

The Traffic Intersection

This article deals with one of those experiences we encounter every so often but spend little or no time reflecting upon. We run across them on a daily basis and fail to notice if they're pointers to something deeper. Then on second thought, it turns out we are the problem. We've become so inured to our surroundings that we miss out on a lot that's offered to us. The reasons for this, of course are too many to be discussed here. All experiences are fascinating in their own right, but the constraint of time in our busy schedules allows just a glimpse here and another there. And so we come away perpetually unsatisfied as well as tantalized. Perhaps we have to comprise...use our imagination...in order to perceive things more by their absence instead of their presence. Then we can work backward and reconstruct what we had been lacking. As for the type of event envisioned here, it's so common, actually banal, and happens so quickly that we're barely aware of it having occurred. We're left with a ghost for an image and can't recall it properly. Upon closer inspection, a given day is filled with a whole slew of these mini-events, many of which repeat themselves and interact with how we comport ourselves, work, the lifestyle we follow and so forth. In addition to their familiarity, their repetitive nature precludes closer examination which is perfectly understandable.

One example that falls under this category and gave impetus to the article at hand stems from a recent experience. However, it's a bit more unusual while at the same time very common. So let's call it unusual reflections on a common experience which might serve to bring home a deeper reality. Let's say we have the opportunity to walk into a busy intersection that had been closed due to construction. The traffic was re-routed in other ways because the construction affected the two roads that came together forming a cross. Similarly, traffic lights on all four sides were out of order. As for the intersection itself, no work was being done on it at the moment; workers were elsewhere nearby leaving the place all to myself. That meant an eerie silence had descended upon a place notable for its lack of silence, a most unusual atmosphere indeed.

By reason of necessity, most people traverse this formidable intersection on the crosswalks. Typically they're on the boarder, a short but safe enough distance away from where the traffic merges from four directions. Should anyone decide to take a shot cut directly across no mans land, immediately he'd be in danger of being hit by car or truck. That's how lethal an intersection is by its very nature...not just to people in it but as we all know, to the traffic flowing through. So when the intersection was shut down, one of busiest around, I decided to walk directly toward the center, taking my time. Even though it was perfectly safe, nevertheless being out there unprotected gave me an uneasy feeling. I might as well have been on an alien planet.

As I approached the center, the silence all around was profound in stark contrast to the usual hustle and bustle. So here I was, dead center where vehicles crossed this way and that. Very strange to be in a familiar yet alien no-man's land. It had no identity of its own, if you will, but such was its appeal. Scattered about the center were several manholes pretty much smoothed down by the thousands of wheels going over them on a daily basis. They led to a wholly other world below where the city's water, sewer, gas and electric lines made their way. Safely ensconced below, they were impervious to the incessant activity going on above. While out in that temporarily suspended dangerous place you could hear muffled sounds from these living lifelines of the city, each one doing its thing and going its own way. Obviously the traffic drowned it out completely, but now was a time to listen in on their subterranean conversations. All in all very mysterious as they converged in a world all their own right beneath my feet. Dealing with that world, however, is a story for another time.

So here I was in a place normally fraught with the worst possible danger but designed for efficiency insofar as to move vehicular traffic as smoothly as possible from point A to point B. We can include points C and D as well since it's a four-way configuration. First impression? A very different atmosphere, almost other worldly, compared to driving through the same spot in which I was standing. Again I bring up the overwhelming silence due to the absence of traffic. It like being in a movie scene when any moment now I expected to see a horde of zombies rushing towards me from one or more of the streets leading to the intersection. A bit fanciful, of course, but that was secondary to the almost unearthly feeling I got while standing smack in the center of the intersection. After reassuring myself that I wasn't about to be mowed down by a big scary truck, I looked down at the pavement, so unattractive its utilitarian flatness and smoothed out by the constant flow of traffic. Not even a bit of trash was there; even that couldn't survive without being crushed or blown aside.

I lingered as much as possible in a place where at other times no one would dare be. It was unlike any other place, mysterious in its own right, and actually a privilege. If I had been in such a spot while traffic was whizzing through, at most I'd last a few seconds. Being at the center of this intersection resembles the center of a circle around which everything revolves or flows. All traffic goes around the exact center which is why sometimes you'll find a policeman there directing traffic. He's protected by a raised platform but even that's precarious. All it takes is careless driver to send him on his way. With all this in mind, there was nothing to do now except to take it all in. I couldn't but be aware of a place defined by traffic and now devoid of that which gives it existence. I went out there searching for something but came away having found something. Such is where this essay is headed now.

So does this rather banal experiment have any practical application? Can it teach us anything, or is it just a whimsical flight of fancy, much ado about nothing? Perhaps. However, the memory of having been in that intersection wouldn't go away, for it required

further examination. Even it turned out to be nothing, my curiosity could be put to rest. Nevertheless, being there awoke an awareness to consider something that was both alien and familiar: alien when stepping out there on foot and familiar when driving through it. I wouldn't be surprised that road workers have a similar experience when working on a busy interstate when the traffic is shut down. They may even have thought of themselves as privy to something no one else had. At the same time I'm aware of the risk of reading too much into this insight. As to its value which I had questioned for several days, a renewed interest came when the intersection was open to traffic. Although I had no plans of going in that direction, I took a detour simply to compare driving through the very place where I had stood so recently, now utterly hostile to pedestrian traffic. I slowed down as much as possible while passing through, that prompting someone behind me to lean on his horn. It was a clear reminder I was lingering in a place where I shouldn't be except in the most transitory possible way.

While annoying and a bit humbling, this experience of rudeness at my lingering in the intersection turned out to be a gift. I was reminded that besides being a highly utilitarian space, the element of time was equally important. The more quickly you passed through, the better. Any attempt to slow down beyond the expected cautionary speed limit is met with a swift response. Actually there's no speed limit for an intersection. It's assumed you go through it very slowly. If you were to stop midway, clearly you'd become an immediate danger to drivers in or approaching the intersection. And so we can attribute this place as associated with the passage of time—slow on one hand and quick on the other.

When passing through, you feel a slight sense of danger, of the possibility of being hit by another vehicle from one of the four roads that meet in one spot. For a brief moment of time you're one with your vehicle as you've never been before. Your mind and body are extended to the vehicle's four points, front-left, front-right, rear left and rear right as well as with the totality of the vehicle itself. You might hold your breath for a second or two as you cruise through with a heightened sense of tension that expires as soon as you come out on the other side. Obviously there are buildings and pedestrians at the crosswalks at the intersection's fourfold threshold. Always you keep an eye upon them while attention is focused entirely on getting through the intersection as quickly as possible for safety sake. Although I don't have statistics before me, one can assume that a large proportion of accidents occur in intersections. The same applies with regard to pedestrians, more fatalities there than at other places.

Having accomplished a safe passage, one can pause and compare having just crossed the intersection with the earlier one of having lingered in its very heart. One feeds into the other. An intersection without vehicular traffic simply isn't an intersection. Important auxiliary elements also are at work. For example, traffic lights, stop signs, crosswalks plus other indicators that you're in a place or about to approach it which differs from all other

places. All are guides placed there to make you more attentive to your surroundings and by all means to keep you moving through to avoid the very real threat of injury or death if you don't do it properly.

Now it's time not so much to answer the question as to how this banal experience might fit in to real life situations but instead to play around with it...be light with it...which may lead to further insights. The starting point is rooted in what was described earlier, as being in a place on one hand alien yet very familiar on the other. The two are separate experiences but are united in the same place. Also the former is stationary (being in the intersection physically) and the latter is the very definition of movement (driving through the intersection). We're taking a physical place, albeit a dangerous one, and using it as a representation of one place characterized by two types of presence, the stationary one and movement through it.

Now by slowing down and examining the elements comprising this dual presence you can see if it applies elsewhere. "Elsewhere" implies the element of space, but by necessity it includes time, the two being inseparable. Again, I mention the danger of reading too much into an experience as just described, of using it to depict something that may not be applicable. However, one thing is certain. The memory of both standing in the intersection and later driving through has had a definite impact, else I would have forgotten it.

I'm not sure if the following ties in with these reflections about the significance of an intersection just delineated. It might be trying to associate two disparate things that don't jibe but will give it a shot anyway. Part of the reason for making such an association is that the article before this one included a quote from Picasso. One day someone asked about the source of his inspiration, figuring that Picasso would launch into an account of how he had done some long and hard searching...in short, blood, sweat and tears. I'm sure some of this is involved, but his answer was simple yet profound, so much that it had registered with me. Picasso's response? "When I paint, my object is to show what I have *found* and *not* what I am *looking for*" (italicized words are mine). How this made an impact wasn't clear at the moment and admittedly still isn't but one of those things that keeps you guessing. It seemed a pathway with the promise of branching off in multiple directions. I was eager to see where it might go as in the context of this article...of all things, a traffic intersection (not that inspired by Picasso I was about to paint a picture of one).

This quote brings up a distinction between searching and finding, the difference between the two sometimes being overlooked. For some reason or other a thing as banal and common (as well as dangerous) as an intersection might shed some light on this distinction or more accurately, standing in one minus traffic and driving through one as part of the traffic. We can start with searching which implies either the lack or the loss of something you become aware of usually after some time passes when you become aware of having lost

it. Then the search begins marked by a gnawing urgency. Also searching can reflect a deeper need based on un-fulfillment, that we long for something to make us whole. In all likelihood we've possessed that something and can't define it, hence that hole within ourselves that's impossible to fill. This isn't necessarily bad, but never can we relinquish that longing. And so we embark upon our search, following one lead here and another there, most of which turn out to be dead ends.

A question comes to mind. Does standing in and then driving through an intersection have anything to do with this contrast between searching and finding? When you're driving through such a place as in a metal container sealed off from the rest of the world, you do so without barely noticing it. True to a certain extent, but for safety-sake, passing through an intersection requires close attention to your surrounding. And you do this, of course, from within your vehicle where everything and everyone else is a potential threat to your personal safety. During the brief interval it takes to pass through you're mind essentially is elsewhere even if attentive to what's going on around you. It's a fine example where our minds work on two planes simultaneously.

On the other hand, if we stood in an intersection devoid of traffic, our first impression is one delineated already, that we're in a place constructed for pure utility and convenience, alien to human presence. At the same time it's pregnant with something about to happen which it does once the intersection is open to traffic. Here during this special time you get perspective on a place, despite its familiarity when we drive through, not available in any other circumstance. Instead of being in a metal bubble, we're out there naked and vulnerable. Yet as we walk around this place at once strange and familiar, we gain an insight that lasts, certainly one far longer than when in a vehicle. In light of what what said above, we've found something in a place usually not associated with finding anything. Besides, it's a place designed strictly for movement, not for standing still, for the more quickly you pass through an intersection, the better and safer is its design.

Obviously while standing in an intersection you can feel this utility oozing throughout. Also you feel as though you are an unwelcome presence, tolerated albeit briefly: the sooner you leave, the better. This emphasis upon pure, unadulterated utility is among the last place you'd expect to *find* something, and *finding* is what this whole article is about. We can say that finding something meaningful in a place wholly geared for utility and convenience is either ridiculous or a fantastic insight. So it's up to the person to make use of such a place, an intersection being common yet rarely accessed...accessed in the flesh as opposed to accessed within a metallic bubble.

With regard to our intersection, it can represent first our *search* for a situation that satisfies an unfulfilled longing, in other words, pick it out. This can sometimes be marked by a certain desperation involving considerable expenditure of personal energy which can lead

you to transforming it into *finding* that which is both unexpected and expected. To the former belongs our familiarity with the overall nature of a traffic intersection while to the latter, our unfamiliarity with being in it *sans* that metallic, protective bubble. Once out there on foot and unprotected, we can reflect upon ourselves passing through the same space as protected. Thus two elements are involved in each case: standing in a place made for action or transition along with moving through the same space while being protected.

Thus we've found something in one of the most unexpected places you could think of. Now it's time to capitalize upon this finding, to apply it in other circumstances. To think of it as a perpetual type of finding is alien to what's going on. Instead, we're after adopting a new mode of being where finding becomes the means by which we move about in the world. As a new mode of being it means that if our attention is set upon the permanence of being, we've made finding our own. While it's easy to assent to, going for it is another matter. Yet assuming such a thing as this doesn't happen in a vacuum. A context is required, real space and real time. It so happened that when undertaking this article it was the Advent season. Being a season characterized by waiting as well as searching, I saw an opportunity or better, a context in which to elaborate upon that more abstract "mode of being." In that way the searching we associate usually with Advent turned into one of finding.

As for Advent, frequently you hear people say that it's their favorite time of the year. Ask them why, and they respond in a vague sort of way, not knowing how to articulate how they identify with it. For many, who observe this season, they consider it as a firewall against the onslaught of the commercialism of Christmas, but that's superficial. Some even go so far as to say it'd be great to have Advent without Christmas. Wishful thinking, to be sure, knowing full well that's impossible, but that's how much it resonates within us. Should we explore a bit further, the waiting so characteristic of Advent signifies a special type of expectation, of having a clue of what's over the horizon even if we can't behold it fully. At the same time we can have expectation in relative safety because distance is involved. We're here and that's out there. Without feeling guilty we can dilly-dally because the pressure isn't on full blast as it might be, say, with the seriousness of Lent. In that season we have the burden of changing our behavior and if not, of being guilty about it.

During the four weeks of Advent we're in a passive mode as to what we're expecting because what it's coming to us, we not to it. Also it heralds an end to our search, the two actions going on together. Such is the appeal and challenge of the season. Christmas does away with expectation—claims it's fulfilled—because Christ has come. All very nice as everyone knows but admittedly all the hoopla rings hollow. This may or may not have something to do with Christmas as the most depressing time of the year or at least contributes to it. Would our expectation mode which had kicked into high gear during Advent might be the real culprit? Once Christmas is present, we're we disappointed because there's no more awaiting and expecting in store. Such questions may not have answers but

certainly are on the minds of everyone to one extent or another. Then comes the real kicker. After Advent/Christ we have a difficult-to-articulate sense of realizing there's a lot more time out there ahead of us with which we need to deal. Throw in the cold, etc., and you have a depressing situation for many.

One way of handling this conundrum is to be aware that our waiting and therefore searching has come to a screeching halt. We could see it coming up ahead, obviously, but no matter how many times we've been here, it affects us. The loudly proclaimed joy turns out to be a disappointment. That leads us to consider if an alternative exists leading to that quote from Picasso: "When I paint, my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for."

So let's do a little unpacking. When engaged in an activity, we have a goal in mind and enjoy sharing it with other people. To conceal it is contrary to our nature, so no problem here. Now Picasso sets up an opposition, if you will, between what he has found, not what he's looking for. He takes into account the common tendency to search out things, most likely having in mind deeper stuff, not what's superficial. As pointed out, we all do this in one way or another sometimes knowing what we're searching for but remain essentially clueless as manifested in our restless attitude and behavior. Admittedly we don't know how to deal with Picasso's finding, or how to go about it. Anyway, it strikes a deep chord within many people. We do know, however, that the searching at hand is not unlike the expectation of the just mentioned Advent season. Obviously reading into Picasso, he'd have no problem with Christmas. He'd simply acknowledge what's there...what he has found...and get on with it minus any self-recrimination, etc.

Our proclivity to searching over finding brings up the issue of pseudo-finding. A chief characteristic of this is a kind of unremitting compulsiveness. An example? When we're on the Internet rummaging around for information, especially the kind that comes into our heads and without much reflection. Unfortunately this type of searching is confused with the real thing and has become all pervasive, spreading a cloud literally over aspect of human existence. This perpetual fog hovering over our minds is difficult to discern and is accompanied by a sense of being out of wack with ourselves. Obviously a challenge presents itself as when making the shift from a stance of waiting to finding. This is where the traffic intersection discussed above may help, strange as it may be at first glance. It's chosen by reason of being a common reality broken down into two ways of experience. First we have the drive-through which is done without giving it a thought. Second comes the opportunity of walking into one when it's shut down, a special circumstance. There we compare the two experiences in the exact same space.

With this recap in mind, we can label the driving-through as representative of searching. Of course we don't do this, but it represents perpetual movement, of going from point A to

point C right through point B, the intersection itself. Also this can be representative of pseudo-finding. While the act of driving and searching are obviously two different things, they have in common this character of motion.

Note the incredible experience of being out in the traffic intersection. You're present in an environment alien to human existence yet one where plenty of humans pass albeit insulated in their metal bubbles, from here looking like spaceships (and space aliens). To test your insight, drive through the intersection afterwards. While approaching, going through and exiting it you do it as slowly as safety admits and again, reflect on such an otherwise un-noteworthy experience. Then you size up the two—standing in and driving through the intersection—relative to the same space and same time.

Could you say—and this might be stretching it a bit—that while standing in the temporarily empty intersection you had found something whereas prior to it you've been searching for it? And what about driving through it, something you've been doing for some time now? As for the latter, you may not have been engaged in either searching or finding but simply are too distracted with a million things (hopefully not texting). All the stuff which fills your mind detracts from finding; it keeps you so occupied by leading you this way and that. Here we have a kind of pseudo-searching though not necessarily the one you're conscious of. An examination of this searching amounts to trying to clear your head and focusing on one thing necessary. Often when attempting to escape this conundrum you try remedies that are on the same plane as that which is affecting you. That is to say, you shift from the searching that's bugging you to one that appears attractive and has promise to obtain that imprecise "thing" existing somewhere out there. The Book of Ecclesiastes is pretty good at giving voice to this tendency describing all types of movement, from physical to mental to spiritual and unfortunately without coming to a resolution. Perhaps the author's goal is to simply state it and have his readers be aware of their inner restlessness after which it hopefully disappears.

With regard to searching, inevitably there comes a point when you've worn yourself out and come to a halt. Keep in mind that to search means having prior knowledge of what you're after and haven't yet attained that which conforms to this knowledge. Indeed, this knowledge can be a gift as well as a curse. A gift when it guides us and a curse when it goes unfulfilled. We're captive to such knowledge and the images it produces. Passive is another way of putting it as to what comes to our minds, and we find ourselves unable to escape it. On the other hand, taking a stance with regard to finding precludes passiveness to events and it seems to some degree, of memory. However, this is memory in the negative sense. Finding suggests what it means, that already we've hit upon what was present in our minds, that and the object having a direct correspondence with each other. Such is a

positive function of memory, the one we're after and may tie in with the finding Picasso speaks about.

Thus finding suggests we're guided, autopilot-like, by the reality we see out there which essentially is in the same within us. Not, of course, that the reality we've hit upon is physically in our brains, just that there's a one-on-one total correspondence between the two. Here we have to be on guard against getting mystical, of going off on a tangent and say that we're privileged to access all sorts of stuff which other people don't (classic gnosticism)¹. That would make the stuff out there irrelevant because we're self-contained. Such is not the case, but some images not unlike this may filter in try to make us think this way. In short, it's pride creeping in, that we're in control.

Our guiding principle, if you will, which makes this one-on-one correspondence possible is our recollective faculty called *anamnesis* dealt elsewhere on this homepage. It boils down to the Delphic oracle's "Know thyself." Such is one of the best known and most ancient bits of wisdom encapsulated in a few words whose pithiness makes us overlook its value. The trouble with speaking about *anamnesis* is that while we all have it, many of us are ignorant of its existence, of how it informs us. Besides, we ascribe to the common perception that it's the same as the faculty of our memory. Partly right but not enough. The right part is that recalling a past event roots us in the present, giving us identity which makes us confident to move forward into the future. Sounds satisfactory but not quite there.

We require something that's fulfilling on every level of our being, that speaks to our condition, not what will entertain us for the moment and later on fill us with another interest. When we recall our true nature—such terms are fluid, the phrase at hand lacking in many ways, but we'll let it stand for now—we come up against not so much a brick wall but a blank wall. That is to say, we hit nothing. Such may be the result of our first effort. Nevertheless, something draws us back. For some reason or other we've been captivated and find ourselves unable to let go. If we don't let go, the memory (conventionally speaking) of our experience sticks with us, always inviting us to return.

This first contact, if you will, can be shepherded along by considering the *ana-* part of *anamnesis*, a preposition indicative of motion upon or on. We could say that *ana-* prefaced to the root for memory lifts this faculty to a new level or better, lifts us up to its level. And this level, if you will, we have at all times but were ignorant of it. In that state we go about searching for this and that, something approaching it but not in the fullest possible sense. The *ana-* of *anamnesis* is what makes it as such and not the recollection of past events we associate with the faculty of our memory. Such is the difference, obvious when pointed out simply like this but not so much unless we examine ourselves, à la Delphic oracle.

1. The other pitfall is that *anamnesis* may be confused with one form of reincarnation or another, something to which supposedly Plato ascribed.

Once this simple yet major distinction is made, we can apply Picasso's dictum of finding things instead of searching for them. Delving into this a bit further, searching involves the holding of preconceived ideas which guide us to finding. In the case at hand, such ideas are all sorts of insights into human origins, spirituality and the like. But finding, while it may involve searching earlier on, abandons it and like the *ana-* of *anamnesis*, goes to the source. Actually it "goes" nowhere but is a kind of waking up after which the object of search appears right in front of us without any effort. So making the shift from searching to finding is abandoning our innate tendency to think that anything good requires lengthy discipline and self-denial. Instead, understanding is the key which requires no discipline but consists in an arousal from a slumber that had come over us, say from childhood, and taught us how to comport ourselves both in society and religious matters.

So this article started off with (of all things) a traffic intersection. The journey from that experience first as standing in it when empty and secondly when driving through led, albeit awkwardly, to the distinction between searching and finding in reference to the quote from Picasso. Actually it was the quote above that put this in motion for better or for worse. As for the traffic intersection, this familiar yet all too utilitarian reality can be approached much as a child would do it. That is, take something we all know, dissect in and come up with some new insight. Perhaps that's why children make the best philosophers. We may dismiss their queries as annoying but find them more as an embarrassment since we don't know the answer to such simple yet profound questions. In other words, we've failed to take a child's searching and transform it into finding. If we did, we might end up with a better society.

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