

## A Season of Discontent

No question about it. Right off the bat I found this is to be a difficult subject about which to write. At the same time I was eager to resolve the situation as soon as possible, the reason for having decided upon a fancy title. I wasn't interested in impressing anyone but wished by any means available to better put my fingers on the subject at hand. Not long after I had begun writing I discovered that seeking a ready made resolution from the get-go was unrealistic. Clearly it was a case of putting the cart before the horse. Not only that, the yet-to-be-identified reality which had been on my mind for a long time was too slippery on which to attach a name.

Often when seeking to identify such a vague yet ever present reality we engage in a delaying tactic of hemming and hawing. It's a sly tactic often done unconsciously. The hope is that this will magically resolve the problem while putting as little effort as possible into the task at hand. That unfortunately is a not an entirely inadequate description. At least being up front regarding what's involved is a major step forward. Because the topic is so slippery as just noted, we know that any human effort to come up with a solution won't cut it.

A further note with regard to the title. I decided upon the word "season" because I found it to be the right balance between familiarity and vagueness. That presents an advantage in other circumstances I would otherwise miss and spend useless energy trying to come up with something else. When we think of season, a particular time of the year comes to mind...not an extended period but one among several. Here in New England we have four seasons, each being quite distinct from each other. And so it presented a further advantage for using this term.

Another characteristic of the word "season" is that it applies to food and therefore taste. More specifically, a season is intended to enhance

the food, even disguise it on occasion. When we taste something, we consume it after which it becomes part of us. In reality we can distinguish between a humongous variety of seasons but at the same time find it hard to actually describe many of them. Thus this double meaning of season has the advantage of working in our favor to clarify the matter at hand.

The other word in the title is “discontent.” That’s somewhat vague, deliberately so. Discontent doesn’t mean outright rejection as the result of an expression of anger or disappointment. Furthermore, it doesn’t stand terribly distant from the root at hand, that is content, to which the not quite so negative dis- is prefixed. At the same time “discontent” is a fairly pervasive sentiment by reason of being low grade. As far as I’m concerned it and “season” come together nicely for the purpose at hand.

So what is going on? I gave considerable time and effort in an attempt to make sense of all this. Then a descriptive word came to mind relative to the yet to be discussed issue, and that word happened to be malaise. Quickly I became fond of it. Malaise is a general feeling of discomfort or lack of well-being, sometimes described as a vague sense that something isn't right, that a lack of order is present. Thus malaise could represent one or more non-specific symptoms. I thought perhaps that malaise could take the place of other words I’ve played around with such as depression. Not quite. Anxiety? Again, not quite. A certain un-fulfilment? Closer but no cigar.

And so I decided to stick with the noun malaise and discovered that many definitions of it center around feeling. That word rang a bell with me recently after having read an article about the so-called *sensus fidei* rendered literally as “sense of the faith.” It has a positive definition where feeling is important when it comes to relating to faith in God compared with an intellectual assent important, as that may be. Then I considered the Greek term to which the Vatican document re-

ferred, *aisthesis*. This can be defined as perception as well as a display of feeling. While it didn't satisfy as I was hoping would be the case, it came closer to describe what put this article in motion.

The best part—and this isn't related directly to its content—is that the overall description of *aisthesis* represents a means to loosen that awkwardness and hesitancy when it comes to writing about the subject at hand. Before that I was hoping for some kind of Lone Ranger solution. By that I mean one that would make a dramatic appearance coming over the hill ready to solve all my problems in one swoop. As for the issue at hand, I don't know if it falls under the category of writer's block, but *aisthesis* (again, perception) served to loosen any mental constriction and thus allowed thoughts about this hard to describe reality better emerge on its own.

Now that insight into *aisthesis* or perception had enabled me to take the first step, the next one was easier. I prefer the Greek term since it's richer and more flexible. When we perceive anything we move around...circle...the object at hand as we attempt to make contact. To exercise perception like this means momentarily feeling at just the right distance, not necessarily reaching out and physically touching an object. That would be too direct and having the potential of missing something important. Besides, it's quite amazing how much information we can garner with this circling motion.

Although we may touch the object of our perception, never do we possess it. That's an all-important lesson. It means we have to learn how to cope with a certain isolation or loneliness though such terms may come across a bit too strong. Slightly disconcerting might be a better way to describe this which works on a lower frequency, if you will. It comes closer to what I wish to capture by the title of this article. That is to say, at certain times we experience a definite sense of not being quite fulfilled. This holds true no matter how exciting or encompassing our life happens to be. Instead, invariably we're bound to the alter-

nation of a joyous rise when we come across something good followed by the pain of letting it go.

It's amazing how many people live with this and don't do anything about it. Invariably the question why comes to mind, this being one of life's biggest mysteries. They don't even recognize that a pair of opposites is involved and that to be loosened from such bonds is true freedom. I've heard countless reports, coming from either side of the pair. However, all stop at being descriptive and are unable to present a concrete solution.

Let's start with an example. Recently the brother and sister of a friend visited from Ireland, the two of them as normal as could be. Without them knowing it, soon they became instrumental in playing a role with regard to the malaise at hand, albeit indirectly. As I look back, their visit turned out to be a genuine gift. If I tried to explain it to them, they wouldn't have the slightest clue as to what I was trying to communicate. I've never been to Ireland but had visited Scotland twice to see distant relatives and felt right at home. If asked to pick out the fundamental reason why I was attracted to that country it was the local pub culture which went a long way to temper the difficulties we experience in life. Unfortunately America lacks that release.

As for the brother and sister, they were in the country for a brief three day visit. While it was wonderful interacting with them, I was left totally exhausted despite my contact being relatively limited. Yes, I was tired physically speaking but drawn out more than usual because I was dealing with people I had just met and had no lasting connection. Within the first hour I was ready to go and hide. That was the superficial side of things. On the other hand, they represented something I wished to have if I were magically in their shoes. Upon further thought after they had left, I wouldn't have opted for it.

I was profoundly grateful that these two wonderful people came into

my world at the right time. Once the initial experience got out of the way, I found that they represented a reality needing to be addressed. That, of course, was a golden opportunity to come face to face with a season of discontent. It had nothing to do with the intent of writing this article which I had begun shortly before their arrival. The best part was that after the initial melancholy of seeing them off as they returned to such a wondrous place as Ireland, any and all longing vanished literally overnight. That, of course, was a good sign. It showed that the possibility of being able to live with the season of discontent was within reach.

The more precise point where these two good folks left an impression turned out to be a kind of sore spot. Here is where the difficulty of articulating something subtle and just out of reach comes into play. This of course had nothing to do with them as persons or the like. Anyway, I know for certain it was set in motion the day of their departure. Now to flesh it out.

While I'm generally content with how things are going in my life, coming across people from a different culture, one known for its friendliness as Ireland, made me want to jump on the plane with them. Fortunately this sentiment didn't so much disappear but abated somewhat the next day as noted above. Nevertheless, it pointed to something I realized was very important and didn't want it to pass by. I was reminded of a childhood incident when my two aunts boarded a Constellation propeller plane for a three week trip to Europe. The memory of being left behind at the airport watching them leave remained with me for a long time. It turned out to be a weird kind of template according to which I fit all subsequent experiences I longed for but could not achieve.

I wish to supplement this experience with another one which took place at the same time as the visitors from Ireland. Nearby lives a fine, mature couple in their mid seventies. Not long ago they had

bought a summer house on the south coast of Massachusetts, a rather exclusive neighborhood. Over time it has transitioned from purely summer cottages to more or less year round residences. The wife goes down there more often than her husband, enjoying the solitude as well as puttering around. Recently she had spent ten days there and sent back glowing reports through emails to her friends, photos included. I didn't bother reading nor looking at the photos because I got the impression she was saying how lucky she was compared with the rest of us schmucks.

I happened to meet this woman several days after she had returned home, their "cottage" being a wonderful bungalow-like house in the woods. Right off the bat she started complaining about this and then about that. I let her drone on without saying a word, knowing that if I did, she'd fly off the handle. Besides, why waste precious time and energy. Nevertheless I couldn't help but think how could someone with two exquisite homes act like this? Despite this and other needs basically taken care of plus reasonable health, why the complaints? Damn good question which made me think. Upon further reflection, it turned out that I with far lesser possessions wasn't much different from her.

So here I was caught between visitors from Ireland who to me lived in a magical environment and a friend who basically complains all the time. On one hand I was wondering why God hasn't hit some sense into her. It turned out that I was wondering that about myself plus being thoroughly ashamed for projecting something I saw in myself onto another person. Fortunately throughout I kept silence which I found to be the best approach. On one hand it's as easy as pie yet on the other, a trap most of us fall into. As for the Irish visitors, I was fully aware that to live as they did was beyond my means even if I could pull up stakes and move to Ireland.

Then I decided to consider my situation more closely. In so many

ways I was better off living in a wonderful monastery with an equally wonderful community. Since I had met the Irish visitors and that woman pretty much at the same time, I was curious as to why they triggered not so much jealousy but a longing to be in their respective environments. I felt this despite my world being superior in so many ways. Something just beyond my ken was operative, and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I figured if I could identify it better, I'd be in a position not so much to avoid future seasons of discontent but not allow them to get under my skin.

Here's a potential lead which led not to making this whole conundrum go away but to be more manageable. The evening of the day when those visitors from Ireland left, I collected their brother from the bus stop, for he lived not far from me. At the last minute he decided to accompany them to the airport. I was nearby and figured he was going to ask for a helping hand, and so he arrived at the bus terminal on time, that being around 5.30 pm. He wanted to treat me to supper so we decided to try out a great new Chinese restaurant, all buffet style.

The sun was at a fairly bright angle for mid spring which had cast a pleasant atmosphere that enveloped the surrounding area. That's how most people would assess the situation. However, I found it vaguely yet definitely disturbing...not in a troubling manner but one which cast a subtle discontent. As we drove home this experience clearly tied in with the recent visit of the two from Ireland plus the woman who loved to incessantly complain. To top it off it was a Sunday evening when most people were not out and about. I could pick up on an air of melancholy very clearly. I had experienced a certain unease with situations like this before, almost always in spring and summer, hardly ever in autumn or winter. And so all the way home I wanted this objectively lovely atmosphere to hurry up and go away which it finally did at sunset.

On subsequent days after these two incidents I was more observant of sunsets this time of year which will last through mid August. According to the first word of this essay's title that is what I mean by a season. By then you can feel tinges of autumn in the air. That consists of cooler evening and mornings but more especially a yellower light during these two times. So the time from approximately mid April to mid August was when I was more subject to feelings of discontent. Again, these feelings were not major, life-changing events but pointers to something that I wished to clarify and understand better.

I venture to say the feelings of discontent (I apology is this sounds like the title to a movie or novel) represent not being satisfied with a given situation in which we find ourselves. Right away I apology for the fuzzy language, but again, this is a difficult subject to latch on to. Because it's essentially low grade and not dramatic, it lurks in the background and needs some coaxing to identify it better. So I decided to try and locate the source by looking at what triggers this sentiment. Without much ado I located the discontent as a desire to be somewhere...anywhere but here.

That's where the visitors from Ireland come in and that woman with her summer cottage. While the former were being whisked off across the Atlantic and my friend was sending texts about her wonderful beach house, here I was returning home in a light that somehow represented this desire to be elsewhere. At least I realized better that one way to deal with it to refrain from coming up with all sorts of explanations why I should feel as such. It may sound like a small step but had a lot to do with diminishing the melancholy.

Permit me to add another feature to all this. To date I've been focused upon a specific time or more properly, spring evenings which the light has a certain quality. Yes, time seems to be the culprit. In addition to the just mentioned evenings I can add a parallel experience which takes place on a daily basis and has nothing to do with springtime.

Each evening precisely at seven o'clock I feel a vague sort of melancholy. This happens year round. The season has nothing to do with it. Fortunately it lasts for half an hour and is over and done with by quarter to eight. Perhaps it has something to do with the end of the day, but again I'm not exactly sure. The remedy? Most likely engaging in light activity, for example, a video or better, an audio-book. Though I've experienced this for some time, only just now in light of the events at hand I've come to see how the two are tied in with each other.

The just described thirty minute period each evening obviously consists of time rather than space. On the positive side, even though experience of it may be somewhat disconcerting, I can count on the fact that for certain it too will pass. The best part is that this transitory nature makes it fall outside the transcendent realm meaning it's inherently limited. Having identified the culprit as temporal by nature allows focus to shift upon the spacial one as well. It's more enduring than the temporal one for the simple obvious reason that we can locate it with relative ease. Time is more fluid and hard to latch on to.

All this makes me wonder how folks handle a desire to be somewhere other than where they are at the present, that is, when confronted with a less than comfortable situation. I'd say it's a universal perception but affects different people at varying levels of intensity. With regard to this a friend of mine quipped that animals have it over us humans. They live totally in the present moment neither fearing nor worrying about the future. This has been known a long time and is often referred to.

In a article just before this one I wrote about several elderly monks and how they've come to cope with varying degrees of pain and suffering. Each one admitted in his own way that what happens either to yourself or outside yourself is secondary. This can apply to something physical or an event. Recently one of them told me how at the last

minute he had to cancel a long anticipated trip to visit both his brother and sister. While he had been looking forward to it for some time, when the cancellation came through he simply shrugged it off. Not only that he was at his place of work the very next day doing his thing as though nothing had happened. I didn't have to ask him how he felt about this. His positive attitude was self-evident in his very demeanor.

At first I thought he was exaggerating with the intent to encourage him so I decided to press him further. Yes, he was disappointed but only in a vague sort of way. I believe such an attitude means he has come not to rest on anything external to himself. Not only that, he brought it a step further by being indifferent to thoughts and emotions about his canceled trip that for some time could have ebbed and flowed within him. Indeed, this is an experience all too familiar with us all.

I'm not to be quoted here but it seems to me this is a concrete instance of the peace of Christ. I could see it inscribed on my elderly friend's face clear as could be. I got the impression anyone could through the kitchen sink at him. He'd duck to get out of the way and then go about his business. What fascinated me was that his peace wasn't static nor locked in some kind of fixed gaze at a transcendent absolute which is usually how we lesser mortal view peace. In order to verify it you have to set aside reading about peace. Instead, go out and see it in action where another person is involved. Above all don't imitate him. Ask questions but instead of imitating, observe. Hopefully soon this peace will pounce upon you.

A secondary remark with regard to this peace. The monastery to which these elderly monks belonged had installed a modest but nicely done sign near the entrance. It reads "The peace of Christ be to all who enter here." I recall having seen it installed about two years ago. Each time I come for a visit I look forward to seeing that sign, pause

along the road a few seconds and allow its message to seep in. Then I thought of those who resided in the monastery. They have entered so hopefully the peace of Christ had settled upon them in a permanent fashion. Also when I leave the property I gaze at the same sign through the rear view mirror wishing the peace it proclaims remain with me and others who also are leaving. In other words we're dealing with a two-way street.

Though the peace I'm attempting to describe is difficult to articulate, I find it best after a while to abandon all such attempts and observe it in what I call insignificant people. To date I haven't seen it in those endowed with authority or responsibility which is more a lack of vision on my part. I bounced this off several trusted friends and to my surprise, all concurred. When you consider it, those weighed down with responsibility are functioning as best they can. It's a source of humility on my part and that of my friends for not having recognized their gifts. Still, it's easier to describe this peace in those whom we tend to overlook.

For the most part those who have been shunted aside for one reason or another had gone through the mill of either having striven to be like their peers and having failed or simply lack the where-with-all to appreciate their unique situation. I discovered that something along the line had frustrated them big time. They weren't able to crawl out of the hole into which they had fallen. That means they had to spend considerable time out in the wilderness. This wilderness isn't in the desert, forest or the like but for most of us is smack in the midst of society.

While in this wilderness their peers tended not so much to treat them with contempt. Far from it. They were simply ignored or bypassed but with a pleasant smile on their faces intended more for themselves than for those whom they had encountered. This would be okay from time to time but over an extended period of time such indifference

can take its toll. And so this experience, while objectively not troublesome, over the long haul can either make or break you.

One may ask rightly so, where do we go from here? Actually no where. Those experiences of having been left behind or shunted off to the side is a gift...a huge gift waiting to be exploited. I've seen it not just appreciated but capitalized in some people while in most instance it's allowed to pass by. One of those monks I had noted told me often there's no one around to teach you this important fact of life. You either fail or succeed, nothing in between. You don't find how to deal with it in a novice's handbook or even among those with whom you live.

Recently I asked a friend why. The answer I got was too long and convoluted to follow through upon in the context at hand. In essence the answer I got was a lack or better, an abandonment of our classical heritage. I was all too familiar with this, and despite agreeing with him, I figure letting this go for another time.

Then again I thought of a broader space, if you will, in which to situate this heritage. I thought of the ancient Greek educative process called *paideia*. It's a word difficult to adequately describe. *Paideia*'s root is *pais* which is rendered as child meaning that the education at hand begins early on and in essence never comes to an end. Actually as you reach the latter part of life *paideia* takes on new meaning, having taken up all that was presented to you and put into a new form. That form is the life you've come to live more or less without reflection but spontaneously. So if you find yourself shelved unceremoniously, having been grounded in *paideia* offers opportunities you would not have otherwise. You'd be too caught up with the maintenance of this or that element of society. While indeed necessary, the attention demanded there lays outside the purview of *paideia*.

Then you might ask what good is this *paideia* if I can't put it at the ser-

vice of society? Obviously a valid question. However, it presupposes an attitude which infects us all. That consists in an attitude that we must be doing something useful. If not, we're useless. This brings to mind another word from antiquity, the Latin noun *negotium*. It refers to business, an occupation or employment. Nothing wrong here. However, consider the word closely. The root is *otium*, another difficult to translate noun which basically means leisure, time free from activity, that activity being the negative *neg-* prefaced which is *negotium*.

*Otium* indeed is not idleness, far from it. It infers a focused awareness upon the elements of *paideia*, of where you stand in relation to how you've absorbed what had been presented to you and where that will go. Indeed, *paideia* essentially has no end. Unfortunately most people are clueless when it comes to these two words at the root of our Western heritage. That why if you opt for what they represent you're pretty much automatically left on a siding. No one will disturb you there, just pass you by. It's an odd sort of witness, one not discussed simply because most people lack the tools to do so.

In conclusion, I'd say that the combination of *paideia* and the *otium* required for its implementation form a type of witness. At the risk of dribbling on further, allow me to introduce one more word, the last one. That's the Greek *marturion* or witness. One who's a witness has seen something generally not available for others. You have two options. Either join him by reason of the words he has spoken or has testified with regard to his vision or ignore him. Usually *marturion* in the Christian sense involves some sort of violence. That's not necessarily the case here. It's more a question of being ignored, a comfortable way to get on with your life. In the end or when older, this will manifest itself in a distinct form of diminishment when it comes to both *paideia* and *otium*.

Permit me to add a supplement which I decided upon shortly after fin-

ishing this article but found no specific place to include it. Henry David Thoreau was fascinated by the West. That is to say, it was a direction he revered as representing transcendent reality. In fact, within this homepage I have an article where I picked out references to the West in Thoreau's *Journal*. He has such respect for that direction that never he set out on his walks towards the West. He'd head off along the other three cardinal directions and make his way westward in an indirect fashion.

Closely tied in with the West was Thoreau's added reference for sunset, especially during the autumn and winter months. In my opinion he wrote best when describing the sun sinking toward the western horizon and lighting up the land east of that direction. I wish I had tied this in with the article above, but that's how the text ended up.

I also found Thoreau's fascination with the West intriguing in that he lived during a time when people were heading to the American West, the gold rush, for example, as well as that part of the country opening up for settlement. Thoreau, of course, was fully aware of it. He must have heard people in Concord all abuzz about heading West. It's to Thoreau's lasting credit that he didn't succumb to going there but preferred hanging around his beloved Walden Pond and nearby places which certainly were tame by the standards of the West. Obviously we were the beneficiaries of Thoreau staying at home.

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