world or in ourselves. Naturally we're drawn to change things, including ourselves, so we think the same should apply here. In sum we could describe this whole process—"gesture" is more like it for it implies doing things in one swoop—as a loosening. Bonds which previously held us fast to such-and-such an attitude are dissolved meaning there's no residue of memories. These bonds melt away instead of being removed by heavy, awkward chipping away, the very thought of which is painful.

This area of human experience is difficult to describe since no adequate vocabulary seems to exist. Part of the reason is that we're so used to relying upon the most basic thing out there to describe things, that being form. Thus without realizing it we transfer our dependence onto something that has no form. Furthermore we tend to consider that which lacks form as devoid of reality or is a product of our

imagination. And so the best way to approach all this is to examine oneself carefully and slowly which requires no small dose of courage since we're in *terra incognita*. Yet the effort pays off because we're dealing with the source of our anxiety which revolves around life, death, God...in sum, all that ultimate stuff. Then there arises the issue of how to comport oneself. Although what we've been dealing with what lies outside form and is common to us all, we won't find much if any support. However, let that be. It comes with the territory. Chances are close to 100% that eventually and at the right time we'll meet someone out of the clear blue with whom to share these matters. As for comporting ourselves, it doesn't apply to adopting a specific life style setting aside a particular time of the day when we engage in some kind of spiritual exercise. These are the usual places we look for clues.

There remains the task to hone in on something more specific as it applies to actual living with regard to what was just said. The recourse set forth here is one among many, of course, and comes from a document posted already on this home page entitled *The Speech of Diotima* from Plato's **Symposium**. Not only is it still fresh in mind but deals with the pursuit of a life accessible to us all based upon philosophy...the love (or friendship, *philos*) of wisdom...as this term is conceived in the original sense. Besides, it dates back some two and a half centuries, having the benefit of standing the test of time.

While the Diotima article has a running commentary inserted into the original text by way of notations, we may re-examine part of it and expand upon some insights without going over old territory. Suffice it to say it's within our reach to apply what this mysterious person (whether Diotima is fictional or representative of Socrates' *daimon* is of secondary importance) has to say concerning the matter at hand. When reading the original text, it's only natural to long for such an adviser as Diotima. Therefore the next few paragraphs will sum up her message.

We can begin with the word *logos* which can translate as speech and may be taken as word in the sense of an expression. Thus right away we get the sense that Diotima wants to change Socrates' life, not just spew out information about this or that. More than being just a speaker, Diotima has a loving intimacy with Socrates. If we take her as being his *daimon*, that means she is inside Socrates, not external to him, perhaps not unlike the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit inhabiting someone. The *logos* at hand deals with the art of love (*ta erotica*), without a doubt an interest to

everyone. Hence the *logos* of Diotima provides a launching pad to speak of love (*Eros*) as a person.

The most important characteristic of *Eros* is his being between mortal and immortal. We know for sure that is mortal (death) and less so about what transcends death though we long for it even if not having a clue as to what's involved. Thus Diotima offers a pair of diametrically opposed opposites. If this weren't bad enough, she throws out boldly that *Eros* is neither. He's *metaxu* or in between mortal and immortal. Such an odd claim is sufficient to grab anyone's curiosity as to what this unknown state could be like. Obviously it doesn't share the two most general categories of life and death, so what in the world is Diotima getting at? She offers the familiar term *daimon* which means spirit or as in the case of Socrates, someone who accompanies him from within him. This *daimon* is therefore *metaxu*, in between. The first thing that comes to mind is a hybrid, but a hybrid can't bridge two extremes such as life and death.

So if you occupy this *metaxu* area, you become a messenger, that is, you bring information from one side (life) to the other (death) and presumably the other way around. The verb here is *diaporeuo*, literally to carry over or set across, *dia-* suggestive of through-ness. Hence the idea of sacrifice as a religious offering makes sense. Such messengers engage in *hermeneuo*, to interpret or explain, a way to express being intermediaries between gods and man. The preposition *para* is used here for between, more along side of, in the company of.

The identity of one of these messengers is *Eros*, desire-love whose father and mother are *Poros* and *Penia*. The former means a means of passing, even a ferry, and more commonly a way or path. *Metis* is his father which translates as cunning as well as wisdom, counsel and craft. While at a banquet, *Penia* or poverty, need, came begging, figuring everyone would be in a good mood. Hence he could get stuff without too much begging. However, *Penia* had something more in mind. She wanted a child and thus managed to lay beside *Poros*, the child being *Eros*. As the son of *Poros* and *Penia*, his lot in life is destined to be part of both parents. That is to say, on his mother's side (*Penia*) *Eros* is poor as well as tough, accustomed to roughing it outside. This makes him a kind of vagabond, even a bum. On his father's side (*Poros*), *Eros* is a schemer after the beautiful and the good.

According to Diotima, this unique parentage makes *Eros* neither immortal nor mortal. Such is a *metaxu* or in between existence: always slipping away yet never without resources. Also *Eros* is *metaxu* wisdom and ignorance which situates him always in a state of desire. Such is the definition of a philosopher, a *philos* or friend of *sophia*. He falls in between (*metaxu* again) two extremes and isn't like the gods who already possess it, including immortality. No so small wonder that *Eros* must be a lover of wisdom meaning he hasn't achieved it and hence lives in between being wise and being ignorant. It comes from his parents, a father (*Poros*) who is wise and resourceful and a mother (*Penia*) who is not wise and lacks resource.

The take-away from this outline is, of course, “being *metaxu*.” Starting out it's better to focus upon the child that lives there, *Eros*, because everyone is familiar with the word. It represents desire for something that remains unfulfilled which would make you think “Why bother?” However, we can't root it out nor avoid it no matter how hard we try or pretend. Getting close to despair like this can provide an opportunity to suspend mental activity, for following it leads to a frenzied mental state which ties us up in knots. Recognizing that such a suspension is possible gets to much of what this article is about. In fact, *Eros*, that forward-propelling desire, has the unique opportunity of coming to a halt within its experience of despair. Such despair acts like a vice—hard as metal but with cushions, if you will—holding *Eros* immovable which is completely against its nature.

Once within this vice *Eros* finds itself literally *metaxu*, in between two restraints Diotima originally proposed as life and death. It's uncomfortable, to be sure, but strangely secure. No longer are you concerned about life nor death. Both have drifted away on their own accord, and you're left viced in with no where to go. Yet there's no pain which you'd expect. When we think of any spiritual exercise, the idea of asceticism comes to mind. That consists of giving something up or undertaking a physical or mental discipline. While all well and good, it misses the mark completely as the example of *Eros* being sandwiched in reveals. Neither is their pain nor exertion involved which may make us suspicious of the whole venture because we've been trained...indoctrinated...to think personal effort is essential whereas it's incidental. All that's required is an assent to being put in that proverbial vice. We balk because the last thing we want to do is be still or paralyzed. It connotes doing nothing which is exactly the aim. Digressing on this is well worth the while because despite any familiarity with spiritual texts and exercises, we think, albeit in subtle

fashion, that our efforts are essential to effecting genuine change whereas they are not. Nothing like being viced to put this to rest!

So if *Eros* finds itself viced, as it were, he's in between (*metaxu*) and realizes his identity of being a son of *poros* and *penia*, of means and poverty. The means is to remain still as possible which means having a full realization of personal destitute as possible and not wanting to escape it. The value of such a practice...a kind of non-practice...is that once the day is done, we can come to grips what we've been trying avoid all day long. That consists not in idleness but in having nothing to do and having no place to go. The despairing side of us, however, tends to view this as idleness which is to be avoided at all costs. Being alone is a fearful thing and seems to be at the heart of monasticism although you might not find it put as such. It's hard to jibe with conventional notions about spirituality which deal essentially with alterations, of time set aside for some kind of prayer or meditation which will inform the activities of life. And so the value we place in asceticism is turned on its head for cultivation of an insight that is more demanding than any physical, mental or spiritual practice commonly perceived.

By introducing the notion of *metaxu* with regard to *eros* in spacial overtones—between *poros* and *penia*, means and poverty—we might be better positioned to consider the fundamental theme of this article. And as the second half of the title runs, that theme revolves around “Sort Of.” That may be taken as both a critique and doubt upon the popular enterprise of striving to live in the present moment. Essentially it's a pipe dream. However we can qualify it by saying that we can get glimpses extending for a limited amount of time. The benefit of these experiences is that they impinge upon our recollective faculty (*anamnesis*). Thus it might be more accurate to say we live *metaxu* or in between “episodes” of the present moment. To be satisfied with that means coming to grips with that innate tension that follows us throughout life. At least now we can get a better handle on it, no mean gift.

While writing this article I was fully aware of its rather disjointed character yet currently at a loss as how to rectify it. Such a quandary may come from attempting to take on a subject matter beyond my capacity. While this may be true, nevertheless I felt moved to jot down these reflection. If I hadn't gone forth with the project, something dear would be missing. It's hard to put a finger on but definitely real. So without offering further excuses, let's stop here and now. Perhaps a redo is in order at a later date.

+ The End +