

WHEN NONSENSE MAKES SENSE

My friend, who do you think you are? Have you ever had that question addressed to you? I wonder if we have fully understood its relevance. Let me illustrate. Not long ago a Chicago workman slipped from his scaffolding and plummeted earthward. His fall was broken by a canopy of a street store. He slipped from the canvas to the pavement, none too gracefully, and lay there stunned. As the crowd gathered, a policeman hurried to the center of the group and addressed the prostrate figure, "What's going on here; what's this all about?" A little dazed, the workman was heard to murmur, "I Don't know, I don't know, brother I've just arrived."

A biographical snippet concerning the German philosopher, Schopenhauer, parallels this story. Considerably disheveled in appearance, the philosopher was sitting on a park bench in Frankfurt when the park attendant considering the untidy stranger to be a tramp, approached him with the query, "Who are you?" Disconsolately, the dowdy figure replied, "I wish I knew." These two anecdotes, my friends, illustrate the core problems of existence. What is life all about? Who are we? All of us comparatively speaking, have only just arrived on the scene of the universe. From birth we are surrounded by fuss, fume and fury, by question marks and exclamation points. We are the recipients of both glory and infamy, of badges and bruises and the insistent query comes, what is it all about? Who am I? Does life have significance, meaning, purpose, or is it sheer nonsense?

My friends, we all know the experience of the awakening of doubt, fear and uncertainty, the happy ride of the senses and emotions that usually characterize childhood, yet, most of it is cruelly dissipated by growing awareness of reality. With increasing age we inquire whether or not life's first impressions have woven for us a deceiving web of fantasy. The music we thought we heard rippling gaily through the experience of each day...was it from Heaven or was it from a callow imagination yet unstopped with accurate pictures of the world? Now dawn the years of questioning and the answer arrived at determine all else for each of us.

WHAT, WHENCE, WHITHER is the title of a famous painting in the Boston museum of art. The artist, Gauguin, tells that his work should be viewed from right to the left. First we see exotic, sensuous symbolism. The second impression is that of tragedy, a young Tahitian beauty is succeeded by a dying old woman and a monstrous bird hovers nearby. Not long after laying down his brush the painter attempted suicide. Gauguin's contemporary, Van Gogh, also a bewildered inquirer about life and meaning succeeded where his rival failed but not in art. As his disillusionments culminated in despair, he suicided. Neither man had the answer to the insistent questions which haunt us all, what, whence, whither? who do I think I am?

In England, Francis Bacon believed his best work was done when he was drunk. He pictures mankind by canvasses showing gory slabs of beef or maniacs in cages. Such works are natural sequence of cubism in the original dada artists (French for rocking horse, chosen was chosen at random from the dictionary artist-philosophers who

wished to tell the world that all existence is only the product of chance and therefore meaningless. You may remember PART OF THE PALM by Hans Arp, one of the group who describes humanity thus, "The head downward, the legs upward; he tumbles into the bottomless from whence he came." This is repeated as a refrain throughout the poem. It reflects the popular conclusion regarding the meaninglessness of existence.

The literature and the music of our day, my friends, the story is the same. Life has turned sour. Man has become an orphan. The thoughtless parent order of the universe is on its way to extinction. And human convictions of values are not so much false as meaningless, a mere physiological phenomena. Thinking is no more than itching. Its source is mindless chaos, say many.

Books have been printed containing random chapters that can be read in any order. They aim at teaching that there is nothing to be taught. And, indeed, no one to teach. What, whence, whither is answered by a reaction that implies that neither questions nor answers are other than the coincidental froth of human existence. The furious rate of modern living with its multiple technicological security against thinking reflects man's fear of solitude. The human race is naked, alone, unaccommodated, bewildered by mysterious phenomena within the self and the world. Suffering and death appear to be the only irreducible and certain facts of existence.

May I remind you what Conrad wrote, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The best

lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity. We need a theme? Then let that be our theme that we poor grovelers between faith and doubt, the sun and north star lost _____ out, the heart's weak engine all but stopped; the time, timeless in this chaos of our wills, but we must ask a theme, something to think, something to say between dawn and dark, something to hold to, something to love."

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 Carl Manheim in his book, DIAGNOSIS OF OUR TIMES, asserts that the dilemma of modern life finds its key in terms of the evaporation in our day of authentic archy types which in past ages has directed human enterprise. By archy types Manheim (?) means those basic experiences that carry more weight than others; in other words, he is saying that modern man has lost his hierarchy of values, that all things have become grey and meaningless, that it is impossible to use the word good, better, best. In support of this thesis of Manheim's is the fact that the themes of modern literature have been summarized as voyage, isolation, doubt and hell. No positives, no hope.

Mac la said, "We are the first epoch in which man has become fully and thoroughly problematic to himself in which he no longer knows what he is essentially. But at the same time knows that he doesn't know. Emil B _____ r agrees by giving his comment, "Not only is the world full of riddles but he, himself, who asks the riddles has become a riddle."

This meaning issue is the fundamental issue, my friends, of our age. It is not the question of communism vs. capitalism, or east vs. west, or colored vs. white, it is not catholic vs. protestant, or classical music vs. rock music--it is rather, the issue of meaning, meaning vs. meaninglessness, purpose vs. purposelessness, reason vs. irrationality. Such is the central issue of the century in which we live.

What is this world? An iceberg or a ship? Does it have direction or does it float aimlessly through time and space? What is life? Is it as Shakespeare suggested, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing? Is it a disease for which the only cure is death, a punishment for the crime of being born, a nightmare between two eternities? What is your life, friend? What's my life, a bubble or an egg full of nothingness or life, fruitfulness? What is man? Is he an illegitimate child of some thoughtless parent order, a mere fuss in the mud, a stir in the slime? Is the human race mere planetary eczema? Is man an animal only or is he a child of God? Is the only purpose for man's existence that he might become fertilizer for the fields? You have heard of Pliny, the philosopher who lived centuries ago; he declared that there is nothing certain save that nothing is certain. And there is no more wretched and yet arrogant being than man. The best thing that has been given to man amid the many torments of this life is that he can take his own life. How true is this remark? It prompts still further question, not what is truth but is there truth?

These questions are so important because what thinkers through the ages have termed a terrible choice. Each one of us must make choices. Decisions and how we make them depend upon the way in which we answer. These are inevitable questions which confront all of us.

What a man does is determined by what he considers he is and what he believes the world to be. Is the world nonsense or sense? Who do you think you are a bubble or an egg, froth or potential for fruit and life, creativity, value, meaning.

Perhaps its a clue to the meaning of existence and to who we are that man is the only creature that can be bored. There seems to be the evidence/^{that man}is a higher order than the brute. Animals do not commit suicide through boredom, frustration and hopelessness but many among the human species do. In north America alone at least, 20,000 suicides are recorded yearly. According to TIMES magazine, the actual number is probably at least twice this figure. It is well known that from 15 to 50 suicide is the leading cause of death. At least 4 times as many hopeless people attempt to end their lives as are successful in the attempt. And, what is more, my friends, the highest per capita rate of this act of self-destruction is to be found in the higher institutions of learning. And it is more common among the haves than the have-nots.

Well, what is it that causes the contemplation of such an irrevocable action as suicide? It is the conviction of hopelessness, the

feeling that purpose and meaning has disappeared from the existence of the universal.

Sigmund Freud wrote to Marguerite Bonaparte on one occasion saying, "The moment a man questions the meaning of life, he is sick." That is the sickness that has overtaken the multitudes of our day. Dr. Victor Frankel of the University of Vienna when addressing the Academy of Religion and Mental Health some time ago, declared that as many as 80% of his American students suffered from this malady. No better in many other countries, Australia, Europe.

Tennessee Williams, called the greatest U.S. playwright, what makes him thus? Not his courage. He says, "I am a definition of hysteria." He imputes his success to the fact that he puts into language what most people see and dread. He declares, "There is a horror in things, a horror at the heart of meaninglessness of existence." Life has meaning if you are bucking for Heaven. But if Heaven is a fantasy, we are in this jungle with whatever we can work out for ourselves. The cards are stacked against us. The only victory is how we take it. "To exist is to be damned," so said Tennessee Williams and so say many others. What say you, my friend?

Paul Tillich affirmed that the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness is the anxiety of our period.

Why is the 20th century so hopeless, so despairing, so bored, so frustrated? Why has man who through the years has asked the

riddle has now become a riddle to himself? Tillich suggested the answer when he declared, "There is a side view event that underlies the search for meaning and the despair of it in the 20th century is the loss of God in the 19th century. It was in the 19th century that Friedrich Nietzsche declared, "God is dead." Because many in the world believed him, man and life itself have lost significance and meaning. Where there is no God there is no man, that is to say, unless man is the rational child of a benevolent creator, he is a mere animal, a piece of protoplasm interacting with other pieces of protoplasm and without worth. The great writers of our day have recognized this. _____esco said, "Cut off from his religious metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost. All his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." The existentialist Camu wrote, "Up till now, man derived his coherence from his creator but from the moment that he consecrates his rupture Him, he finds himself delivered over to the fleeting moment and to wasted sensibility." And friend, Nietzsche again said, "Is there still an up and down? Are we not wandering aimlessly through an infinite void? Does not an empty space breathe upon us? Has it not grown colder?" Nature is an adequate parable of our times. Born in the same year that Darwin wrote his first sketch of the ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES, the young Nietzsche desired to be a minister, to please God and benefit man but after reading Darwin his religious illusions vanished. He prophesied that the churches would become the mausoleums of God and that then the world would writhe in chaotic agony.

The death of meaning is the death of hope and the death of hope leads to the hope for death. This explains why suicide has become pandemic. Must we join the club? How strange that few men have realized that if, indeed, all things are but chaos, we could never have known it. How strange that men have taken for granted the miracle of mind which interprets all things, which has been assumed that yielding the interpretation of chaos would itself be the result of chaos. If mind is but the product of accident as the spilling of a bucket of water or the emission of a shower of sparks, why should anybody trust its conclusions? Just as the 26 letters of the alphabet could not yield the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States without the minds of the founding fathers, just as the 7 notes of the octave yield the Hallelujah chorus only because of Handel, so the flux of matter could never have given rise to mind without the devising of an infinite mind.

Can I remind you of the first words of an old book that has often been jeered at but somehow keeps coming up again, here they are, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." These opening words of Holy Writ give the only anchor for meaning, sanity, hope and joy. In many respects, the book of Genesis is the most important book in the world for 20th century man. Without it man does not know who he is, from whence he came, or whither he goes. While not written as a scientific text book the Bible reveals to all men in all times and places the central truths necessary for successful existence. It is from its pages that we want to draw good news unlimited. It's brought joy, meaning, life,

vitality, fruitfulness to millions through the ages. The Bible's revelation of divine purposeful creation, not only undergirds all worship, but all meaningful living.

You, my friend, may say to me, well, I can't believe such old fashioned myths as creation. My dear friend, may I suggest to you there are only three possibilities, you must either believe in an infinite nothing that created matter and mind or you can believe in an infinite mind that created matter (this one makes sense) or the other alternate that an infinite matter that created mind. Only one of those three will stand up. No one can really believe that an infinite nothing made something or that infinite chaos made mind.

When you look at man there are only two possibilities, man is either an accident or a child of God. Is man an accident? Matter plus time plus chance equals man? Is it true that through a series of chance lawless reactions life came into being, that some of that life happened to become a garden snail and some developed into an elephant, some of it happened to be you? The only difference would be time and complexity. Dear friends, if that is true it is sad, very sad. It would mean that you and I have no more significance than a tree or a machine, like the little dog sent on the train ~~that~~ lost its collar which had its identification, it received a new one from a station master saying here is nobody from no place going nowhere. Such a belief destroys our personality. When you take someone in your arms

and tell them you love them, you are only experiencing a chemical reaction in the blood stream according to this theory. When you dream you found something beautiful, it's a joke and, truth, that's a fluke. Computers that are replacing men are just as significant on this theory. Thinking then is only itching if my thinking is determined. Morality, well, that's only passion.

How can we derive what ought to be from what is? What is the difference between killing a garden slug or a fly or you?

My friends, if life is just chance we cannot say that anything is wrong. No use appealing to what just people feel. If we do that we can say welcome back Hitler. Lots of people feel he should be around. Are we going to say that 51% of the people are right no matter what they say? Is prejudice right because the majority think one way? Is racism right, exploitation, murder, civil rights, adultery? What do these words mean if there is no source of morality--just gobblelygook, meaningless symbols, romanticism. My friends, we must get this, this is the unsought result of relativism, the result that nobody will face up to, that if God is dead, man is dead, reality is dead, morality is dead, values are dead. And as we said before, the death of hope leads to the hope for death.

Dostoevski said, "If God is dead, everything is permitted." Have you ever thought about that? God above is as necessary to us as the earth beneath. If you and I were not made in the image of God, then we can be made in the image of society by unscrupulous

politicians.

Peter, the Great, caused the death of thousands when he was building Petersburg and when he was accused of evil, he said, "Man is like an egg. Eggs have to be broken to make omeletes." Is that the whole truth about man? Is he just an egg, good egg, bad egg? If that is true sadism is right, murder is right.

My friends, think on the other possibility. The other possibility is that you and I are made in the image of God as the best book says. That is the one I recommend to you today to think about.

You remember Pontius Pilate, he is remembered for two statements, particularly. One of those statements is, "What is truth? The other statement was, "Behold, the man." Have you ever thought to put those statements together? We can either interpret man by looking at the universe or we can interpret the universe by looking at man. If we are going to do the second one we need to look at the best of men, that man who came from above, who called himself the Son of Man that he might be the brother of all men, black, white, young and old. What did He say about life? What did He say about you and me? Well, you remember on one occasion when he was dining with publicans and sinners the self-righteous religious people of the day said, "Look at this man. He is dining with publicans and sinners. This man receiveth sinners." And there they preached the Gospel much better than most preachers because the good news unlimited is just that, this man receiveth sinners.

It does not matter who you are, my brothers and sisters, it does not matter how many times you have blown it, it does not matter how many mistakes you have made, it does not matter how weak you feel, how foolish you have been, this man, Christ, receiveth sinners. He wants to receive you. He wants to give you everlasting life today. He has already paid the price for your guilt, sins; he took it away at Calvary and suffered so you need not suffer. He was forsaken of God that you might never be forsaken of God. He took your guilt that he might give you his righteousness. On that occasion when they accused him of receiving sinners his reply was 'guilty.' That is the only thing Christ ever said he was guilty about and he told 3 stories to prove it. He told the story of the lost sheep that was loved and sought for by the good shepherd and that is what man is, my friends, a lost sheep and the good shepherd has come to seek us and to save us. And then Christ told the story of the lost coin that still bore the image of the king even though it was tarnished with dirt, that is you and me. The woman went looking for that coin with a candle as Christ comes looking for us in order that he might rejoice over us, pick us up again and cleanse us. Then, you remember, he told the story of the lost son. As soon as that lost son said, "I will arise and go..." His father who was watching from a great way off ran to meet him, didn't let him get his confession out, just took off his rags and clothed him with his own robe, put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet and killed the fatted calf, called everybody in.

My friends, to know that we are loved despite our failures, to know that it is true that God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever, that is you, that's me, that's every failure, by believing might not perish but have everlasting life. To know that, my friends, turns life into a song. It brings heaven down here. It means that every good dream is possible of fulfillment. Listen to Him today. He is saying to you, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. He that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men. I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." Believe it today and you will know who you are and life will become a song.