

## Meaning vs. Reality

A few years ago the murder of a prominent family in Connecticut had captured the nation's attention, a crime so horrendous that it turned everyone's stomach. Then in the fall of 2010 a trial found the principle defendant guilty, and shortly afterwards he received the death sentence. The trial of his accomplice is scheduled to follow. Not long after the first trial the surviving member of the slain family went on television to tell his story. I didn't see the interview, but just hearing that he agreed to go public like this made me feel uneasy. I wasn't concerned about his motives but felt a bit squeamish at millions of viewers being privy to such pain; if I had seen the program, I would have felt guilty of voyeurism or partaking of sensationalism. Of course, anyone could have predicted the first question put to him: How can you believe in God after your family was murdered before your very eyes? What's unfair is that people expect a revelation that will shed light on extreme evil. The husband unwittingly found himself an expert on life and death, under pressure to come forth with a Solomon-like ruling on the subject. As expected, that doesn't happen when a nationwide audience is watching you. With the passage of time, the doubts and mental anguish such incidents elicit dissipate and remain unresolved until another tragedy emerges. While most of us (fortunately) don't undergo such extreme catastrophes, the triple murder and the reaction to it raised a question not dealt in this article but was the impetus behind it, hence the reason why I mention this trial now at the beginning.

An extreme situation as the one just outlined makes us wonder how we'd respond in such a situation. After a friend saw the interview, he launched into a digression as to how can we make sense of our such blatant evil. Naturally he couched it in terms of doubting God and his existence, a topic always just below the surface, ready to spring forth when a tragedy occurs. Instead of staying on this cosmic level, I wish to take a look at more mundane experiences of daily life, of how we hold together experiences in light of an ideal or what we think should be the right way of doing things. Always the two are bumping up against each other, quite unrelenting, when you think of it. Such was the lesson I learned not so much from that overwhelming tragedy but how it made my friend reflect on his own life. As soon as he opened his mouth I knew he was going to ask my opinion about why does God (if he exists) allow such terrible things to happen. I brushed off his observation with the conventional "who knows" which didn't bother him simply because he was to pre-occupied. And so I came away from this not at the unfathomableness of evil in and by itself but at the way people get caught up in it as an observer, after which they move on to something else.

Upon hanging up the phone at once I decided to do a quick mental experiment. It consisted of blocking out ideas about reality right across the board, no exception. This pretty much is Mission Impossible yet even a brief attempt reveals an important lesson, albeit a simple one. Ideas act as filters between us and reality, quite different from our coming into the world with our minds as a *tableau rasa*. Generally they are considered the exact antithesis to meditative exercises and indeed are believed necessary to function in the real world. So what's the goal? Simply curiosity, of seeing how ideas govern us, and if we can have any freedom from them. A goal further out and more important is to see if such a state is desirable, if it makes us happy. At first the experience was liberating but a few minutes of experimentation revealed it was much harder than anticipated. Wishing for a life unbound by the constant parade of ideas which precondition us is a desire that has occupied virtual every spiritual tradition from the beginning. The prospect is so formidable that even a few minutes into it makes you wonder if it's worth the while. The evidence says "no" (after all, no one around you seems to be doing it) whereas a deep from within urges you on, this in the face of overwhelming odds. How do you sort the two out in a realistic fashion, that is, how do you make a distinction between your regular life and a life unconditioned by all that impinges upon you? So instead of rushing headlong into the inevitable brick wall at the impossibility of reconciling the two, it might be helpful to start from an awareness of this basic divide and get a lay of the land. The very first impression is that it is perceived as a divide. Therefore we can visualize it as such and move more closely to the border area and see what's there. Even if we found nothing, the search was worth the effort, and we can try out something else.

Bumping up against this primeval divide (primeval because it appears to be at the source of every one of us) is not unlike peeling away the surface layer and looking at tectonic plates under the earth. On top the rub is noticeable to some degree, but it's much more violent and in perpetual motion not far beneath. Plenty of

other things on the surface detract from deeper exploration. Even if we obtain a glimpse of this in all its fury, there's a natural tendency to shut the cover tight and return to the surface as quickly as possible despite the turmoil transpiring right below our feet. The usual recourse we have is a return to our regular way of life but with memory of that experience, perhaps hoping some day to delve into it more fully. Part of the problem is that although we're curious, most people with whom we associate aren't...what goes on down there isn't recorded except a casual notice at the rift existing on the surface. As with an earthquake, the only time we pay attention is when the activity deep below erupts to the surface causing widespread destruction.

So with this image in mind, it might be helpful to check out any rifts on the surface, map them out and see how deep they lay. That could help us predict any future damage. As in science, nothing can prevent an earthquake, but sensors can be installed in the field to monitor the situation and give some modicum of warning. Applying this to the situation under discussion, perhaps it's possible to install "monitors" to see how our daily thoughts and emotions stack register or better, how they compare to a desire for undue influence upon our lives. Such an approach is more indirect compared with a frontal assault which is more subject to failure, hence the reason why so many people understandably don't bother to pursue inquiring further. Better to take time getting the lay of the land and map it out. Appeal to our map-making inclination hits home for a lot of people. So many get genuine enjoyment from pouring over maps which enables you to fantasize about the place you imagine which can turn out more exciting than actually being there.

One reliable way to avoid pitfalls—and by that is meant when a given thought dominates our way of thinking and behavior—is to hold before yourself as vividly as possible the most likely scenario that will unfold. It demonstrates how vulnerable you are, like on a small boat in the midst of the ocean or a passenger in a jet some thirty-five thousand feet high with a thin piece of metal separating you from the wild blue yonder. Awareness of this vulnerability, regardless of what it is and even if it is not present, has a way of dissolving the threat at hand. How this works is anyone's guess, but works it does. Perhaps it has something to do with the notion of rehearsal; the more you perform an action in your head beforehand the easier it is when the time comes. This seems to be a process of making our minds (which, of course, lack geographical space) work in a way that is geographical, of setting up bounds and temporal durations within which we can operate before an event occurs.

Every religion with a contemplative component recognizes the ceaseless flow of mental thoughts and images that assail us. They weary us because the process is unceasing day and night: during the day with thoughts and night with dreams. All meditation boils down to handling this assault. Some might be more successful than others, yet all fall short of achieving their ultimate goal...not of blotting out thoughts and image from our mind but of suspending them. Maybe it'd be unnatural to wish for this, really. Another approach is to accept the flow as part and parcel of our existence, not just resigning to this flow as a neighbor from whom never we can escape but to welcome it. Regardless of which approach you adopt, meditation looks unfavorably at the mental stream to which we all are enslaved. That might be part of the problem, of struggling against that which we have not the slightest chance of stemming. Some ground may be gained here and there but for the most part thoughts and images win out. So if one is sensitive to things spiritual (that implies, of course, that a person is bothered by the ceaseless mental flow and feels powerless to do anything about it), it might be time to examine that long-standing prejudice against them. If it doesn't work out, then back to the drawing board...

Often the adoption of an image gives us the lay-of-the-land, and one example is the notion of a threshold. It was one of my earliest images which signaled how I had comported myself as a child which later was supported by classical studies and an inclination for the Christian contemplative tradition. For example, during one highschool class on mythology we were studying the Roman god Janus who had no parallel in the Greek pantheon: dual-headed, with one head looking forward and the other behind, marking actual and metaphorical thresholds in time and space. Janus guarded crossing places and thresholds, beginnings and endings and acted as an intermediary between the gods and mortals. Right away this hearkened back to those earlier experiences of boarder-ness while at the same time taking up that experience and projecting it onto a new or higher level. That process would be repeated when I had come in contact with various Christian authors, usually those of the first four centuries when Christianity was still being formulated and view in through the lens of Hellenistic philosophy. All this would find its best expression through the notion of a monastic enclosure...not as a

restricted space but as one set off by reason of being superior to its surroundings. That's such a life-giving insight that it continues today unabated with the wonderful prospect of offering further insights.

In order to bring into focus what was just delineated, some distance is required with respect to the normal way of viewing reality. To effect this is no mean feat because it is so alien to our conventional experience. A suggested way of effecting this necessary distance or withdrawal is by examining two verbs, to loll and to saunter. The verb "to loll" connotes a hanging down either in exhaustion or relaxation, though it does not refer to laziness *per se*. The three "l's" make the word roll off your tongue slowly which is enhanced by the letter "o" pronounced not unlike a Southern drawl. Thus this rather strung-out verb of four letters is a delight to utter, chiefly because it takes a relatively long time to get off your lips. Lolling is indicative of the summer and vacation time as sitting on a front porch simply enjoying oneself as an observer of all that passes by. Unlike other verbs pertaining to relaxation or indolence, equally it applies to standing up, lying down or sitting. As with anything else, lolling can have negative overtones, but given the slowness required of its pronunciation, lolling doesn't lean in that direction. As far as I can tell, this verb lacks a noun, for example, "loller." This intimates that we find the action in the verbal form only, that one has to l-o-l-l in order to appreciate it.

The second word verb is "to saunter" and is best described by an excerpt from beginning of Henry David Thoreau's essay entitled **Walking**: "I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived 'from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going à la Sainte Terre'—to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, 'There goes a Sainte-Terrer,' a saunterer—a holy-lander. They who never go to the holy land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds, but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering."

Despite the difference between "loll" and "saunter," both play a similar role with respect to the subject at hand.