

Don't Worry, Be Petty

Some years ago there was a popular song by Bobby McFerrin entitled “Don't Worry, Be Happy.” One lesser known reason why this song stands out is that it was adopted by the country of Iceland as a quasi-official national anthem. This may come as a surprise if not a shock to most people, for the image of that country and its people is quite severe and restrained. It turns out that in a way this is a facade presented to foreigners. One of the best ways to get behind this facade is to take a stab at their tongue-twisting language and toss to the wind any fear or hesitation of how you do it.

Another way which is less known but just as important is to appeal to the monastic heritage of the land. The reason? The first settlers were Irish monks, and they continue to hold a dear place in the collective heart of Icelanders. Also tied in with the “Don't Worry, Be Happy” attitude is the sometimes unnerving Icelandic habit which has morphed into a custom of sorts to do things at the last minute. Icelanders excel at this even though there might have been plenty of time beforehand to carry out what was needed to be done.

Pardon the digression, for I didn't intend to start off this way but couldn't help but make the connection between McFerrin's song and Iceland. As for the song itself, I decided to alter its basic theme as revealed by the title, substituting “petty” for “happy.” Before embarking on this fundamental subject I found it necessary to insert some mental space between working on the current article and the previous one which recently was completed. It's important in order to avoid both an overlapping and rehash of the same material. Failure to take that precaution can easily lead to have little or nothing to communicate. It so turns out that knowing when to insert a gap or hiatus is both refreshing and tenuous. Tenuous in that who knows what will emerge, making it a gamble of sorts.

We could say too that inserting a gap between projects boils down to the familiar phrase “chill out.” It's a special time neither to think nor to plan about what comes next. Instead, you give yourself permission to throw precautions to the wind and accept what comes your way, neither forcing nor rejecting it. Another way to view this is as a time to percolate. That sounds easy enough, but it turns out to be a rather trying experience. Anyone who has set

about doing it runs the risk of becoming antsy. To be as such is by no means fatal but a sign that you're dwelling in a kind of no-man's land. Continue with it and don't interfere. It will go away on its own.

In a circumstance as this there's a general, hard-to-define unease where energy needs to be directed properly. Should you fail to do it, you run the risk of dissipation, of exhausting yourself not at once but by dribs and drabs. That means the passage of time goes by ever so slowly with no end in sight. So learning how to pass time in accord with the image of treading water finally led to an insight but not on my own terms. You could say that I wasn't looking for it but it was looking for me. We may not realize it at the time, but something transcendent is at work. Socrates, whom we'll discuss later, would attribute it to his *daimon* or inner guiding principle.

The three basic insights I present here in a relatively coherent fashion came out of the clear blue. The first concrete incident dates to early childhood, the memories of which never had diminished. More precisely I'd say that with time all three insights had their origin early on though their relationship with each other needed time to sort out. Actually they point to a mode of life that seems most natural as time goes on.

When growing up I had lived within walking distance to a zoo and often was drawn there not so much to watch the animals but from a desire to learn how they lived. At the time conditions weren't the best, for they were rather confined, some more than others. Still, some such as llamas and bison had much larger open spaces, being able to go indoors as well as remaining outside. Of all the zoo animals they had it best. I'd also include a large variety of birds inhabiting two aviaries, one outdoors and another indoors. They had the advantage of being able to socialize more freely.

In sum, what remained with me down the years was that they were living imprisoned. Always I could count on them being there even when, for example, I was at school or engaged with other activities. While busy with these so-called essentials often my mind would drift and wonder what they were doing. Not only that, I wished I could be like them. In back of my mind was the fact that I was destined to live in a similar fashion. As for the activities in which I had to

participate as part growing up clearly they were in the way. I was stuck with the prospect of going through them. The sooner the better they were done, the better off I'd be.

And so a fascination with this strange situation of being confined in one place took on a life of its own that would provide inspiration in so many varied ways. At the time I hadn't the slightest idea of how it would pan out but somehow I knew it would reap benefits that would keep presenting themselves. Since I was relatively young, I lacked the ability to communicate this with anyone else. Even if I could articulate it, who'd understand? As for the confinement represented by the animals in the zoo, never did I think my future (God forbid) would end up as a lifer in prison.

Although these animals were deprived of their natural habit, never did I think of them as such. For me, the place in which they found themselves was exactly where they belonged. In fact, they were fed and cared for, to what degree I don't know, but certainly they looked healthy. So I entertained a crazy thought. Would it be possible to emulate this way of life, that is, without actually going to prison? The choice seemed really weird, but even then I knew for certain somewhere, somehow it would come into being. My task, then, was to wait and see. In the meantime, the task of growing up had to get done and out of the way.

So what does this have to do with what I had set out to present in this article about not worrying and being petty? After all it was the primary insight that got it off the ground. I might as well throw in being selfish which is close enough to pettiness. To say that we're selfish at heart may be difficult to accept or even threatening. However, to say that we're petty is really getting nasty. Selfishness is talked about in various guises but pettiness is close to downright embarrassing. Bringing this up look at first glance like it could develop into a guidebook on how to live contrary to everything we've been raised to be...that is, unless you've been destined to be a lifer in prison. To do that you have to go out and commit a heinous crime.

As for the animals and the importance they represent, you couldn't describe them as being selfish. That would be transposing onto them a human trait. However, we do this all the time, even with inanimate objects. The animals were

acting as expected, in a perfectly normal manner. The only un-normal thing was that they were confined. Yet I was struck by the contentment many showed on their faces. Some of the tamer ones got to know me quite well. I run the risk of reading into this, but it was due to a commonality they and I somehow was present and would be continued.

The confined space in which the animals live out their lives represents an environment both secure and obviously restricted. What we dread more than anything is being confined, for that allows all sorts of things from our past to come bubbling up. Instinctively we know the fear even if not what comes up and shut it at all costs. Perhaps it'd be more accurate to say we're assaulted by the force of hurricane winds beyond our control. At the same time the value of a confined space removes a lot of input normally available to most people and quickly enables us to see how selfish as well as petty we are, through and through. This starts with the most basic needs survival followed by the need for food and drink.

Any self-imposed limitations allow our self-centeredness to come to the fore more quickly than in normal circumstances. Learning to live with them is no picnic. To counter this embarrassing realization we may rummage around in our heads to find any instance when had manifested an instance of altruism but find ourselves hard pressed. Perhaps there may have been one or two incidents in a given day...not more...when we acted altruistically as when holding the door open for an elderly person. However, that was done spontaneously and without reflection. Compare this with our experience of mothers. Perhaps they are the most unselfish type of persons in existence caring for their children. Fathers may partake of it as well but come in a distant second. As for how that works out is up for grabs, for certainly nobody is immune. Only real mothers and real fathers can verify this observation.

Although some might find the confined life of animals in a zoo to be a somewhat disconcerting mode to life, they suggest a creative way we handle that base pettiness which afflicts us all. That doesn't mean we've become some kind of special persons, just that we're not subject to being depressed as would be the case most of the time. This is a real treasure not to lost sight of because life consists in a whole series of events which create constant, low-grade state of

anxiety operating just below the radar.

Does this mean we're to equate zoo animals with human pettiness? Obviously that's simply impossible. However, by reason of their confinement the animals represent a deliberately chosen way to remain stationary in one place while allowing any and all thoughts and emotions to flow by without taking root. They pass on while we remain stationary. The only problem is that no other humans are doing it except those in jail, the handicapped or those are confined to some institution where they are unable to take care of themselves.

Just think. It may not seem as such, but we're dealing with the most profound problem there is. On the surface it seems insignificant but far from it. If you opt for the stability as represented by the zoo animals at once you discover that people, things and events are passing you by. You might be sorely tempted to move forward with them but instead you stay put and so so voluntarily. Apart from hermits and the like, the only notable example I know of is Henry David Thoreau. Though he did move around somewhat, essentially he opted to remain in one place. It was more difficult than at first glance because at the time there was a mass migration to the West where supposedly lay all the action. I don't think there are any records of Thoreau speaking of this but certainly it formed a background to his fixed residency in the Concord-Lexington area.

An important though generally overlooked aspect of Thoreau is his innate preference for the westerly direction...not West in the sense just delineated but west as represented by the setting sun ¹. Actually he never seems to have melded the two but kept silent as to the craze about moving away from the east coast inland to the west and ultimately to California. The only real hint he had of this was frequent mention of the railroad that ran nearby, that is, going westward from Boston. And so Thoreau more or less hung around his local area while so many people were hurrying west. Trying to stay above this was no small challenge. All the while he secretly discovered what that direction truly means and was living it out in one place.

¹On this homepage is a short document of excerpts from Thoreau's lengthy **Journal** which deal with the west.

Thoreau's focus upon the west seems to have kept him not just sane but happy and flourishing while society about him was in an absolute frenzy. From the sun's very rising in the east and passage overhead it is preparing to draw us towards the west. The sun reaches its destinations when disappearing just over the horizon. Here is more precisely where we wish to go, not further west into the darkness and eventually come out the other side. There's something mysterious about being just over the horizon, not much further beyond, that endows us with a certain broadness of mind. It seems to have something to do with living on a border. Here indeed is where the animals in the zoo have their home.

This experience is quite difficult to articulate by reason of the elusiveness involved. It's an insight you have to see at once or not at all. All along throughout the day or throughout the sun's passage from east to west we've been getting ready for this important moment. You can feel it in Thoreau's entries, especially during the short winter days. To perceive what's going on ideally our attention should be diffuse which means it embraces all things that cross our path, more importantly that which is within us. As for this diffuseness, it's a lead-in to that third leg of that triad. If our attention were focused or concentrated, we'd miss the point entirely. That's a huge mistake a lot people make. Once we arrive over the western horizon—rather withdraw just enough from the nominally important things of life—we can say in truth that we are home. As for the sense of being at home, it's one of those things that doesn't require explanation but is hard-wired into us. The east is behind us...barely...which signifies that there's no further place on earth to go.

So what in the world does this have to do with pettiness? We've dealt with the confinement represented by the zoo animals and have seen they represent a necessary precondition which is diffuse for watching our inner movements. Let's say we've invested ourselves in a form of stability not unlike Thoreau. There emerges on its own and not by our own self-interests a distinction between what is important and reality. At first glance this seems incidental, a minor eureka moment but much more is involved.

While keeping in mind the two images of the zoo animals and living just over the western horizon, we see that essential to both is the implementation of

diffuse awareness which is so little understood. One way which conveys this magnificently is by observing a common domestic cat. When content, a cat sits and observes everything around it, not focusing attention upon anything in particular. At first you'd think it's lackadaisical or downright bored. Its eyes move left to right, up and down, taking in everything at once which says far from it. The same applies to its ears if not more so. However, things change in a nanosecond when something grabs its attention. The cat is focused in a manner so absolute it's scary. Once that's over, then back to its inherently native diffuse awareness, the two states alternating numerous times.

Such diffuse awareness is a kind of prerequisite for determining whether we're living in accord with some important matter at hand or living in accord with what's real. This too can be a difficult insight to grasp because often we think the two are the same and fail to see that making the distinction is contingent upon something not in our power. For now let's call the ability to do so rests on a sliver of awareness. As for that phrase, some months before writing this article it emerged in several discussions with a friend. I don't recall the exact details as to how we came up with this phrase. That's secondary. What's important is that the sliver of awareness allows the injection of a transcendent reality into daily, humdrum lives.

In order to clarify the distinction between what is important and what is reality, let's say that the vast majority of human endeavors fall under the category of the first. Their importance is neither to be minimized nor ridiculed but as with all things, they pass and have an illusory quality about it. I recall some of the larger outdoor animals in the zoo watch people with a mildly quizzical look on their faces. Obviously they're doing their animal thing, but they represent a way of watching two legged animals as they come and go. As we all know, all things do pass on a one-way ticket to God-only-knows-where.

One example at the time of writing this article comes to mind. The president of the United States was in the Middle East. As usual it got oodles of media coverage with people saying how vital it was and how it will affect our relationship with our allies, etc., etc., etc. Then the president returns home and behold. More stuff hits the news even before he's off the plane. Within less than a week the president's "important" meetings are forgotten for something else

that's even more "important." No small wonder that the rapid succession of such events give the impression of an illusion.

While all this is going on continuously in the so-called grander scale of human events, there are important events that take place closer to home. We live in a society where all sorts of complicated interactions must take place for it to function smoothly. On occasion we might miss the boat by slipping into an unintended crack somewhere along the line. There are multiple causes, some of which are traceable to ourselves as when unintentionally we might have put our wrong foot forward. They are remembered by those with whom we live, and we suffer from being labeled. It can be disconcerting, but there's no other choice except acceptance. It doesn't stop there. We can adopt various manifestations of passive aggressiveness, not especially strong but nevertheless real. The problem is that we don't take steps to remedy this but allow it to continue. This in turn makes us wallow in our misery, even enjoying it to some degree.

Time for an intervention. This comes not from ourselves but from a transcendent source outside ourselves. Actually having been humiliated by others and remaining labeled one way or the other is one means of discovering how important events and deeds become relativized. Such is the prelude for adopting a stance which sees a potential use for them. However, for that to take effect is contingent upon an intervention from the transcendent order, a sliver of awareness. Sliver is important because it means just a little, not much...only enough to make a difference.

Awareness of being sidelined from things of importance does not go away but needs to be put in its place to make room for the introduction of a new dimension, again, that sliver of awareness. Being a sliver, it's thin and sharp. That means it can penetrate places normally not accessible to other modes of living. Unfortunately important matters are immune to its beneficial intervention, completely so. That means it's best never to discuss the matter but to keep it secret. The time to share it will arise not on our own accord but on what that sliver of awareness prefers.

Now the stage is set for the alternative which is in tune with reality. The

problem is, can we really define reality? In a way no because it encompasses literally everything. We could say that the sliver of awareness has taken effect when it wakes us to reality as distinct from what is important. Reality has a way of remaining, of being constant. Not only that, it expands beyond its initial sharpness of a sliver, pushing out to the left and to the right as it makes room. At the same time it remains accessible for our benefit and does more than enough to compensate for our limitations regardless of their severity. This is of great importance when we're excluded from important matters.

We're invited into this reality, fully aware that the initiative doesn't come from us. Since we're in a situation where there's basically nothing to look forward to in life, why not opt for this? After all, we've defined it as reality. We go for it right in the midst of our petty concerns. Actually these petty concerns or more precisely, our recollection of them, evolve into a protective sheath of sorts. It's the strangest of all protections, no doubt about that, but perhaps the strongest and most effective. It's based upon hardcore experience and shields us from prying eyes. After all, anyone engaged in important matters doesn't want to bother with this. It's too common, trivial and of course, petty. With reality, however, it's something very different.

When speaking of reality as has been done thus far it sounds pretty abstract. However, there are concrete places and concrete times when and where we can actualize it. To do so is not unlike undergoing some initiation process, for again, we have to keep in mind that we're powerless to effect it on our own. Should we fall into that trap, we end up smack in the middle of our pettiness without the means to escape it.

There are actual physical places more conducive to getting in touch with reality which are contrary to what people consider as being important. Such places are all around us. Because we're so caught up with important matters, easily we can overlook them, thinking they have to be other-worldly. Should person point one out, we'd come away clearly disappointed. However, once we discover a given place, it requires constant discipline not unlike cultivating a garden. The prospect of doing this may turn some people off. Basically this is because reality isn't well...real...it's because we're so acclimatized to matters of importance.

As for actual places, often they are gardens or more specifically, parts of a garden hidden away in the shadows with lots of vegetation. They are different from shaded areas along the side of a field or in the woods. The reason? Some cultivation is required as well as a generally squared off area which make it more clearly defined. Other than that they are pretty much faceless to people engaged in important matters. While of great value, such places can be cut down within an hour. However, the significance remains unaffected and can be transferred to another such place.

In several earlier articles I brought up the idea of a *daimon* or governing spirit best associated with Socrates or more specifically, in the **Symposium**. *Eros* is one such *daimon* whose primary function is to be an intermediary between opposites such as beautiful and ugly, human and divine. More importantly, a *daimon* represents the inability to bring about any permanent closure when it comes to such opposites. That makes it hard if not impossible to nail down as we're accustomed to do with matters of importance.

Furthermore, we find in the Bible that the Lord has a revulsion for anything associated with shady groves and the like, associating them with idolatry and immoral practices. One such quote that can fit in nicely with the image of shaded area comes from Ezekiel 6.13-14: "And you shall know that I am the Lord when their slain lie among their idols round about their altars upon every high hill, on all the mountain tops, under every green tree and under every leafy oak wherever they offered pleasing odor to all their idols. And I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land desolate and waste through all their habitations. Then they will know that I am the Lord."

As for the quote from Ezekiel, the Lord is furious because the people find in such places meaning they don't get when relating to him as Lord. This is impossible for him to understand, and he shows no willingness to listen whatsoever. What, then, is the problem? Can it be rectified while at the same time retaining the integrity of the Judaeo-Christian tradition? In a nutshell or perhaps running the risk of an oversimplification, some elements of this religious heritage and the one represented by Socrates can be put together, not blended. In fact, the struggle between the Judaeo-Christian tradition and

Greece never has been resolved. Now there's hope. Perhaps we can bring it to a better resolution.

The Lord just might relent if he and Socrates could sit down together and present their respective cases. Socrates would have to present his side of the story to the Lord by pointing out a fear on his part, risky business, because he finds it close to impossible admit. That's why he fears leafy groves where in the full light of day shadows exist, independent and impervious to this light. So if a person is attracted to such places, he's pretty much immune from divine intervention. He does this not willingly nor in revolt but out of a need to get a fuller picture of...well...reality.

So what does this have to do with the theme of this article which supposedly deals with pettiness? At first glance the connection is vague, even loose. However, there's a deeper tie present beneath the surface. By cultivating a diffuse type of awareness symbolized by the zoo animals you remove yourself or withdraw from what demands full attention. This consists of everything important and unimportant, leaving behind at least momentarily the low-grade tension that's operative here. As for pettiness, it's something to which we're all susceptible and are afraid to admit. We'd rather admit to the big stuff because that draws sympathy. But pettiness? Nobody wants it even though it fills our day. We could add selfishness to the mix which isn't that far off.

The diffuse awareness—like the cat mentioned above looking here then there, up there and then down—is done in full view of these two embarrassing but pervasive traits which are so much a part of the human condition. The strange thing is that such awareness doesn't seek to modify anything. That's why awareness presented as spread out and unfocused is helpful. To do this is easy as pie while at the same time tough as eating nails. Such an approach is basically other-worldly. It has no place in society yet is what everyone on the planet wants more than anything. So if you want to find out where this diffuse awareness dwells, look for those leafy, shadowy places. Remember too that a pre-condition is that they must be cultivated, semi-so, not fully wild. That means a human hand has been applied which is essential.

So the Lord comes along and hears about activity taking place in one of these

places, very suspect in his eyes. Of course he's curious and automatically sheds his light on it. However, he runs into an immediate problem. His light, divine as it is, cannot penetrate the leafy-ness. Those within the grove are not hiding from the Lord as did the first man and first woman. Rather, they've discovered that innate *daimon* of which Diotima speaks with Socrates. Right away we think of this as a rebellion against the Lord and all that he stands for. No, it's the introduction of something new and very human. If the Lord were to tone down his brightness, he just might be able to witness and give his *imprimatur*. Then the two parties would have a meaningful dialogue.

And so this awareness presented as being diffuse is the means for communication. It's helpful to interject yet again because often we think we have to be morally upright and intensely focused to have converse with the Lord. That may help, but it's not essential. It even may be a hindrance. So this diffuseness is aimed at toning down the intensity of divine light, not to alter nor to mitigate it. In such a way a greater openness to alternatives may emerge beneficial for the Lord as well as for those who are favor leafy groves. Indeed, they don't have to hostile with each other.

In conclusion, our innate pettiness and selfishness are tools to be used in this regard, not to be shunned nor to be embarrassed about. Also they offer an ideal disguise for cultivating a relationship with the Lord and introducing him to the *daimon* under the tutelage of Diotima. She, in turn, hands it over to Socrates. Thus down the ages the West interacts between divine revelation and the peculiar figure of Socrates. It's an alteration that often is presented as being in conflict. You're for one and against the other. That's pretty much how it has been and a good description of our common inheritance. No more of that.

+