

Death and Work; Memory and Leisure

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Death has been much on my mind recently. The passing of several of my family and friends and the procession of funerals over the last year has set me in a certain pensive frame of mind and like Ishmael in Melville's book, I "find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet."

But instead of following Ishmael to sea I seek a kind of refuge in history, in that limitless expanse of the past through which I have wandered the better portion of my life. But again, like Ishmael, in the event I find less of a refuge and more of a venue, a location and context to grapple with my concerns about the human condition.

My morbid turn of mind has set me to reconsider the doing of history. Why should I continue to spend my life crafting histories that few read now, and no one will read in ten years or less? Not only will I die, and soon, but my scribblings will be as dead as I am in few years.

And as my alma mater's (UNC's) "fight" song concludes, "I'm a Tar Heel born and Tar Heel bred, and when I die, I'll be a long time dead." (The bowdlerized ending of the verse, "I'll be a Tar Heel dead" is beneath contempt.)

Topping things off at Trinity Church in Iowa City, Ecclesiastes kept showing up in the Lectionary last season. Last August we read Ecclesiastes' "Preacher" advising yet again, "vanity of vanities; all is vanity," and asking "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?"

And directly to my point: "There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after."

Why not, "numbering the days of my life," follow the "Preacher's" advice and chucking it all, find out where the party is?

On second thought, being a bit long in the tooth for sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, I see more wisdom in the "Preacher's" lesser known counsel, "Better is a handful of quietness, than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind."

But I find some good reasons remain for me to "do" history, reasons that I recommend to all my friends and students who struggle along. Whereas Ecclesiastes is a wonderful purgative for the academic's primary (in most cases, only) motives, self-aggrandizement and ego-intoxication, (does anyone still have faith in the old Enlightenment Project- "The Truth?") some reasons withstand the "Preacher's" *memento mori*.

The first is the joy of the activity in and for itself. The primary advice Ecclesiastes gives us, other than eat, drink, and be merry, is to take delight in the "work" itself.

There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink,
and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour (Hebrew, 'amal).
This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. (2, 24)

This advice, as I understand it, is a far cry from the modern boss' plea to "be happy in your work." It is evident to me that the "Preacher" is referring to an activity complete in and for itself, separated from reward and without constraint, full of the intensity of the effort. Quite unlike most of our jobs, such activities are more like our hobbies and volunteer work, or maybe our "work" on ourselves, or on our relationships, families, and communities.

For me, at least, the counsel is to do history for itself. Teach others the joy of the activity. Share the wonderful process. Involve as many others as possible, freely. Do it, not as a job, hemmed in by professions, positions, publications, degrees, status, perishable reputations, and the production of new "truths" *de jour*. Do it *freely* in its fullness as God-given, worthwhile in and for itself!

"What profit?" the "Preacher" asks. It's the activity, not the "profit," not the truth-residue, product, reputation, or payment that is important. The profit is just another vanity.

I am perfectly serious, and have argued often, that history and indeed all of the Liberal Arts, are viable *leisure* options for all of us, constituting some of the few good reasons to

get up in the morning that will stand the test of time. The Amateur is much underestimated in these days and times. David Gould's legacy letter project seems to me to encourage just such a democratic broadening of the Liberal Arts- just the sort of thing that the university needs to encourage.

Some will disagree, but I am persuaded that the vast majority of our jobs, even the best of jobs, will never provide such an enduring good reason "to do something rather than nothing."

The second reason for me to keep doing history is personal, based in my Christianity. Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, is an historical religion. Historians and theologians have long pointed out that our modern historical sensibilities sprang from the Jews, Christians, and Moslems. Our notion that history has a beginning, middle and end and that it is going somewhere, comes directly out of these traditions. Today most of us subscribe to "progress" in some form or other.

Before the monotheistic religions came along most people, even the Greeks and Romans, thought about the past, if at all, in terms of repeating cycles. Consider the "Preacher's" attitude in Ecclesiastes, written in the 3rd century, B.C. and heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Christianity and Judaism gave history direction and purpose, awakening the profound insight that history on its own spins around, going nowhere- "twisting slowly in the wind."

Meaning, purpose, direction come from outside, at "right angles" to the course of history, as Reinhold Niebuhr put it. Without transcendent intervention, history is randomness- a tale told by an idiot.

Try reading Tacitus, or even Herodotus. The Roman and Greek histories are BORING. It is the same story over and over. As Voltaire once said of history in general, these histories are truly "one damn thing after another." Or as Henry Ford observed, such history is "bunk." Little men with giant egos, killing one another with relish, rising to power, strutting and debauching, being overthrown by others just like them- again, and

again, and again. Sounds a little like the evening news, or, closer to home, our yearly updated vitae.

With Christ's birth a story with plot and direction begins. History has purpose and meaning. It has drama. It seizes us. We are engaged, becoming very much a part of the action. We are on pilgrimage. We are going somewhere. What we do makes a difference, for good or ill.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

Part of the drama is our periodic falling away from the Faith. Like the Children of Israel wandering around in the wilderness, we tend to lose sight of the big picture, the overarching story, and become preoccupied, busy to the point of mania with our own thing and the work and works of this world, chasing after the wind.

Individually and as cultures we begin to chase after what Jacques Ellul called "New Daemons;" new gods that, like the Golden Calf, we ourselves have made. We even sink to self-worship, relying on ourselves for salvation and meaning- working even as an attempt at self-creation.

Invariably our new faiths are our own creatures- the *works* of our own hand. What we can really know about is what we can see (we want a god we have made and can see, the Jews in the wilderness said). We seem to need a "faith" based on what is "real."

Here is where we will abide, we say to ourselves, lodging our faith in what we can touch and know because we have made it ourselves.

I am convinced that our new modern religion is work; our daily sacrifice, our jobs. Work itself, and the things we have made, from buildings to bridges, to academic "bodies of knowledge," are the objects of our worship and ultimate loyalties. Work, and the works of our hands are where we live and move and have our being. The more we moderns become a secular people, the more we rely on our jobs to answer ultimate questions about meaning, purpose, personal identity, and community. Many, perhaps most of us cling to work as one of the last reliable absolutes; a severe comfort, a

changeless given amid the shifting sands of uncertainty that bewilder this new *fin de siècle*.

Work now answers what I take to be one of the most profound questions of our humanity- what I have called "leisure's question," "Why get up in the morning?" or more formally, "Why do anything and not nothing if you don't have to?" This is a question, I believe even more profound in its answer and consequence than Heidegger's famous ontological query, "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

But the problem is that such "New Daemons" invariably face an "Apocalypse," as Ellul put it. If history teaches anything, it is the perennial failure of modern rivals to the traditional faiths.

"All is vanity and a chasing after the wind," says the "Preacher." He has been saying this for millennia. But we humans have to learn this the hard way, laboriously constructing new faiths only to find them crumbling to dust. We have to be instructed by the hard knocks of life, by the profound inadequacies of our new faiths and by their eventual, traumatizing collapse that "it is He that has made us and not we ourselves."

Following Ellul, it is here that I see a role for the historian, an enduring reason to keep on "working" at my craft. By demonstrating historically the inadequacies of modern rivals to traditional faith, e.g., the religion of work, the believing historian might succeed by asking Pontius Pilate's question in such a way that the contemporary world might hear, that one true and enduring question, "What shall I do with this Man?"

I believe that history throws up, or presents this "Christ Question" to every generation and individual. Disclosing the inadequacies and failures of human-based, work-based faiths prepares the way.

If only I may be permitted to show how the transcendent perennially breaks in "at right angles" to all our lives in this way... If only I might suggest once again how "all is vanity" forces us all to struggle anew with ultimate questions of identity, meaning, and purpose... If only I can expose the false god of working and the needless sacrifice to THE

JOB.... If only I can show a glimpse of how the Eternal is thus moving "in" history and present to the ages....

The last, and clearly the greatest, abiding reason to do history is love. Last summer my Ishmael-like wanderings took me back to my old church, Samaria Baptist, just outside of Raleigh. My father is buried there, and of course I visited his grave and read with new appreciation the epitaph on his tombstone.

"Love Makes Memory Eternal"

Indeed. My mother's phrase- she knew all along, simply, what I have struggled to find circuitously.

Of course. Christianity has always known this. What others see as a morbid preoccupation we know as one of the wonders of our faith. We Christians have always paid close attention to the death of one of our family. We have always taken elaborate care of catacombs, crypts, cemeteries, and graveyards for just this reason. Love. We remember those who have died.

Thinking back, I realize that my first real experience of history as an integral part of life, not moldering away in books or locked up in classrooms, was my mother's saving the detritus of my boyhood. Out of love she remembered, and "saved" my past.

She filled numerous "Blue Horse" notebooks with pictures of me and the family; me going to Knightdale School the first day; me holding up a mass of snakes my friends and I captured during a day on the Neuse River. I know the treasure intimately now.

Reminiscent of the cheesy Christmas story, "The Littlest Angle," she held on to bits and pieces of pure junk; an old book-sack she made for me out of that stripy, pillow-cover material the last minute the first day of first grade because I was sure everyone would have such a silly thing; a broken, cheap clay Indian my sister brought me from Cherokee, all for me treasures because they were bits and pieces of my life- the very fabric of my being.

My wife Francine (I try to help) is doing the same now, keeping parts of our children's past. They look to us, as do our grandchildren, for a reference- for an orientation by the past and a place to stand facing the future. Who they are now and where they are going *must* have such a reference point, otherwise life simply spins on, chasing after the wind.

Amnesia nowadays is very much a cliché, so much so that even soap operas seem to have gumption to avoid it. But I have always thought that amnesia would be one of the worst afflictions imaginable. If I lose my memory, I lose myself. I would argue that who I am is formed almost entirely by my past. Amnesia would be a death more profound than even the ordinary variety.

Remember Benjy in Faulkner's Sound and the Fury. His affliction, his idiocy, is that he is unaware of time and doomed to the present, to the cascading, fluxating now. He is overwhelmed by the chaos of events that wash over him. He has no fixed place to stand, no reference to make sense out of it all. He has no past.

I tremble to admit that I see signs of the affliction in the University's Administration- Benjy would fit right in the deans' office.

I wish I could remember who it was who suggested this. I think that it must have been Saint Augustine or one of the popes, who observed that a "pious-conceit" might be a healthy pastime if one didn't take it too seriously. A "pious conceit"- an extra-theological musing- a game of "what if" that sets the mind in a prayerful frame.

The argument goes this way: all human faculties provide us with ways to know God- all have a spiritual potential to give us hope and guidance. Why not imagination? Here is my pious daydream. What is God like? A perfect being must have a perfect memory- absolute recall. He is the Great Historian!

This is an embarrassing display of my own self-centeredness. But it is a very human thing to do- conceive of the Divine as a projection of ourselves.

Kept in perspective it may be healthy. The Great Historian could serve as a model of perfection, toward which I might take one of two faltering steps.

I imagine that The Great Historian would be able to remember me in infinitely greater detail than I remember myself. She then would know me even better than I know myself. She could remember all people this way.

I imagine, "Is this not a basis for thinking about immortality?" Remember the adage: "The only eternity we know for sure is the Past."

Maybe we all have a place in heaven reserved for us by a Deity who keeps us forever alive in memory; our identities intact, our lives remembered, perpetually replayed, re-lived for the delight of that remembering Being.

I have my own fantasies about these things - *being* remembered, I am then aware of other *beings* remembered, and thus meet my brother Robert again in that perpetual remembrance.

Didn't the thief ask, "Remember me;" and did not Christ promise, remembering, "Today. you will be with me...?" But I will keep all the rest private. I think it best to just set up the conceit and let others play with it.

Stephen Swanson, professor of music here recently told me of a computer class he took at the university. His instructor was going on about all the miracles of technology, one of which was that scientist are now able to store memory onto electrons- make an electron spin one way, it represents a "0," make it spin the other, it represents a "1". Using this device, the contents of the library of congress could easily be stored in a one-inch cube of dirt.

Given all the room and matter in the universe, is it not entirely reasonable to imagine that memory may be everlasting, eternal in the mind of The Great Historian.

But why would She choose to remember us? Back to love again- that most enduring and abiding of all the spiritual gifts. Love that remembers and keeps us. A loving remembrance that the Church has tried though the millennia to reflect and imitate with catacombs and graveyards, and perhaps, please God, even with accounts of the past, written by Its members.