

In the World versus Not of the World

Several months ago I had the privilege of getting together with three elderly people who have been good friends throughout the years. In actuality they're some fifteen to twenty years older than I, a difference which for the large part fades when you get in the vicinity of sixty-five years of age. At least by then people stop referring to you as "young," a gentle put-down. This stands in contrast to earlier in life when the difference between ages meant more, and when folks on either side of a given age divide had less in common. As for the four of us, we decided to have breakfast at a popular local restaurant which provided a personal opportunity to observe the unique bond of friendship we enjoy even though we don't get together often. That made our brief time together as one to savor. It seems that when you get older, quantity recedes in favor of quality, and everything clicked among us effortlessly without having to offer explanations and so forth.

Over the years we've had a number of such goods times but now are enjoying each other's company even more. All it requires is a simple, local setting...nothing fancy...but sufficient to have a relaxed conversation such as this breakfast. A chief characteristic of our conversations is that disagreements have diminished considerably or more importantly, the potential for them. Why that is so will be discussed later, for it's an important component of this little essay. Although our relationship had been maturing over the years, subconsciously something deeper had been at work which only now is becoming more evident. I'm not using this as an opportunity to glorify old age. For many people it's marked by loneliness and un-fulfilment, not to mention the increasing aches and pains. Unfortunately these tend to obscure the real advantages.

A situation like this gathering for breakfast offers the opportunity to look back and recall when these friends had been younger and quite vigorous but now are suffering from various ailments. One is unmarried and two have lost their spouses. Apart from this, fortunately they are in reasonable health and mobile even though they have slowed down considerably. Also they suffer from not so much a loss of memory but from a general forgetfulness. For example, one tends to misplace personal items such as glasses and wallet, needing to retrace his footsteps for them which, because of his slow gait, is time consuming. One of our company shared how he had just done this before coming to the restaurant which led to a discussion of our impending mortality. It was amazing how easily they shared their views on the matter. What struck me was that no one had any regrets about opportunities missed or lost, and that the future is bright despite the prospect of increasing physical pain.

While we were enjoying ourselves at the local restaurant we did what elderly folks are accustomed to do, reminisce about the past and friends who've died. There was nothing sad nor melancholy the way everyone bantered back and forth, the conversation punctuated often by self-deprecating remarks accompanied by a general sense of joy and contentment. In sum, there was not the slightest tinge of sadness concerning friends and relatives who've passed off the scene. I found it a privilege to be primarily an observer and secondarily a participant in this wonderful conversation: observer in that I was younger than they and participant in that I knew many folks whom they were talking about. Before you know it, I'll be up there among

them and hopefully blessed with similar companions enjoying the same light-some spirit they possess. Opportunities like these can't be forced, trying to fabricate another breakfast situation, if you will. You have to wait for them to come along and jump at the occasion. If they were too frequent, something would be lost. That gets to an important issue, namely, that such occasions are meant to be remembered...rather, savored...and kept alive as informing your life. If you take that approach, things will work out accordingly.

A subject that came up was the recent influx of migrants into Europe, especially Syria. This made the conversation turn serious, but one of the participants who lives most of the year in Europe chimed in. She acknowledged it posed a problem but shrugged it off as secondary. Although she didn't say it outright, her age (approximately 82) made her thoughts turn elsewhere, that somehow and somewhere something better awaited her and hopefully us all, migrants included. Passing judgment on the situation was the killer to be avoided at all costs. Plenty of people are doing it and God willing, some are doing it correctly for the common good. Quickness to pass judgment is more frequent when younger but when older, it's another thing. Instinctively you know that you'll have to answer for your attitude in the end. Besides, passing judgment is too time consuming and a waste of energy.

Our conversation developed that theme a bit which touched upon death and more interestingly, that some form of existence is in store for us afterward. We had no need to explain this in a tedious fashion; instead, everyone acknowledged it as real, and that was the tacit basis for our overall satisfaction. Another person told of his middle aged sister familiar to us all who had lost her husband three years ago. Never was she able to have children and compensated for this by rising on the corporate ladder and traveling the world. In fact, she and her new boyfriend were off to a cruise on the Danube, this not long after having been in Aspen on a weekend skiing holiday. Nothing wrong, of course, if you can afford it, but we all...old timers!...concurred that our current life style, sedate as it is, couldn't be better. "Been there, done that" as our American expatriate reminded us of that familiar expression.

Out in the parking lot we said good-bye to each other, hugs, kisses and all that. There wasn't the slightest bit of sadness, for one of us (or more) might not be around for the next meeting whenever that might be. It sounds prosaic and corny, but we knew we were going to meet not terribly far off only this time will remain together along with other dear friends. After we broke up and went our separate ways, I couldn't help but wonder about the fate of each of my friends. One was headed back to Europe in the next few days and the others off to their respective homes some distance away. The concern about meeting again was secondary. Each of us had obtained a level of contentment which was easy to sustain compared to earlier in life as well as to share with other persons. We didn't solve any of life's problems but realized that life's ups and downs have leveled off even if the future contains extended physical suffering. Taking this further, it seemed the two were interconnected and in some fashion formed two different sides of the same reality instead of being at odds with each other. This comes naturally with most folks when they get older, that is, provided they're reasonably well off. We knew this to be true and that it set us apart from those less fortunate.

When I saw my friends driving off, two in one car and another by himself, I couldn't help but

wonder what they'll be doing next, literally speaking. At the end of the day they will retire to their rooms, shut the door and go to sleep. This image remains one of ultimate loneliness for many people but not in this special instance. You could tell it clearly by the way we had interacted. I couldn't help but be reminded of a saying from the Desert Fathers of Egypt during the early years of Christianity, "Stay in your cell, and it will teach you everything." Great advice, but who in the world follows it? At least I know several who do even if they may not formulate in this way.

Another concern that fades in old age is the distinction between those who've had children and those who haven't. It tends to remain sharp for a long time throughout your life, even haunting you, but fades away as evident by those of our group. The same applies to what we've accomplished or have failed to do so. The "place" to which we're all headed has nothing to do with those things, and we know it more day by day. The time left to us at this latter stage is much shorter than before, a fact that's staring us directly in the face. Now it's more a matter not of preparation but of disposing ourselves for a transition seen less as from life to death but as passage, the nature of which can't be described adequately but is real and for the better.

With this in mind we seek ways to maximize our remaining years which doesn't mean going out to accomplish great things. In fact, the opposite holds true. Like Ecclesiastes, we've come to see the "vanity" in these pursuits which doesn't denigrate them in the least, let alone the people engaged in them. If they weren't doing these things, life would be less desirable than it is now. Nothing would get done. So let's put the tag "tension" to what has characterized our lives...not that we've been in a state of constant anxiety all our lives though that's unfortunately true for many folks, but getting towards the end of life brings it into clearer focus.

This tension is roughly twofold (compare it with being edgy described shortly afterward). First, it has provided the energy for us to accomplish things in the most productive way possible. Second, old age reveals that the tension at hand has duped us, if you will, as being the very essence of life. Under various guises it has prevented us from seeing things as they are; rather, we've seen them not unlike shades or shadows. Then a day comes when by a stroke of luck or divine intervention we say "enough." We've come to see our previous responses as a set of reactions and counter-reactions that have done little to remove resentments which have built up over time. The sign that our response is genuine lays in the fact that the remaining years in life are short, and we don't want to end them bogged down in such a mental and spiritual mire. Better to say we refuse to let this happen, having discovered a new type of boldness and authority to handle that tension which had dominated us for so long. Now it's okay if our conscience brings up memories of the past—it was doing this all along anyway—because through them we see something else looming on the horizon, something we haven't seen before.

Returning to our breakfast conversation, one friend asked more or less rhetorically, does the comfortable space we're all enjoying make you feel edgy? In other words, do you feel guilty in not being "constructive" as you had been earlier in life? In sum, is there any tinge of regret? The question arose when one participant started feeling sorry for himself which deviated from

the overall positive nature of our gathering. Later he expressed gratitude for us not jumping on him but gently and humorously pointed out his negative remarks. To feel edgy shouldn't be equated with a guilty conscience. It comes largely from a constant, albeit subtle comparison of oneself with others, usually in a competitive sense. Actually this idea of edginess failed to take everyone by surprise because it comes into sharper focus when older. Although you don't have as much energy now, you still have enough which remains to be expended. The trouble, if you will, is both how and where to expend it. A final acid test, as one friend chimed in spontaneously.

It seems this edginess, a more refined description of that tension stated above, stands at a little understood though important border which emerges later in our lives insofar as it represents two halves. Already we've gone through the first half, and no one has a clue about the second half, how long it'll last. The first represents the time when we go about the business of growing up, advancing (for good or ill) and then retiring from it all. Sounds like that includes the bulk of our life span, and it does. Often people get anxious at or around sixty—a more or less arbitrary cut-off point but one that's handy—about what will happen to them in the not distant future. From here on it's pot-luck. We may be around anywhere from one to forty years, in what condition God only knows.

One friend familiar with Christian monastic life threw out an interesting observation relative to this barely understood manner of life which goes against the common flow of what everyone else does. The monastic example is intriguing because something completely opposite takes place. A young man enters the monastery with the normal expectancy of embarking upon a new life. Nothing new there; it's common everywhere. After the newness of the life wear off—it does so more quickly than other forms of life by reason of its sameness and repetitive nature—all along you're watching from the corner of your eye your contemporaries who for the most part are advancing. This one is now an executive and that one has four kids...and later is divorced. In other words, the first forty years or so of monastic life are difficult because in addition to the natural struggles of youth and middle age, there's the pernicious tendency to compare yourself with your peers with whom you live closely day after day.

Within the monastery things are the same as they were twenty years ago and most likely will remain that way for the next twenty and (God forbid!), twenty after that. So for a person who sticks it out through all life's phases reaches the age of sixty in no time. That's considered young by monastic standards by reason of the healthy diet and peaceful environment to which few people (alas) have access. Now you take another glance at your contemporaries. They have growing anxiety about the ironically labeled Golden Years, that is, their health, retirement and ultimately, death. Yet this is where the true Golden Years of monastic life are beginning. You have everything taken care off and no worries about it whatsoever even though you may be going through considerable physical pain. This socialist model of cradle-to-grave care has been true from the day you entered, but you hadn't appreciated then, being swept up with the newness of the life and the struggle to get through that day at hand like everyone else.

Here is a freedom that for your contemporaries is unimaginable, something they could only dream about. “Regular” life starts off positively with promises of advancement whereas

monastic life starts off in the opposite direction. For example, a newcomer called a novice does fairly menial chores for three years with virtually no alteration in his schedule. It's not unlike boot camp, however, that time is more limited and you face the prospect of promotion. Then about two-thirds towards the end of a monk's life, the situation is reversed, again, approximately when he reaches sixty. This is a proven fact by the great contentment so many elder monks exhibit. Not that they've been coddled but have waken up to see that they're set for good and view death as a gateway to something better. They've put up with a kind of long term martyrdom, that is, they have remained committed to one community and one place for the duration of their lives which is unheard of today. Most of that time has been taken up with attention to minor tasks compared to what family life involves, let alone making a living. Now they can begin to reap the fruits of this witness.

But let's get back to the edginess at hand, that vague, uneasy borderline world which includes monastic life. We can describe in general terms that much of life is taken up with various means to survive and propagate one's legacy and does this by parading before our minds an endless stream of images or forms. These forms are chiefly conflicting ideas within our minds vying for allegiance as we bump up against them or more accurately, grate against them. Such a rocky, scratchy road unfortunately seems the norm and is sustained by a misinformed awareness that yes, this is the nature life. Everyone's doing it and to go contrary to it means we're abnormal literally speaking, that is, away (ab-) from the norm in which everyone else is a participant. These forms cling close to our skin and make it virtually impossible to posit the existence of an alternate reality.

Even entertaining an alternative to this constant grating throughout life can be misunderstood as a form of escape, delusional at the worst. Yet so many people set up their own alternate (virtual?) realities, and that's accepted. The trouble with them, of course, is that they grate in their own peculiar ways. One way of getting at the root of these forms is to consider your personal experience. An incident which had caused unpleasantness is secondary to the one now planted within your memory. We hear that over and over, know it to be true, but seldom act on this distinction. The common expression "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never harm me" is as illusory as it gets. Yet somewhere in middle age or when we've well passed the period of youth, an uneasy feeling starts to emerge. We continue to access memories implanted in us, but they have lost the firmness of their foothold. Yes, they retain the power to lead us around by the nose, however, the pull isn't as tight as it once had been. Describing this transition is difficult chiefly because we've been conditioned to put great stock in forms as arbiters of reality.

Nevertheless we're still dealing with forms in a mitigated fashion, that is, they have become more light-some than in years gone by. This process of distillation, if you will, is natural and will continue though we encounter resistance. It lasts longer than we desire because never have we been trained to shake off formal expression or better, shed it gently like a snake does its skin in order to move ahead more effortlessly. Even to think in such terms is generally unheard of. Throughout we're in the process of accumulating a kind of energy that although lacking form, manifests itself in a relative wisdom which doesn't requiring anything showy. We could more accurately phrase this as a diminution of our innate folly. It emerges by reason of

less attention to form and hence beliefs as well as opinions resulting in detachment and more universal or unbiased attention. This occurs naturally and without our realizing it. Our attention is displaced from a habitual attachment to forms whether in or outside us over to that which lacks form. While this process is commonplace in old age but rarely reflected upon, the task at hand is to become aware of the overall subtilization of form that we might capitalize on the situation as quickly as possible. That means with better understanding we can move the process to earlier in life. Grasping the seriousness of the matter is vital, for the more we do, the quicker we're spurred into action.

If we could pinpoint what people really crave nowadays it's the ability to comprehend the mechanism just outlined. Granted, it's hard to understand, let alone write about, but worth the effort to disclose what's going on. People don't want to beat around the bush as is often the case with religious-devotional language. A more matter-of-fact approach is the way to go because people want a straight-forward understanding of the transition they're experiencing. Already they're having a tough grasping it due to the paucity and inaccuracy of the language at hand. This contributes to the unease we're trying to understand here, a malaise, if you will, which contributes to our inability to articulate the edginess we experience during the (in)famous midlife crisis. Interestingly, it is the time when when we're neither growing nor decaying; it occurs just after the transition from youth and at the threshold of old age which is the middle plateau of life.

Actually midlife is quite short, lasting twenty to thirty years and jam-packed with lots of activity which disguises the growing unease we have despite our achievements. In sum, this unease consists in trying to appropriate that which is eternal and make it fit our temporal world. We know eventually that we'll bump up against a wall but deceive ourselves by saying it's still far away enough. During this period a growing sense of life's ups and downs begins to assume a greater air of unreality. Not that they're unreal but their continued alteration belays a reality underpinning them though we can't quite lay hold of it. That's why in the midst of midlife's activities rarely people admit they are happy or content. The unreality of events isn't strong enough yet to make them check out other viable options. The sentiments of being duped is still too vague and ill-defined but destined to become stronger later in life, say, another twenty-five to thirty years.

Midlife is when we're at our strongest, often called the prime of life, or so it seems from the conventional point of view. However, it lacks the accumulation of experiences, positive and negative, which yet need to be smoothed out, the end result being growth in wisdom, the diminishment of our folly. In other words, the idea of form remains quite strong though it is on the threshold of being loosened. This is putting it awkwardly because such a topic is little explored except in general terms. It seems that towards the end of life most people, regardless of their background and culture, feel that life is an illusion. Not that life is ghost-like but its transitory nature, alternating as we do from this form to that form and back again, gives rise to the idea that such is life. There's no more to it than that, a swinging back and forth, hence the oft-noted idea of life as game or taking place on a stage. In light of this universal experience it's easy to see how various ideas of reincarnation, other worlds and parallel universes came to be. They're as good as anything to describe our continuous bantering back

and forth. During one swing we're good and in the next, not so good. Then it's curtain time.

So once we've passed the midlife crisis and have embarked more seriously upon the aging process, that is, not yet feeling the fuller effects of aches and pains along with a decrease in our mental facilities, we become more attentive to our corporeal nature. One friend who recently turned eighty said for him the real effects of old age started about seventy and increased steadily since then. He wondered wryly, what will the ninety's bring? He quipped, more frequent trips to the bathroom. One thing we can count on as we enter the sixty's: our pains are more immediate and constant. In short, we're more aware of our mortality as we evolve into being professional patients as another friend had said referring to someone who spends three days a week for dialysis. So while we're in the thick of all this knowing it's not going to get better, we achieve a resignation that had been lacking earlier in life. That is what my three friends were expressing albeit unintentionally during our recent breakfast. Even if you're older as they are, a person can continue along in the conventional sense and not make any progress in matters that are now important, that is to say, a deeper understanding of things spiritual. The invitation has been there from the start, made more available during the midlife crisis and becomes more obvious towards the end of life.

What's at issue isn't a question of acknowledging God as we may have done all our lives, a lot of this having been backed up by the influence of religion in our culture. However, things have changed drastically in just one generation. For many folks it's a matter of shaking off preconceptions about spiritual matters that we've dragged along from our childhood which, in turn, we got from our parents with little or no development. In other words, we grew up stunted, religiously speaking. The paradox is that while we may have become knowledgeable in many fields of human endeavor, even quite sophisticated in them, spiritually we're still in kindergarten. By chance not long ago I heard a well known local rabbi on PBS mention this very fact. When pressed by the interviewer about being immature spirituality, he was at a loss. The rabbi skirted the issue somewhat by saying that ongoing religious education has been lacking but nothing more. The tone of his voice revealed not so much his ignorance but his guilt at not providing a satisfactory answer. Actually, who could blame him? I wonder how he felt walking out of the studio to his car.

I came away from this radio program disappointed both for myself and for the listeners who're eager to get more precise information in an area of common concern but never receive a satisfactory answer. So it seems that as a society, sophisticated as might be, we're all at a loss. Those of us tending towards the end of life are left with little guidance or training as what to do next except getting the same ol' religious information we had in our youth. We know we're made for something better than this. Everybody does, including the teachers, but they're at a loss like the rest of us. Such is the proverbial elephant in the room. Everyone acknowledges its presence but don't know how to handle it. While my three friends had been exposed to this general malaise, they've managed to grow both within their religious (Catholic) tradition more or less undamaged while not abandoning it. What had sustained them, it appears, stems from interest in various meditation practices held by the Church. Such people stick out in a crowd by their attitude but not in the usual sense of being oddities. Externally they are always joyful and if you look more closely, are more detached in the serene sense than most of us.

Our awareness of physicality in old age increases in some measure from aches and pains thereby making us come full circle. That is to say, when very young—and I mean infancy and shortly afterward—our entire attention was focused upon the physical world. We had little no conception as to what was going on within us. And so the two types of attention to physicality are superficially similar but in reality very different. The former comes before and during the mind's early development and the latter obviously much later, including (unfortunately) its dilapidation. Sensitivity to that which is physical belongs to both due to the overall weakness of each period: one of pre-maturity and the other post-maturity, if we can put it such. The point is that the physical, instead of the mental and spiritual, are at the forefront of our attention because our weaker condition demands one-to-one contact with the outside world, a fact anyone can observe. The latter stage is of concern here because we have little training how to make use of that which is physical. Everyone acknowledges that old age tends toward greater interiority but often lacks proper guidance relative to the outside world. Hence people can end up empty-handed, one the greatest tragedies that goes unreported. They're just as helpless as when they had been infants and are filled with memories of their maturity which lasts some thirty years before a decline sets in. That's pretty much where old age deposits us...filled with memories of deceased relatives and friends.

During middle age or that span of some thirty years before old age creeps upon us, we're functioning on all cylinders. If we could establish ourselves in awareness of physicality during that time, we'd be spared considerable grief later on. However, our sense of being in command blots out everything else; we're so full of this plan and that plan. Although never can we escape the physical world, rarely do we give it attention. This may sound a bit far-fetched but simple observation proves it true. Our total involvement in the world of representations (some could say with equal force, virtual reality) makes it impossible to entertain the option of an alternative, let alone an option superior to the one we're in now. What we have at present is as good as it gets or will ever get which is why we fear getting older, loss of our attachment to where mental activity is the by-all and end-all. Just consider people who've now ended up in old age. They, as when in middle age, had been preoccupied with thoughts which now have become memories of the past, so familiar and clung to even if they are less than pleasant. It turns out we haven't been informed how to handle such a situation even when everyone knows this is inevitable. This time, so dominated by memories, is one when we're confronted with daily aches and pains that are bound to increase, not diminish. They feed into our mental representations which are quite useless yet at the same time grab our attention. And this is how we can spend our lives, a genuine tragedy.

It appears that the aches and pains just noted are all the more fearful by reason of their contrast with the mental vibrancy experienced during most of our lives. However, it's a vibrancy founded upon mental representations which are neither good nor bad in themselves. The problem lies in the fact that such representations are *forms* of thoughts and memories, partial and hence incomplete. By their very nature they can't take in the whole of reality which includes the negative side of things. This doesn't mean we have to bestow upon them the same preference we have for what is good. Rather, it means withdrawing the tendency itself to have preferences, a concept difficult to grasp by any standard. Usually we bypass this

opportunity and bring over into old age the positive and negative sides of our thoughts without altering them a bit. In this way we continue, even foster, the alteration spoken of earlier. Even though our mental capacities may be diminished, essentially we continue to live on the same plane of forms as when younger, trying to maintain an impossible bridge between the two.

This kind of gets at the issue at hand. I say “kind of” because the subject matter at hand isn't something you hear talked about. The main reason is that we're approaching a realm where the notion of form is more tenuous, and forms have preoccupied virtually all the days of our lives. Instead, we're on the threshold of a wholly new way of looking at things, and that way puts significantly less emphasis upon form. Speaking like this makes us bump up against the limits of language along with many other restrictions we haven't experienced before. Therefore many of the remarks put down here essentially are provisional, perhaps somewhat off base, but that doesn't preclude exploring them. The important thing to be on guard against is our innate preference for mental representations—in other words, forms—across the board which blind us to the existence of any alternative. And that alternative is the question at hand which at first appears non-existent, even a fabrication (which belongs to the realm of forms), because it has no form, never had a form and never will have a form despite what we feel contrariwise.

To get at this matter better, let's consider an ideal case yet rooted in real life. Suppose a person on the threshold of middle age has learned that mental representations, while perfectly fine in themselves, are limited. How this comes about is incidental; for now we posit it as such. Yet life's constraints compel him to pursue a fairly conventional course which he discovers isn't for him. After all, society is built upon established structures. These, in turn, are founded upon mental representations, something he has come to reject because of his insight that an alternative exists even if this insight is rather vague. At this juncture one might draw a parallel with the saints. Some may have been engaged in the world early on but suddenly withdrew from it. We run into a problem here for many folks. This withdrawal is couched in religious and devotional language which largely has lost its appeal. Be that as it may, the withdrawal at hand is common to all religious traditions and appears as a loss both to the person involved and to observers because of the renunciation of what's held in high esteem. That's the rub. If we were dealing with renunciation of evil or despicable behavior, no problem. Our theoretical person may feel the same, but as it turns out, this is an initial impression. What he takes up is of greater value, but it can't be described employing the language to which he had been accustomed. To use the common proverbial expression, we're dealing with a leap of faith done all on one's own and without support. Once the leap has taken place, more often than not you find like-minded persons. They just appear, like coming out of the woodwork. It's a phenomenon provable to anyone under one condition: you can't go out looking for these people since they come on the scene without your intervention. Quite miraculous, really.

Continuing with this ideal case, is it possible to trace with greater specificity both the where and the when of the initial insight to withdraw from the world of mental representations? Essentially we're asking to locate a conversion, a *metanoia* of sorts commonly associated with religion. Here all language is tentative; it describes the way we comport ourselves as a result

of our thoughts and our identity with them. Briefly put, no thoughts, no identity. Insight into this world—the only one apparently real—looses its grasp. Hence fiddling about the where and the when is pretty much a waste of time. Something not visible to our eyes has intervened not unlike that *metanoia* just mentioned. The most general characteristic of this intervention is that we can situate it “up there,” doing this in full knowledge that there's no “up” and no “there.” We have to use language, and therefore opt for what lays fully outside ourselves. And that which is “up there” somehow has become accessible. It has come “down here,” not the other way around. It must assume the form of a descent which, when you look at it more closely, relieves us of a lot of undue stress. The realm into which the “up there” reality has descended always strives to usurp that place, again keeping with the terms of striving to get “up there.” It's a completely natural tendency, not necessarily evil, but more susceptible to less than desirable influences whereas that which is up there coming down here has none of it. Always we retain some traces of “up there.” The problem is that we don't posit these traces as belonging to the virtue of hope where they belong. Instead, we prefer not to hope, if you will, and prefer taking “up there” by storm. Such is the most fundamental up-to-down vs. down-to-up pattern of life into which everyone is situated.

It's an obvious fact that our physical world is full of messy, violent things, including some of our behavior if it isn't properly checked. We're aware of it even when things are going our way, that both won't last and even if prolonged, come to an end with our death. While this whole ball of wax impinges upon us one way favorably and another not so favorably, it is the source of all our thoughts, the agent responsible for *forming* them. Each of us has been raised this way, right across the board, regardless of being rich or poor. So to step away from this realm is like trying to step outside your body and trying to continue in existence, a seemingly impossible task. Yet that's what the idea of conversion (*metanoia*) is about whether or not it's presented in religious terms. It's almost too much to conceive a plane of reality that exists outside our thought process, yet that's what attention to physicality enables us to do. That which we thought was furthest away turns out to be the closest, quite amazing, and easy as pie to access. Starting it early on in life gives a whopping advantage when you get older (even if you do it late in life, it's better than nothing). What's so paradoxical about attention to physicality is it goes against our expectations. We want something “better” than the physical and posit it in the mental and spiritual. However, it turns out ultimately this is false.

Now the question foremost to us may be put as follows. How do you sustain awareness of physicality without falling back into mental representations? In actuality you can't go at it full tilt. Instead, you must learn how to deal with alternating between physicality and the necessity to have thoughts in order to function properly within the world. Always this takes place out of sight which is hard to accept because we like the spotlight thrown upon us. In fact, this struggle is constant and quite literally heroic. So consider when in old age we have the opportunity to look back and identify not so much the point when we've opted to see reality without the imposition of forms, but a general smoothing out of how we comport ourselves. Attention to physicality, including our bodies or even starting there, shows how much in life goes according to automatic pilot. And this autopilot guides us along the straight and narrow without our interference. A fuller realization of such living may come later in life, but that's no problem because we're dealing with a reality outside space and time yet very present to us.

One is reminded of Christ's parable of the overseer summoning labors in the early morning and continuing all the way until evening, giving each man the same pay. Realizing the boon of physicality has the same reward whether begun early in life, middle age or much later. Old age now is something that ceases to weigh upon us despite the pains and humiliations of having to be cared for. We've managed to escape the forms that normally accompany people into this stage of life. So if death is the advent of that which is formless, already we've "died." That is to say, we've left forms behind and can go forward into what we are already present, the best way to describe such a paradox.

A closing note about the typically Catholic idea of Purgatory, if you please. Traditionally it's presented as an in between state of heaven and hell. Most people aren't good enough to go directly to heaven. The same applies conversely with regard to hell. Because we're not qualified fully for neither by reason of our mediocrity, we have to tread water for a greater or lesser time before entering heaven. That means we require being purified for a given length of time if such a concept can be applied to eternity. The agent which cleanses us isn't soap and water but fire, a rather unpleasant prospect. Regardless of your position on the matter, Purgatory does have merit. Because 99.99% of us are in between heaven and hell and have to go "somewhere," why not Purgatory, a place of cleansing? So to preclude this halfway house after death, it's possible to begin as soon as possible by reason of being cleansed of the deceptive, all-pervasive world of forms. We've come to acknowledge the reality of that which is formless and see it as our native land. Because we haven't achieved it before death (arguably no one has) and are immortal by reason of that formless reality present throughout our entire lives without diminishment even late in life, we end up in one place or another. Obviously this talk falls under the trap of form, hence both the ridicule and fascination Purgatory still retains. We know we're made for something great, have squandered it to one degree or another, yet are worth saving. Hence the need for cleansing after physical death which we can anticipate beforehand or when we've opted to shake off the yoke of formal bondage.

A note on the title of this essay, *In vs. Not of This World* is in order. Originally it was intended as an attempt to explore how a religiously oriented person can live his or her life in the world but not be part of it, not be begotten by it. When these ideas were being formulated there intervened that pleasant little interlude of a simple morning breakfast among friends which opens this essay. Each participant in his or her own way had some religious influence upon their lives, even one who took pride in proclaiming loudly that she is an atheist. However, her claim was more against organized religion, a familiar theme we hear today. As I look back on the lives of each participant, they've been involved with religion in a more intense way, quite sustained over their lives compared with most folks. So here were four people who were living in the world but were not begotten of it. In their advanced years they were content and showed no fear of death which could come at any time. I thought of changing the essay's title but in the end decided against it. After all, it is a title and the essay is a a dim reflection upon several persons who are genuine as they come which is what counts and continues to make a lasting impression.

I might add in conclusion that putting down these ideas involved a struggle. Without a doubt, considering the way we go through life as passing from one form to another and so forth is

awkwardly put. This becomes even more difficult when an alternate is proposed, a realm minus forms or beyond forms. It sounds mystical in a hokey sort of way but then again, each of us eventually ends up confronting it. That's why emphasis has been upon the latter years of life when we unknowingly acquire a wisdom we've lacked earlier. That wisdom, if you look at it closely from examples of people you've known, has moved from formal representation to an informal one. If you were to put it this way to such a person, all you'd get is a blank stare. Thus by thrashing around with some reflections upon a little talked about reality more clarity may be gained. After all, we're all headed for old age so might as well make the most of it.

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