

*Please note: This article is situated under this section simply because other sections have plenty of texts. It's simply here to save space, if you will.*

## **Ressentiment**<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly...and this depends upon each individual...you feel yourself old. While transiting through your 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s you're not acutely aware of the passage of time. Then you hit around 60, and it dawns on you that you have less years in front more in behind. How? When? Where? Why? As often as we've asked ourselves these questions, their force comes rushing in with a force we've never experienced before and are left without being able to answer them. One feels like blurting out with Ecclesiastes, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!"

If your health is reasonable, you don't feel you're getting old though unmistakable signs start to make themselves felt. The minor aches and pains increase imperceptibly at first until (if you're lucky) you get to around the mid 70s when many of us starting becoming professional patients. That means virtually your life revolves around doctor appointments and sorting out pills in one of the SMTWTFS plastic dispensers. When having a conversation with someone, especially your own age, you tend to talk about your personal aches and pains. Actually they're the only ones who sympathize with you and can compare notes. This by far is the most boring form of conversation on the planet. The second most discussed issue concerns contemporaries who have died, knowing that you're time is not far off and wondering what (if anything) lays beyond death.

You'd think older people would be inclined to discuss so called higher matters. Yes, some do but quite rarely which is a sign both of how they've been brought up and society's irresistible dulling effect. It's worse than say our grandparents' generation meaning that those born more recently have the potential of being even duller in spirit. Previous generations talked a lot about families. Now that disintegration of this fundamental building block of society has set it, no longer that will be a subject of discussion. It may be no exaggeration to say that largely the next generation for all intensive purposes will be illiterate. However, that isn't the only issue at hand. Above and beyond all laying up ahead is the specter of death noted just above. Second thought says no. It has made its presence felt already among those not illiterate in the conventional sense but in the fuller way of experiencing life.

<sup>1</sup>A psychological state arising from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred that cannot be acted upon, frequently resulting in some form of self-abasement. Refer to **Ressentiment** by Max Scheler (New York, 1961), the reading of which spurred on this article.

One of the most characteristic signs of aging is a sharper awareness between you and younger persons. You notice young adults whose future is starting to take shape as well as those who have the potential of falling by the wayside. Your age enables you to sense who will go where before they do, and it's tempting to butt in with unwanted advice. However, knowing when to stay out is better because real wisdom means that each person must discover the truth on his own, not forced into it, if you will. After all, you have been in their situation just a moment ago, a true sign of how fleeting is life. As for communicating this to young folk, forget-about-it. They're not interested in the slightest and to recognize this fact ultimately is a way to get in with them.

Fast-forward a bit when these folks have established their careers and families who to you as observer still are relatively young. They may be conscious of the passage of time, albeit vaguely, but are more aware that a good number of productive years lay ahead of them. That translates into opportunities for further personal advancement as well as looking forward as to how one's children make out. As for those whose lives don't follow this trajectory, they're stuck pretty much in the same condition as when much younger. So when they compare themselves with their peers, embarrassment coupled with suppressed anger can set in. In a word, they've become ripe for *ressentiment*. They can't strike back at their peers nor have the resources to take it out. Violence obviously is frowned upon, that extreme not being of the essence of *ressentiment*.<sup>2</sup>

When older, it's possible to use one's accumulative experience to broaden out your acquaintances beyond the people with whom you're familiar thereby reaching out to an increasingly larger population. You can run with this insight until it encompasses all humanity with the rise and fall of all its generations where the individual (including yourself) fades into the background. Such fading away of you as an individual is shunned upon, especially when you're younger. At that early stage you're intent upon making a go of it in the world by distinguishing yourself from everyone else. To think otherwise borders upon the suicidal.

This shedding of one's individuality in preference for humanity as a whole sounds abstract but has down to earth effects. They aren't dramatic but doorways into a way of viewing things you haven't had previously. An example many have experienced is when present at the death of a loved one. As soon as the person has passed away, one of the first things you notice is sound and movement, not so much anything visible whether near or further away from you. It's as though the one so recently alive has

2 Very recently the "opiod crisis" has burst upon the scene which may nullify this *ressentiment* simply because the drugs and injection you take knock you unconscious while the world goes by.

slipped into this background noise and has become part of it while we are left behind. Being so left behind does have its sadness but more interestingly represents waiting, a waiting for our turn to move on. Move on we will. Although it may lay many decades ahead, its arrival won't be feared because we've prepared ourselves for the *transitus*.

Some people early on in life perceive themselves as they will be when much older and therefore differ from their peers while at a loss to explain why this is so. They have a certain wisdom and insight of what it's like to be older way beforehand which makes them feel awkward and essentially alone in their present state. You could say they have mature minds in immature bodies, the two being out of sync which can cause considerable difficulty as they go through life. Chances are that they'll be loners growing up neither relating to their peers nor to their elders though they feel more comfortable in the company of the latter. The bulk of life which most people consider their formative period, in fact the best time, isn't such for these folks. They go through it as a pilgrim passes through a strange land and don't feel as though they're home until late in life. Once they've reached a certain age...say around their early to mid-sixties...suddenly they find themselves at the point from which they have started out many years earlier. Trying to explain that case of *déjà vu* is mission impossible. Actually you wonder how such gifted persons ('gifted' tongue in cheek, for some may not grasp this) have managed to survive. It seems to be a case of foreknowledge which turns out to be stronger than anticipated.

Then at some stage—the time can't be pinned down exactly but say again around sixty—these “early bloomers,” if you will, come into their own. They realize the intervening pilgrim years, if you will, have been painful but necessary for reinforcing their original insight. If not, they wouldn't be reaping the current benefits they're enjoying right now. Loss of the interval time to them isn't a loss of something precious; the achievements of their contemporaries, wonderful as they might be, have a hollow ring about them. Rare it is to find someone to share this insight which usually is borne alone though at some point a person with a similar experience comes on the scene but doesn't hang around for long to develop it. So it seems.

“Early bloomers” can't go around claiming that the pursuits of their fellows is of no value. Immediately they'd be shut down and isolated to a degree that would make their current condition seem mild by comparison. Instead, their focus is to remain upon their pilgrim nature in essentially an alien land even if their pilgrimage lasts the bulk of their lives. However, their path is unique insofar as it consists of returning to the place from which they had started out, an insight that's not comprehended fully until having undergone a whole slew of trials, etc. In the meantime the intermediate

years when most people come into their own lack something which they may intuit here and there but not completely. It seems to be part and parcel of their normal striving to make a go of it in the world. Perhaps on occasion...and such an occasion is quite rare...they may consult one of those people not fully at home in the world and get insight to continue their journey in life, altering it somewhat. Fortunately not everyone perceives themselves as pilgrims so described; if that were the case society would grind to a halt. Such is one reason why this group is small by necessity.

A person in this tiniest of minorities knows when his perception of being old before his time has come into its own yet has no control over it, for it does so suddenly and peacefully lacking any sort of fanfare. One day everything seems to click and go as it should which has nothing to do with being self-centered. It remains fresh as ever even through the frequent physical ailments associated with old age. These aches and pains are secondary to the mental variety which has accompanied one through life. Something really great is laid up on store, an insight that had begun when such a pilgrim-oriented person started out long ago and becomes clearer with the approach of death. It isn't worth bothering to describe, for even if one did, no one would pay attention. That's fine, too. The desire to control one's life is relinquished, put on automatic pilot, and you go where you're supposed to go.

One simple example comes to mind relative to this pilgrim condition. You might be sitting in your room and see jet contrails pass overhead. In the Old Days these contrails had a sense of mystery but that has disappeared with the Internet. Now you can track each plane as it makes its way along knowing the place from which it came and to where it is going. Still, this doesn't detract from the fact that they're passing you by, literally. Then you lay aside this contrast without making any fuss and return to your measly earth-bound life free from the desire to be on one of those jets. If you're burdened by the that pilgrim malaise we're discussing and happen to be on board, chances are high that you'd be bored stiff. The place from which you came and your destination lack that excitement you had enjoyed earlier in your life because you realize that real growth has nothing to do with physical movement and places other than the one in which you're situated.

This awareness of the ebb and flow of events you can't participate in but long to do so points out in a poignant way the essence of what we as human beings struggle with on a daily basis. It involves an age-old desire to have what we don't possess which gives rise to jealousy or more accurately, *ressentiment*, the title of this essay. What's especially pernicious about *ressentiment* compared with run-of-the-mill jealousy is that we keep this jealousy pent up and don't release it until much later when it has

more widespread consequences. In the meanwhile we stew over missed opportunities and let them pile up. Then a spark sets them off, and even then we are surprised at our violent response. St. Paul seems to allude to this problem somewhere in his epistles when he does what he doesn't want to do. However, he doesn't let this frustration stew around in his head but finds resolution through faith in Jesus Christ. Sounds fine, and it worked for him. However, the real issue is attempting to maintain a balance between these two extremes intensified, if you will, by the competitive society in which we live.

One way of getting a handle on our personal *ressentiment* is by hearkening back to when we ourselves were young. We can do this by having some kind of association with younger people, say those in high school, as they begin to formulate what they'd like to do for the rest of their lives. We might single out those who are more ambitious...who have a certain drive to make a positive contribution later in life. Then we accompany them through college, for example, and beyond until they have established themselves, usually with families of their own. Throughout this process everything in their lives is directed toward a given end on which they continue to be focused for some forty or fifty years until they too attain the age of those who are observing them. Then they retire and reflect upon their own lives and that of their grandchildren, reliving their lives through them. Admittedly wholesome but in the end a boring process.

Following a person's growth into greater maturity in a vicarious fashion can't help but evoke memories of how we had made our way through life. It can be embarrassing as we see ourselves, for example, in another person in his mid twenties just getting established. The benefit is that when older we're more conscious of our mistakes whereas the younger person is less so. In order to maintain a good relationship with the person we're following we have to refrain from making observations pertinent to his behavior else our friendship will come to a screeching halt. As for ourselves, we can fall into a trap which goes beyond a wistful longing for a time we'll never recover to fostering a desire to take some form of revenge even if it gets no further than pouting. And so it can be a perverse way of trying to obtain commiseration. This is anger towards another person(s) or institution that can't find proper outlet in order to dissipate pent up energy which builds and builds and builds within us. This, it seems, is one of the more accurate definitions of *ressentiment*.

We'd love to vent our jealousy over lost opportunities but can't as we look on helplessly while being eaten up from within. We can mollify it to some degree by sympathizing in the negative sense with people in the same boat as us. Their

association gives a certain sweet satisfaction and relief to our own frustration. It begins casually enough with a passing remark but degenerates quickly as one remark feeds into another. It turns out to be a formidable foe to dissipate because the *ressentiment* shared in common has two or more mouths to feed. Objectively speaking, taking delight in playing the victim is boring because of its repetitive nature, and we wonder why on earth we fall prey to it. We enjoy...indeed savor... replicating the same scenario over and over again. Should we pause from this *ressentiment* it's only to catch our breath, like coming up from the deep to take a gasp of air and dive back down again.

Even to speak of this form of *ressentiment* is profoundly embarrassing since we think that we're the only ones so afflicted. Yet we may have the happy chance to meet a mature person who sheds valuable information as to how we ended up where we did. Suddenly we see where we haven't been free but have been kept in bondage by chains we ourselves have fashioned. The person we've hit upon doesn't necessarily have to bring up the matter *per se*; just talking with him about an unrelated matter can do the trick. Actually a person free from *ressentiment* stands out from the crowd, albeit modestly. Perhaps it's our desperation and willingness to change that makes him come on the scene, almost magically. But to imitate him is harder than we had anticipated. In fact, we may return to our own *ressentiment* with renewed fervor since it's a kind of perverse safe space.

Should memory of our recent conversation with this person who had intervened be allowed to take root, the hardened soil of our *ressentiment* starts to loosen up. The outside world continues as it always had which embarrassingly we hadn't noticed even when it's right in front of our noses. It seems to hold out a welcoming hand, an invitation to participate in it, saying something like welcome back to the land of the living. Words from the Hebrew prophets about the people having ears but don't listen and so forth now apply directly to us. We see this in miniature with children. They may be told clearly and with vivid signs and gestures to refrain from unruly behavior but don't even pay attention. Our situation, again embarrassingly, is the same or worse by reason of being grown up.

Another article on this home page deals with the twelve steps of humility in the **Rule** of St. Benedict. Instead of focusing upon the presence of God, virtually the entire chapter (the longest in the **Rule**) is taken up with human faults and frailty. If you follow through on it, it leads to what appears to be a strange conclusion, namely, that striving to cultivate the presence of God is a generally useless pursuit. For us moderns it's not encouraging, even depressing and morbid, making us want to dismiss

the whole enterprise as fine for an archaic mentality, not for today. However, sticking with it reveals that the divine realm is wholly other than our human one, including nature. In our haste we overlook the fact that our human condition generally is wretched. By paying attention to it in greater detail leads not to self absorption but to throwing off concerns for our welfare and therefore attaining a hitherto un-imagined freedom not envisaged by any humanistic philosophy. The focus upon our condition which Benedict recommends isn't done here and there or at set times. Rather, it's a life style where awareness of our frailties is constant. Our condition is that way regardless as everyone knows, so we might as well get comfortable with it.

It's vital to realize that when going through the **Rule's** twelve steps there's no discussion of *ressentiment*. You'd think it'd loom large by those who have followed each step and that it'd be recorded to warn the text's readers. Such is not the case. And so a modern reader may have second thoughts and be persuaded to follow through on the practices recommended as something worth pursuing, that it's not so out of sync when it comes to things divine.

So the twelve steps in the **Rule of St. Benedict** written way back at the time of the fall of the Roman Empire turn out to be a particularly reliable source to counter the perennial struggle against *ressentiment*. While it was present then in a more seminal way, it seems to be a symptom of the modern world due to a heightened sense of self and a lesser one of community. The **Rule's** genius is to introduce an element of the transcendent which enables us to get out of our personal stew. No other exit seems possible. In addition to the transcendent element, we could throw in a hierarchical one. This is a parallel reality, for literally it means a holy (*hieros*) order (*arche*, also as beginning<sup>3</sup>) and isn't necessarily associated with any kind of ecclesiastical apparatus. Instead of perceiving an order as that which hinders as well as confines, a hier-archy has the primary benefit or bestowing identity to a person within a set rank. This precludes the very modern focus upon personal rights and privileges which is a familiar obsession. You could say it offers a framework to relieve us not so much of constant concern but even better, of being preoccupied with what's so incredibly boring.

Being ensconced within a hierarchy, you are fully aware that someone or some group invariably is above you as well as below you. In other words, always you find yourself sandwiched in between. It has been this case from the beginning of human society

3 Since this aspect of *arche* as beginning is overlooked, it implies that everyone situated within such a *hier-arche* participates in beginning constantly anew. Thus attention is taken off where I might stand vis-à-vis other persons to where I and all others are beginning perpetually.



and most likely will continue so despite the clamor about everyone being equal, etc. If you get used to that, a hierarchy has the supreme benefit of relieving that tension innate to life and enables all members to relax within fixed parameters. Note that a chief characteristic of *ressentiment* is tension, always ready to jump at a moment's notice, and this tendency can apply to wanting to jump from the hierarchical level in which you find yourself. A non-hierarchical scheme can't accept this, for always it's trying to level the playing field. So there's something missionary about it, always on the go. The more efforts are put in this direction, the more things get flubbed up with everyone become losers.

Note too that the twelve steps of humility in Benedict's **Rule** are hierarchical, if you will. It starts off with fear of God traditionally as the beginning of wisdom and ends with a monk's outward appearance conforming to his inward attitude before God. In fact step twelve speaks hierarchically as it's being defined here, "having ascended all these degrees of humility."

So we can apply this hierarchical notion in the sense of a holy-beginning to the progress of life from birth to death. Towards the end, that is, with greater awareness of death on the horizon, we can compare how younger and middle aged people compare overall with our lives. The comparison usually is less than flattering, but at this stage comparisons are, according to the adage, odious. Movement forward is the norm for younger folks tinged by a certain dread of remaining stationary or worse, falling back. When older, these concerns fade away nicely, like dropping so many masks you've used as disguises...necessary to get through life...but disguises none the less.

As we age, perhaps the most common word we hear is "life." It's associated with the above mentioned notion of advancement and accruing wealth but more importantly, recognition. When our energies grow weaker but haven't yet reached decrepitude, the meaning of life changes quite radically. Better put, we're have an opportunity to perceive more clearly what life is about though many continue along with little or no change from their earlier years. Life turns out to be exactly what it had been when we started out even way back when we exited the womb. That means eating, walking defecating, blinking one's eyes and all the rest which belong to bodily activity. Indeed, here is life just as we have it, unadorned by any belief or ideology cast upon it.

Everyone across the board does these things, no exception. Just the thought of focusing one's valuable attention on these "base" activities sounds less than



desirable, but what, then after all is life? Here we have it unadorned. Both a rich and poor person do these basics. However, their minds are chock-full of thoughts and emotions with just the most cursory focus upon bodily functions. Nothing, really, exists beyond these functions which can leave us hanging and asking why the bother. However, happiness turns out to allied closely with them, not where we're accustomed to look for it, namely, the usual goals of personal advancement, etc. In old age we come to the conclusion that we've chased after these goals and succeeded more or less like everyone else. Now like Ecclesiastes we see the "vanity" inherent in all pursuits but don't stew in our juices wishing they would go away. They will go away, though, should we shift attention to our corporeal functions, watching them closely without passing judgment upon any of them.

The power of such beholding (this seems a better way of putting it) neutralizes all thoughts but doesn't get rid of them which is impossible. Another way of putting it is that such impartial observation is on a plane other than thoughts which are a barrier between us and immediate sense perception. And these thoughts which we've become so accustomed to call our life has become the chief obstacle to detract us from living. It's a simple yet difficult insight to grasp by reason of the immediacy involved and everything we've grown up to hold in esteem. Now it's pretty much sidelined and done so in one fell swoop. Along with it goes *ressentiment*. If we don't have thoughts...let's put it that way for now even though such language is too direct...*ressentiment* is sidelined, for thoughts are what it feeds upon. Abstracting a bit further here, thoughts are forms, albeit invisible ones, and govern us as we all know so well. Since they are forms, we can say with greater accuracy that they form us. And that brings up the question of how dependent we are upon forms. Just the thought of something without form...formless...is abhorrent, but therein lays our harbor of safety.

In other essays posted on this homepage the idea of form vs. formless has been discussed several times and in various ways. It reoccurs here once again, only this time taking into account that nagging feeling of *ressentiment* which never seems to leave us alone. If we realize, albeit dimly, that taking refuge in that which lacks form is the way to go, we're moving towards something that lays outside the human domain. By that is meant anything that can't be manipulated. Essentially what we've hit upon is a gift which never can be procured by our own efforts or better, is the source from which all things come and makes them a gift. Initial realization of this is frustrating because we're so accustomed to just go out there and get things done. Besides, everyone does it.

Putting a sense of gratitude into practice sounds attractive, making you want to get out there and do it, but greater effort than we imagine is demanded because it raises us to a level of sustained consistency most of us never have experienced. That's the real obstacle to a sense of gratitude. Such consistency is distinct from discipline as we know it because the whole enterprise is simplicity incarnate. We're not used to this top-to-bottom change in our lives because always we're wanting to fill them with "stuff." And stuff...material or otherwise...is the breeding ground for *ressentiment*.

Another factor contributing to rise of *ressentiment* is the modern emphasis upon treating everything as a business. Although I have no immediate sources, several people in the academic world have mentioned this began with President Reagan, spread to education and has taken root there. Be that as it may, right now we're stuck with this business model by which all things are judged according to efficiency. The quicker and more profitable something gets done, the better. This sets up unrealistic goals, an ideal breeding ground for *ressentiment*, resting upon the notion of profit. Within such an environment it's difficult to be grateful because our attention always is focused upon getting this and that over against the threat of someone else grabbing it before us.

So it's a pretty close certainty that if you're grateful you can kill two birds with one stone: avoid the trap of *ressentiment* and come closer to the transcendent source of all things. People who aren't grateful tend to deny the latter which is an automatic denial of any divine influence. In fact, the two are synonymous. For them being grateful is a sign of weakness and dependence, an open door for *ressentiment*. So this begs the question, how do you become grateful? Is it forced or cultivated? More towards the latter though that implies some work at it. True, of course, but only to a certain extent because gratitude is one of those few attitudes you don't work for but receive. That means being open to a source other than yourself, the bane of *ressentiment*.

Being open means not having preconceived ideas about anything, anything at all, which is the widest anyone can be. It's a frightening prospect, really, and takes some getting used to. One way to begin is to project yourself into a favorable situation and see if you can come away from not wanting to be a part of it. Obviously some imagination is required but worth the effort to see if we can pull it off. For example, early on in this essay we have the example seeing a jet contrail overhead and wishing to be on it. This desire<sup>4</sup> is evoked when we hear the high and distant sound as it

4 In a sense this gets to the heart of Buddhism, the attainment of freedom from desire, and is often misunderstood by us Westerners. Failure to address it properly by Christianity seems to be a major stumbling block and makes that religion less attractive which is quite unfortunate.

passes by and leaving us behind. It's heightened should we on *flightradar24.com* and actually see its destination some thousands of miles distant from our position...Paris, Buenos Aires, Hong Kong and even Kazakhstan.

If a desire to be elsewhere than where we are now is recognized, it's minimized to a certain degree and frees us up more. However, leaving behind our attachments is like leaving behind life itself because nowadays there doesn't seem to be any guidelines out there to do this properly. Everyone is left adrift to follow this whim and then another. And so recourse to *ressentiment* arises, takes root and has an uncanny way of finding other persons with the same sentiment. The fruit of this is a "non-community" if we may put it that way. Unity is found in negativity and in nothing else.

So it's necessary to replace the binding force of this negative unity, one of the chief sources of *ressentiment*. In this instance every undertaking is done with great seriousness and gloom while frowning upon spontaneity. At the precise time of writing this there appeared a solution. It came in the form of a program on a PBS website which recently had aired on television using a so-called "creature cam" in the form of a sea turtle and squid which worked its way into a pod of dolphins. Apart from the usual material we expect from such a program, the commentator mentioned that in his opinion dolphins were born to play. That's all they do day in, day out. Then he added the observation, kind of on the whim, that humans have to evolve into dolphins in order to survive. Intriguing and makes you wonder. So if we could explain *ressentiment* to a dolphin, we can be certain it'd turn its back and swim away immediately.

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