

## On Being Fractured

(On the distinction between peace and equilibrium)

As with several article located under this banner, it's situated here simply because there's more room.

This little essay came to birth about ten years ago when a good friend from Iceland had mentioned what it's like to live a fractured life. He was situating it within the context of having made a retreat of some three months in a Catholic contemplative community where he had plenty of time to be alone though accompanied by like-minded men. What made this all the more remarkable is that he has a high-powered job and family. How he juggles this is beyond me, but quite a few people do it. We thrashed about the reality lying behind this word on several occasions, and I didn't wish the subject to pass by without more detailed examination, hence this little essay. I begin with some observations pertaining to commonplace experiences which highlight what I mean by the adjective 'fractured.' From there I consider some ways of handling this disconcerting experience, namely, the value of that which is personal over that which is impersonal. Unexpectedly I ended up favoring the latter.

Allow me to situate the term "fractured" in the larger of the work place where people are governed by a rigid frame of time. They have to punch in and punch out. If you're late by X amount of minutes, you receive X less amount of pay. The opposite applies with overtime. Thus one's life revolves around a fixed schedule determined not by you but by an institution. The time you spend at work determines how much money you bring home, simple as that. Outside the work schedule you're free to organize your own life, but largely it's taken up by shopping, going to the bank and other necessities. Sometimes you come across unforeseen events requiring time spent in places you'd rather not be such as the doctor's office. And so the rest of the day is pretty well shot, and you must conserve your energy for work on the morrow.

Then comes the weekend, time to relax, but if you're married with kids, those two days can be more hectic than your work. On top of all this, quite a few people hold down a second, even a third job. One reason for the extra work comes from maintaining a life style beyond one's means or to pay off debts. In truth, a lot of overtime and extra work can be avoided if you manage your finances prudently, but that's a rarity in a highly materialistic society. Round and round it goes, a treadmill on which people set themselves right after they've completed their education.

Yet throughout most of one's career there persists a nagging sense of wanting to do something else, to be of greater service for society. These remain dreams almost never realized. At last comes retirement which you're supposed to enjoy, but often it's marred by declining health and awaiting the finality of death. One's own death may not be so bad; in most cases a surviving spouse has greater difficulty at the end coping with life now that he or she is alone. Not a cheery way to finish one's term, but such is the lot common for most of us. As everyone knows, old age is ignored, even suppressed, which makes it all the more painful when we reach it.

The remarks of a friend grabbed my attention when one day at work one day he recounted an instance of being fractured. One lady's cat had kittens. When I asked what she intends to do with them I got the reply that she hasn't made up her mind. The reason? She welcomes the sound of something alive when she opens the door in the evening; before the kittens, dead silence. The other example is when I asked a fellow in his late 50s, a bachelor, what he intends to do over the weekend. He didn't respond verbally but shrugged his shoulders. The translation? He hadn't a clue or simply will hang around doing nothing (which he did as I found out later).

While these two good people aren't what you'd call miserable, they are, in Thoreau's words, living quiet lives of desperation. At the same each one has cut out ways of coping with life. Beneath all this I've picked up a desire that people long for conversations about deeper issues and jump at the opportunity. When it comes their way, they are lifted from their daily colorless routines, at least temporarily. They don't want anything special, just the opportunity to talk at a deeper level.

I might add that the two are not married and by reason of this are considered an anomaly in society. At the same time society (American and otherwise) is full of people living alone; some say it might be 45%, even as high as 55%. Included in this group are those who are divorced or widowed plus those who are single for one reason or another. Despite this sizeable chunk of the overall population, people living alone largely remain out of sight. Because society places emphasis upon relationships, the overall atmosphere so created urges people to either live with someone or to get married. In other words, do anything to avoid being alone. Closer examination of many such relationships...marriage and people living together...paints a less rosier picture. Some are more miserable than folks living alone yet give the appearance of being better off. Although the relationships may be foundering, it sure beats living alone. Despite this turmoil, there remains a certain attachment to strife which is preferable than lack of it. Strife keeps your mind occupied which is better than being left along which, in the final analysis, is our ultimate end.

Within the institution of marriage (the same applies to people living together, very common in Iceland) people are living up to expectations, a fact which becomes more evident after the initial honeymoon period. People can set up defense mechanisms to counter these expectations not only within intimate surroundings but the work place. Generally they operate in the background where we anticipate and maneuver as how to respond to what others may expect of us. This complicates matters, for we can never read someone else's mind, only project into it. And so anticipation of another person's reaction is always present even if we aren't aware of it. Constantly we are measuring ourselves according to standards set by other persons. It goes on even in private, for we think, plan and connive of how and when to respond virtually all the time. It is as though someone were silently looking over our shoulder with whom we're having a dialogue. People are reluctant to admit to such things but are relieved when they find out others are in the same boat.

What lies behind this inclination of how we stack up vis-a-vis other people? We are protective of our image, a protectiveness which disguises an inferiority complex lying below the surface. It's quite amazing how widespread this is, usually expressed through its opposite, a facade of bravado. Although shame is opposite to bravado, both are closely linked in order to counter a negative self-image usually stemming from early in life. At the same time this inner invisible struggle has as its core a desire to pursue that which is good.

Our efforts may be misdirected, but at its core our desire is sound. I believe it was Aristotle who said the desire for the good is constant and requires redirection. However, after the horrors of the twentieth century, most people consider this point of view as naive or obsolete. Nevertheless, it has value and worth examining. It suggests that we know something indirectly or putting it in another way, we know it by the absence of a good, and that absence seems quite pervasive nowadays. Because we can't see this good directly we must view it at an angle by relying upon our awareness of absence to catch, so to speak, its presence. I get the impression that people are fully aware of their misery, try to cope with it as best they can, yet they can't find a way to escape. In short, they are rudderless. It is easier staying with a proven way of living with low-grade depression which over the long haul takes a toll. That's what I picked up in conversations with people here in Iceland. Despair is kept at bay yet awareness of its presence persists. And so a lot of effort is expended to keep the wolves at bay.

While pondering all this I decided to revisit a book by Hans Vaihinger entitled **As If** which got me to write an article prior to the one at hand now posted on this website. There I honed in certain aspects of how Vaihinger applied the two little words “as if.” The two have the potential of opening up new worlds of interpretation based upon common experiences and creating something quite marvelous. For example, when someone says about Iceland “I feel as if I were on the moon,” it implies several things. Either the speaker has been to the moon or more likely has seen photos of it. Iceland’s international airport is located at the tip of the Reykjanes peninsula, one of the most barren and nondescript parts of the country. A visitor therefore has information stored in his or her memory about the moon and has immediate access to it to make the comparison. At the same time this visitor knows Iceland is not the moon. If he does, something is wrong.

And so upon seeing the Reykjanes area, the first time visitor feels *as if* he or she were on the moon while knowing full well it is not true in actuality. “As if” is stronger than the comparative “like” insofar as it situates the person uttering these words within the situation itself. In other words, Iceland = the moon. If you wanted to spell it out further, when in Reykjanes one could pretend to be on the moon. Once this spontaneous union of two different places has occurred and you move on to everyday life, the memory continues to affect you long afterwards.

I bring up Hans Vaihinger’s **As If** because it offers one way of healing that quiet despair afflicting so many people by appealing to our imaginative capacity. This is important because the dullness of spirit acquired over an extended period of time precludes many people from articulating their situation. They may recognize the symptoms of their illness with some accuracy but are at a loss at coming up with a remedy to resolve their predicament. This phenomenon is characterized by an inability to bring over the unknown into the known. The relative flatness or greyness of their environment makes them so accustomed to their situation that no longer have they the capacity of recognizing that alternatives do exist. Furthermore, this way of living deadens the imagination which prevents recourse to little devices as represented by the words ‘as if.’ In this way their malaise is virtually impossible to detect, let alone heal. Here we have a uniquely modern predicament without historical parallels. I bring up this matter because despite being a malaise, it is able to effect a kind of equilibrium or stability. Clearly this is a manageable condition, one preferable to uncertainty. Working quietly in the background, the equilibrium as outlined by Hans Vaihinger and transferred here is distinct from peace.

The biggest problem, of course, is that equilibrium and peace are confused easily which we hear in the context of talk about inner peace, unfortunately taken for equilibrium. One reason for this may be that the general atmosphere in today's society does not foster peace, has lost contact with ways of achieving it and offers inadequate substitutes. Peace does have the appearance of equilibrium but differs significantly from it by reason of its transcendent roots and not being reliant upon external situations. And so we end up in a situation where everyone desires peace yet few have the means to actualize it.

Although Vaihinger does not speak about peace, he offers us an indirect look at it through his observations on equilibrium. He situates equilibrium in terms of dogma which means teaching as pertaining to belief which implies adherence by all who subscribe to it. We're familiar with dogma and usually take it in a negative, authoritative sense. Automatically dogma makes us think of its opposite, heresy, a pick-and-choose of elements not consistent with a given belief. Thus dogma effects two types of unity: exterior, where people assemble under a single banner (religion) and interior, a sense of purpose that has become internalized.

Even though modern society is secular and subscribes neither to religious dogma nor to heresy, it does require allegiance to specific ideals and how they are implemented. At the same time secularism is confronted with religious extremism, a phenomenon that has taken us by surprise in recent years. What makes extremism so attractive is that it offers a unifying world view where there's no room for questions as to its core beliefs. Apart from the often shocking news it makes, I think that we can miss this appeal and do so at our peril. After all, our world is fractured, not unified, so we lack the resources to counter its threats.

Both secularism and religious fundamentalism share a common thread, namely, they stand in contrast with contemplation which is brushed aside as useless and a waste of time. Despite this, many people retain a persistent interest in contemplation which they view as distinct from a specific religious organization (and that implies dogma). At the same time the two have certain parallels. Consider those instances when a person has been captivated by a regime or religious belief system which offers satisfaction before which demands, even if severe, are considered minor inconveniences. The adherent doesn't perceive them as demands but willingly drops everything and everyone because it promises meaning on all levels of existence. Even better, the adherent's past—by that I mean memories—melts away to be replaced by one object of attention, and this is akin to worship.

Such a unifying experience, both outer (sharing with like-minded persons) and inner (one's faculties), seems to mimic contemplation in that both effect unity. However, contemplation does not gain strength from dogma, strictly speaking. Contemplation may use dogma as a point of reference but ultimately transcends it.

As for the equilibrium of which Vaihinger speaks, here is a quote from **As If**: "The mind has a tendency to bring all ideational contents into equilibrium and to establish an unbroken connection between them. The psyche tends to make every psychological content more stable and to extend this stability. The condition of unstable equilibrium is as uncomfortable psychologically as it is physically." When I read this, the word "tendency" got my attention because it is the governing principle of equilibrium...indeed, of everything we set out to accomplish.

Tendency is another way of defining desire, the driving force in our search for the good, even on those occasions when it gets us into trouble. On the other hand, peace strangely appears to lack desire or better, has both managed and passed beyond it. At the same time, both peace and equilibrium bear superficial similarities which the untrained eye easily can confuse. Such is the condition today. People desire the good, realize that their desire can become perverted, yet lack the where-with-all to discern the difference. And so they may end up in a state of equilibrium but lacking peaceful minds and hearts.

I latched onto Vaihinger's description of equilibrium more or less at the same time I happened to be considering the lifestyles of several friends which had a role in making me write this short article. They struck me both by being typical of so many today as well chiefly through the truce with life they managed to establish. I say truce, not peace, because I picked up a threat of despair lurking close by. Such good people seem to have a whole slew of satisfactions which taken individually don't amount to much yet give their lives a certain balance or equilibrium. At the same, they prefer not to shy away from their uneasy truce for fear of the unknown. Surely they are the least susceptible of all people when it comes to subscribing to religious beliefs or more radically, slavish adherence to a political party or ideology.

While they move along contentedly, people who have been disenfranchised or who lack life's basics are being lifted from their humdrum lives into a reality larger than themselves. They share the same emptiness within yet have found the means to achieve equilibrium. Thus the world seems to be divided into two general categories: the haves who have not and the have-nots who have through their pursuit for equilibrium. Both categories may claim to be at peace but really haven't a clue as to what it's all about.

Several months after I had reflected upon the way my friends managed to carve out their lives as best they could, I returned for a closer look. I wanted to see if they represented something more fundamental about the way modern society is set up. The answer was obvious...so obvious that I tended to overlook it. The oversight consists in the supreme emphasis society puts upon interpersonal relationships. At the same time, many people seem unfit to enter into these relationships. Or to put this in another way, they move from one relationship to another without much success. If you ask an individual why he or she is caught up in such a waste of time which they freely admit, the answer is simple and straight-forward. It is better to suffer together than to suffer alone. Therefore loneliness is to be avoided at all costs, even if a relationship is painful.

In light of this, I pondered whether or not loneliness might have a positive value. I don't mean simply being alone in the physical sense but something deeper, that which is impersonal. At first glance this word rings alarm bells and is repulsive to most folks. Yet if we look at history, for centuries societies throughout the world lacked the idea of personhood as we know it today. For example, an individual person was subsumed under the larger category of tribe. This accentuation upon the impersonal has a technical sense distinct from common interpretation. That is to say, experience shows that when one is engaged in deep prayer or meditation, all sense of the personal falls away.

There are more common examples such as when we are absorbed in a project requiring full attention. These instances are quite different from being lost in a vague blob or mist...in other words, a typical caricature associated with people who meditate. Loss of one's self simply means loss of concerns and worries that weigh upon us. Here we are able to shed memories which constitute our very selves whether positive or negative. Everyone is familiar with these experiences when the sense of the 'I' has been suspended. We come out of them refreshed despite being physically exhausted, instinctively knowing that when we had been so absorbed, we were most at home and happy. How do we know that such an experience is genuine? The primary one is 'by their fruits you shall know them.' Should people note a positive change in our attitude and behavior, chances are pretty good that we're on the right track.

I set down these observations with only a few people in mind, but they are a microcosm of a larger malaise I'm attempting to outline. It's easier to see how established institutions affect people, such as mainline Christian churches. While

society now is thoroughly secular, traditionally churches wielded moral authority which eroded over the years. Now they far less important and struggle to make new the Christian message. It seems to be a case of the church being neither warm nor cold but lukewarm. Thus Christianity ends up more a cultural phenomenon which acknowledges the principles of religion, celebrates them through song and other means yet goes no further. In other words, churches lack a tradition of prayer and mysticism.

While the early Catholic period has left many fine documents of such a tradition, it is locked away in books instead of a living force from which to draw inspiration. As for Protestantism, it started out with a desire to reform Christianity, yet after several centuries, its form has ended producing a vague meeting-hall type of Christianity. This atmosphere is ideal for keeping religion conveniently at arm's length from daily life while maintaining an official cloak. As a result, people (especially the young) have rejected the church. The amalgam of religion and the state has created an ideal space for middle-class living. Of course, it fails to address people living quiet lives of despair or low-grade depression. And so, modern society retains some trappings of religion without the meaning of religion. On the surface everything is fine but that's about it, an environment which produces neither equilibrium nor peace.

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