

The End of the Year

Before you,
There is a clear road laid:
To you,
A new sky has been opened:
The timepiece of history
Has just tolled out a memorable hour!

Go off, off, master of your fate
Over the twilight pathways
Over the humble pathways of the Ancients.
A poem from Negritude

There is something very stark about the end of the year. You know you are undeniably one year older and you are one year closer to the end of your earthly existence. That is an interesting idea and it does have significance. However, the significance it has may be confusing to us. For we have no real philosophy of time even though we have been trying all year, all of our lives to create one. Two major ways of interpreting time continue to add to our confusion, and a third understanding does not get listened to very much. The first two ways of interpreting time you learned in school, but the third interpretation you did not.

The first way of understanding time is the Hellenistic/Greek way known as the cyclical interpretation of history or often referred to as the “wheel of time”. It is the understanding that we move from birth, to growth, to decay and death and the process repeats itself over and over again. There

is a springtime of wild and unbridled dreams; a summer testing period; a fall time of repose; and the death in winter. That is the cycle. It is a death dealing idea of time.

It really does not make much of a place for you as a person. The race is saved, but you as an individual are not. For instance, your mother and father raise and support you and they die. It is rather theoretical to suspect that you know they are literally alive in you. It makes of time an unfulfilling reality and a frustrating cycle. If you press this, you will find that there are other thinkers who used other words, one of which is "cosmic time". This is what you learn if we look at the universe and what you learn if you look at nature. However, it is looking at nature with an undiscerning eye. This time never supposes that there is any ultimate significance to what you would call the aroma of a flower. All we see are the stems that are beautiful and dropped, turned to dust. We see the cycle only. What happened to the flavor --- the scent? Does that mean anything? You can't account for it here. As a matter of fact it is an interesting understanding because it puts us in a kind of relationship where we look at time. Time bespeaks the malady of us, and, therefore, maybe is a projection of our problem as developed in the Greek mind. We cannot own the present because in order to do so we annihilate the past. In this perspective the present must kill the

past and then as soon as it is established it must be annihilated by the future.

Does this mean anything to you?

Let us turn to the Bible for an illustration. In Ecclesiastes it says, “there is nothing new under the sun. What has been is what will be.” How many of you find comfort in that? If that is true, there is no need to struggle unduly. What if a Beethoven had taken that seriously? What if Malcolm and King had taken that seriously? That is one understanding of time.

The second understanding of time is what we call historical or linear time. It is that realm wherein we are on the pursuit of something and new things break into history, new ways of doing things. It is very conscious, unlike the other of the past and of the future, and always runs the risk of illusion as it attempts to live in one or the other. You know the people who always hearken back to the “golden years” when things were better? This understanding of time does help us at the point that it creates a sense of history. We are not just going around in circles. Time is moving along because there is a past, present and a future. This helps to give meaning to this understanding of time.

Now it is to this understanding of time that we have added a new dimension. I believe that it was Merton who called it “collective obsession”. This may be peculiar to mass man – man whose linear motion through

history is bombarded by mass delusions and obsessions, so much so, that he begins to believe that there is really nothing meaningful and the linear motion through this life and through history is simply a flight away from the awfulness and the absurdity of our world. Many people that I encounter are living in the historical time perspective as they attempt to flee from the absurdity that is their own existence. They think it is possible because collectively we all act like we can move away from the awful reality which our lives have engendered. That may just make life a farce.

It is around these two ideas of time that I think most of us spend our days. Also, there is something about them that is a part of most of our lives during this time of the year. It is a time of year where there seems to be a futility of life. We don't make resolutions anymore. Why? Because we made some last year and we did not keep them. It comes from what will be is what has been, so it is no use. In addition, we feel we are trapped by the facts. Many people have used the past to serve their own spurious purposes. They lock into their memory all that has been done to them over the past 12 months and "vow" to get even. If you encounter them during the year, they will spew out all of the venom which has built up as they remember what has happened to them.

Many of us have allowed this kind of thinking about time to

categorize or conceptualize us. We look at our past failures and begin to think they are indicators of what is really possible for us. If we have had successive failures, we then begin to take stock of ourselves within the context of that failure pattern and decide perhaps we should not get too carried away with this linear stuff because the cyclical thing is still turning. It is written in our fingers there is a limitation in our lives. So, we do not try anything too different or dare anything new. We design our life on the basis of what we have not been able to do. In so doing we never deal with the dimension of what might be, of what could be, or what shall be. And all of the time the Gospel stands over and against this reading of history as it talks about the infinite expandability and possibility for every human spirit.

Equally as dangerous is another great temptation to stake ourselves upon our successes. Some of us may have had a good year and we are proud of it. Have you ever run into someone who is living on his or her successes? It is perhaps more tragic to run into this type of person. For this person is locked between these two conceptions of time because they really do not believe nor do they dare believe that maybe yesterday's success pales in contrast to what could be today's success. Someone once said that there is no defeat quite as defeating as the defeat of success that forgets the dream that gave its birth.

Most of us are within one of these places. Either I have had a good year and I'll live on that for another year or had a bad year and I'm really not going to put myself out too much this coming year. I am more mature now. We say, "I know what I can do and I am not going to let even you get to me to do something I can't do. I have it all figured out."

But do you know what you can do? Are you sure you know who you are in terms of what you can do? The very notion of "passing" suggests to us something that is very awesome and that is whatever we are going to do, we ought to get to doing it. It may be a simple idea, but it allows for a basic integrity to be built into life. The minute we have a tomorrow, a yesterday, and a next week, we get caught within the frame from which some character can be built.

My father gave the commencement address at my high school graduation and the title was "Tomorrow and the Next Day". I now recognize the importance of that theme. He was saying this was your opportunity to do something in time. It is the basis out of which integrity is built. You actually do have a judgment based in the motion and if you don't do it, it may be too late. "The moving finger writes and having writ, moves on..." and all your tears can't erase a line of it. We have an opportunity and then it is gone. Sometimes we act as if we have continuous, unending

opportunities, but the passage of time suggest that there is a judgment in your dilly-dallying around. That judgment is based in life as it reflects itself in our own erosion.

The apostle Paul tried to deal with this as he sat as an old man of 70 in a prison. He said, “This one thing I do, forgetting what was past, I press on to the mark for the prize.” He was trying to suggest a break with some of the models that have us caught. He is saying we must act and not just dream. Over and against all of this, there is another kind of time that needs to be added. I refer to it as the scripture calls it, “the fullness of time”. Tillich calls it “Kynos”. Berdyaev calls it existential time. For me it is easier to call it the “mystery of eternity in time”. All religions posit that there is a norm of time that also judges us that is neither cyclical nor linear. It is an understanding that the eternal is available now. This understanding posits there is an order of existence that we don’t live in.

Oppenheimer used to talk that when he was in the laboratory he became sensitive to a world backing up into his world. And it was over in that world that he went for his insight. He talked about a time that is neither on a wheel nor on a line. It is best characterized by that which breaks through upon our present involvements and opens them up to the possible deeper meanings. It is to participate in a fleeting moment of the old world

about what is human, what is beautiful and what is good. Some of you may have had moments during which you said, “Time stood still”. What you meant was that for an instance all the cyclical/linear time was suspended and something different in character and tone was real to you. That is the other time that breaks through to inform you and in the break through gives you a glimpse of what possibly could be. It is the realm of all prophets and seers. It is the realm of all aspiration, of all promise, and of all life which then puts death in its place. It is in the realm of the resurrection. The disciples did not know how to say it, but after Jesus died they knew that the old time was thwarted and suspended by his life. There was let loose that which defied all time and space.

One thing is clear. We have all experienced these moments. Did you ever have a time in your life when things were so good that you forgot what time it was? You did not check your watch? Things were so good that you did not check the calendar? At that moment you were outside this time range. Most of the time in this world we are checking to see what time it is.

Of course, these moments will not happen on any meaningful level unless you are involved. You must be involved in life’s paradoxes and contradictions to be sensitive to the broad design. When you are involved in the struggle for life, peace, and justice you increase your awareness of who

you are. Also the struggle will open up to you new dimensions of the dilemma of existence when your back is up against the wall. You will see more when the break through comes. Melville says that what is grand in me, must be plucked from the sky, dived for in the deep, and featured on the unbodied air. You cannot understand that by sitting on the sidelines – a spectator to life. When you get involved in some issue of justice or deal with some of the oppression in this world, then you will know what it means to go alone at night and leave a little of your blood behind. From a point of involvement you get a response from life, because life knows you by name. And whether it is joy or tragedy you will have something to report back to those who are sitting on the sideline. You will be able to tell them not just something about the past or the present, but you will be able to tell them you have stood on the edge of life and had an idea about what could be, of what will be.

Therefore, I call you to desert the illusionary lostness in the past and the future and to give your life to the problems which would destroy life in such a way that you will know the insight that breaks through in transcendent awareness to those so devoted who call upon life for a response. I call you to live not in the future, but to live **the future** to celebrate the new found awareness and to be a vehicle for the continuous

celebration of the new vistas, the new time, the new norms with renewed dedication. Allow the vision of tomorrow to walk the earth in the form of your body. That is the opportunity. Live that the very neighborhood that develops around your being will underscore the possibility and the potential for a humane and just world.