

The Gift of Immaturity

No, the title isn't meant to be a gimmick to catch the reader's attention. Strange to say, immaturity—something everyone dreads perhaps more than anything—has the potential of being a genuine gift, freely bestowed and deserving of acknowledgment. You won't find much, if any, information about it in books. Rather, the reflections in this short essay about a subject from which we naturally shrink have their root in a personal acquaintance who has been deceased now for several years. Before getting into that, please bear with me as I present some preliminary remarks which hopefully will make subsequent reflections clearer.

A good number of decades ago I came across a quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald which if I recall correctly, runs pretty much as follows. "The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your mind and retain the ability to function." I think that's fairly close to the original which I had typed out on a 3 x 5 card using an IBM Selectric typewriter, a marvel in its day.

Although I used that card as a book-marker over the years, I was unable to locate it more recently. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's quote stayed with me a long time especially in certain trying circumstances. It remained both a promise and a challenge through thick and thin, something I always knew was an attainable goal. I was aware that part of the quote or a "first rate intelligence" didn't necessary apply to someone who was super-smart. So instead of that being a disqualification, it served as an impetus to dig deep within. Furthermore, it remained as measuring rod not in the belittling sense but for assessing a correct choice when confronted with two diverse options.

What struck me most of all with regard to this quote was not some kind of pie-in-the-sky high bar Fitzgerald was proposing but the words "retain the ability to function." I take them to mean that when confronted with two diverse viewpoints compelling us to make a choice, we can live quite serenely whichever way our choice lands us. We try our best to make an informed choice after which we simply let go while at the same time seeing beyond the choice at hand regardless of where it may lead. The best part is that apart from the importance involved, the result assumes a certain air of irrelevancy.

Lo and behold, we've hit upon something within us we may not have realized even late in life. Through these two choices before us they have a larger role, of setting the stage for a discovery our transcendent nature which, as we've just found out, lives happily independent of any choices we make. Even if one choice is less than desirable, still the result can't help but work out in our favor. A true-blue sign this works is that we no longer suffer any type of paralysis. We're delivered from making a choice but now are in a position to let it be made for us. Furthermore, we're free from any manifestation of fate, of being compelled by some supposedly supernatural force external to us, for example, the stars.

Indeed, the transcendent character just mentioned is invisibly at work within enabling us to handle anything thrown at us. By no means are we supermen. Far from it. We've simply relinquished self-reliance, no more, no less. However, those experiences which pretty much reduce us to nothing function as a trigger enabling the transcendent nature within us to manifest itself. Thus some form of desperation appears to be a necessary element for any such revelation. By revelation I mean the literal sense of an uncovering of a reality which already had been present from the get-go. We can now remove the cover without disturbing a thing. Indeed, this is a big deal. "Retaining the ability to function" turns out to be another way of not being thrown off balance.

As for the functioning at hand, it means going about our business as normal where the element of both peace and conflict are treated as essentially the same, something unheard of. This sounds weird at first, even impossible. The "magic" behind it is that we refrain from adopting any plan of action while allowing them to be made for us. The beauty of this situation is that it reveals how much we like to cling to things not unlike a suction cup. As for "the ability to function," lo and behold we discover that we've been doing it all along only now we're continue with the same but unaided by anything.

The best part is that this "ability to function" neither belongs to the spiritual nor to the mental realm but stands apart from both. So where then does it reside? Beyond our reach? No, but well within our grasp. On second thought, that's a misnomer. You don't grasp anything if you have it already. Obviously this begs to be unpacked which we'll do a bit later. We'll examine the behavior

and attitude of a particular person I had mentioned in the opening paragraph. First there's a need for some digression.

The situation which I have in mind can unfold within the context of what's commonly called the spiritual life. Even the phrase "spiritual life" is somewhat awkward. Because it's familiar to many people hence the reason why I use it. Nevertheless this phrase remains somewhat nebulous, a kind of mental construct on which we rely to hang certain ideas that affect us in a profound way. I have in mind the Christian context where the traditional approach to its practice puts emphasis upon self-denial as part and parcel of following Jesus Christ. All this, of course, is laid out clearly in the Gospels. While St Paul's epistles may be included, the primary focus is upon what pertains directly to Jesus. Self-denial can assume many forms depending upon one's attitude and role. All these manifestations work together and feed into each other. This has been proven true time and time again, so it must work. Nevertheless, something...hard to define, really...seems to be missing.

Let's take a specific example. There can arise a problem when it comes to Lent, traditionally a more intense form of self-denial. If you've been at this self-denial professionally—and by that I mean living the religious life and more specifically the monastic variation—over time easily you can lose sight of its significance. It has become more a problem now with our extended life span. By that I mean we don't observe Lent for a few years but for many decades thus doubling if not tripling the time associated with this time of self-abnegation. While the awkwardness associated with it may be acknowledged, unfortunately it isn't addressed possibly due to an inherent unwillingness to face a new reality along with a lack of knowing how to cope with it.

As for self-denial, it's so much a part not only of Christian tradition but of virtually all religious traditions. The pervasiveness of this practice is taken for granted and given the usual sophist-like explanation ¹, namely, fallen nature, sin and all that. Why so, I wonder. It implies an almost abysmally deep division between life as we live it and another life, a more exalted one, available on the condition that we engage in such-and-such practices. In this case the first type of life is—depending upon your point of view—generally

1 By that I mean a ready-made answer where the person giving it essentially is ignorant of the subject despite what he or she is saying. It's both tragic and humorous at the same time.

thought of as illusory or defective. If you're seeking advice as well as material to read up on this, you don't have to look far. The bulk of religious literature and those who are spokesmen of various traditions thrive on this divide whether it's fabricated or real.

So when you come across a worldview which for literally millennia had been taken for granted as rock solid, the prospect of questioning it sounds almost treasonous. So is it possible to discern any cracks? It's about time we pose such a question even if we might be standing on shaky ground. Society has moved on considerably which in part has created the atmosphere for asking questions. We're living in a totally different world. Our quest is twofold. First, are we right in even questioning the role of self-denial? Obviously what has been held dear for countless generations can come across as a bit unnerving. Secondly, is it possible that we might uncover something that despite good intentions, had been essentially fabricated and is purely human in its origins? So much incontrovertible evidence seems to be out there to support such a possibility but then again, perhaps not so fast.

With this background in mind, coming up with an alternative seems more challenging than ever. While I found potential alternatives in this or that author, the issue at hand boils down to this. One position (found chiefly in Buddhism but is also present in the Judaeo-Christian tradition though you have to dig deeper) holds that we are whole and complete right from the beginning. Not unsurprisingly this may be difficult to accept chiefly based upon evidence, of what we see all around us. There focus is upon our inherent weaknesses and above all, our sinfulness, this again being self-evident.

Because of the pervasiveness of the second point of view, it's much easier to talk about than being made whole and entire. Rightly people will challenge us to produce the evidence of its reality. It simply lacks proof. Besides, it smacks of something foreign...from the East...if you will. So despite a somewhat nostalgic return to earlier ascetical practices and observances we witness today coupled with prayers and devotions supporting them, times are a-changing. This re-emergence seems to be a more or less well-intentioned temporary stop-gap measure.

Another way of presenting the whole and entire” position is that each of us recognizes somewhere deep down that all is well. The troubling stuff floats on the surface is where the problem lies and where we reside most of the time. Such in a nutshell is the tension we all experience to one degree or another. From what I gather—and this is purely on the surface level—being made whole and entire rests on an impossible supposition. For example, “Only renounce the error of intellectual or conceptual thought-processes and your nature will exhibit its pristine purity.”² Actually Huang Po is relentless on this which to anyone with the slightest common sense sounds impossible. Nevertheless, the tradition to which he belongs is dead serious with this premise.

We can experiment with the renunciation of thoughts and see if it works even though this proposal seems impossible if not ludicrous. Backed by a venerable tradition as in the case of Huang Po, it’s wonderful to say this renunciation turns out to be within our grasp. Actually it’s not a renunciation but sheer joy just at the mere prospect. What stops us, however, is unfamiliarity with the vocabulary which Huang Po proposes. The value with such radical language is that in a unique, direct fashion he takes head-on spirituality’s biggest bugaboo, distractions. Not only does stopping all thought sound impossible but suicidal. Everyone on this planet is plagued by unwanted thoughts though sometimes I wonder about aborigines and the like. Still, the way Huang Po puts it so directly and almost in-your-face can’t help but grab your attention. Should you stay with him, his words about our inbuilt and actually inescapable gift of awareness is always present and ready to come to the rescue.

Stop and think (pardon use of this word, a kind of misnomer here) for a minute. No matter where you go and what you do, awareness is present. It’s like a shadow, inescapable but more so because it’s within us. Not just that, it’s unchangeable. That, I believe, is the transcendent nature I spoke of above with regard to Fitzgerald’s quote. Should you hold this in mind—the holding is a kind of grabbing of awareness—you see that awareness is impervious to both the noblest and vilest thoughts we can devise. I put it this way for emphasis. What really bugs us is the daily boring stuff we have to endure throughout a given day, and simply latching on to this insight is a lifesaver indeed.

2 **The Zen Teaching of Huang Po**, p. 88 (New York, 1984).

Let's take this to the nth degree by pretending you're dead. You can do this physically to a certain extent because pretending has a remarkable imitative ability we fail to acknowledge. It's essential to what makes us human. Thus we can "die" and see the results, imperfect as they may be. Once you've tried it out—even for a nanosecond because time is irrelevant—awareness remains. It simply doesn't go anywhere nor requires striving after. It also doesn't demand any ascetical practice in order to become present. Making awareness present is in fact a contradiction, an impossibility.

So if you've always been wondering what happens after death (and who doesn't, just look at human history and culture), here's one actual way to find out. Nevertheless, the experience can be a bit unnerving. It turns out that something remains, namely, awareness in and by itself. As for the proposed practice through the vehicle of pretending, I believe the real trick ultimately ends up by shifting into getting acquainted with absolute silence, for awareness is another way of saying the same thing.

So here we are walking around doing this and that with our awareness which as far as we can determine is omnipresent. The best part—and by best I mean that which surpasses everything we can imagine or in the context of this essay, escape from those inevitable thoughts labeled as distractions—is that we possess everything imaginable. Truly there's nothing to acquire nor to strive after. This doesn't sink in all at once but takes some time to comprehend. We now see that our earlier efforts at quieting our minds never worked. They resembled a dog suddenly aware of his tail which made him run around in a perpetual circle in an attempt to grab it.

Now with this gift (for that is what it truly is) having been activated, we don't just hang around being static. We notice that our physical bodies which are totally made for action continue to wiggle this way and that, either on their own in accord with how we direct them. At the same time this governing is secondary, always at the surface of awareness as just presented. Should we let our bodies (and now we can identify our minds with them) take charge as free from mental guidance, quickly we learn that the tail is no longer leading the head. We've lived in an inverted sense for so long, so it takes some getting use to the other way around. Quickly we discover that our physicality is where the action is whereas earlier we had deemed it as secondary.

Again—and this word can be repeated almost *ad infinitum*—we know that awareness is ever-present. Here we have grounds for a concrete application of what usually is called faith. It can start off being painful and shake us to the core, but then again, awareness in its absolute silence is always present. In other words, faith puts us at ease and makes us know it is as such. Sometimes in a case like this our lack of faith mocks us which is okay. The mocking is ultimately beneficial provided (that important word ‘again’) we make the shift to what we’ve always had and can never shake, awareness.

At this juncture it seems we discover a gazillion options exist as how to comport ourselves. One particular path stands out which had been trail-blazed by someone I got to know quite well, having died several years ago. Shortly after his death I had written about him in an article on this homepage entitled **The Quadriplegic, sort of**. I bring him up again since he ties in more directly as exemplary with regard to the title of the article at hand. During pretty much his entire life Roger (his real first name) came across as a perpetually joyous individual. It really came to fruition in his later years though for the most part it went unacknowledged.

More on Roger’s unique outlook shortly. Those who cared for him bore testimony to his joy even when they had to get him up in the middle of the night which happened quite often. By no means was the process easy. Two people were required to lift him from bed and move him around, this often a painful procedure. Nevertheless, Roger remained just as happy as at any other time, something that marveled his caregivers to no end and is still talked about today. As much as I’ve heard these reports, both I and those who gave them still wonder how anyone could be as such.

As for meeting Roger under normal circumstances—he was confined to a wheelchair when not in bed—each time he greeted me as well as anyone else with great enthusiasm, almost always with a vigorous child-like wave of the hand. Not surprisingly a number of people who had become familiar with this form of greeting were somewhat turned off. They’d acknowledge Roger albeit grudgingly, and make their escape as deftly as possible. Here’s where Roger’s joy became a kind of unpleasant reminder of one’s own unhappiness. It was as

though the person involved didn't want to be reminded of it. I'd equate such an encounter as to meeting a five year old child in a ninety-five year old body.

I had plenty of experience with Roger's enthusiastic way of doing things. Never was he bored sitting around in a day room or local chapel day after day from around 5 am to 7 pm. Then I asked him what I've been dying to ask for a long time. What was the secret to his being so happy? Again, I can't help but emphasize the fact that Roger was quite restricted seven-twenty-four, day after day. Plenty of witnesses can corroborate this observation. Even to this day his former caregivers speak of it but always with smiles on their faces. In fact, I can see Roger being transmitted from them to people who never knew the man.

Please keep in mind that I recalled Roger when I was formulating some ideas for the article at hand, that is to say, when I was attempting to get a better handle on how to write about awareness as the most important thing in our lives. Somehow I knew that Roger had it in abundance though due to his essential simplicity he was incapable of articulating it as such. That, of course, was incidental. No doubt he had the Real Thing. Tuning into awareness as essential to our human constitution has nothing to do with being smart or otherwise. Realizing this is more difficult than at first glance, hence Roger was the ideal model.

So after the customary greeting which consisted of vigorously waving his hand in a child-like manner along with a wide grin on his face, I wasted no time in asking what I've been dying to ask for a long time. What was the secret to his perpetual happiness? I told him it seemed unnatural for a person to be as such. Roger loved that statement and wholeheartedly agreed. This really opened him up, for he knew that I had hit the right nerve and was getting nearer to his closely guarded secret. At the same time Roger wasn't troubled in the least. In fact, he was pleased I was taking time to uncover something very precious to him. I venture to say for him it was the first time ever.

Another point from our conversations that emerged more or less indirectly was that Roger thrived at being cared for. He was in a safe environment where all his needs were met. He admitted this was a purely selfish attribute, but as our conversation moved on, I could see he had learned to accept it and didn't hesitate to put it at the service of a higher end. This is the side people saw more

clearly but failed to recognize that it was founded upon an awareness of being profoundly needy. To me that's a magnificent plan of action, using one's weakness to achieve a higher end. At the heart of it lay another gift Roger confided to me, how to pretend in order to safeguard the gift of immaturity bestowed upon you.

After I had asked in a straight-forward manner what was his secret, Roger turned uncustomarily serious and blurted out something I hadn't expected either from him or anyone else. In fact, it had such a profound impact that I hadn't unpacked it until after a number of conversations close to his death. Being somewhat pious in the Catholic sense, Roger put his response in the form of a prayer request telling me his secret was to pray for the gift of immaturity. He stressed the word "gift" because it was something he knew that he hadn't devised but was bestowed upon him.

Immediately I realized a humongous gift was being given to me free of charge, but it would take time to unpack it. We continued our conversation somewhat around the skirts of this insight, Roger not expanding too much on it. He didn't have to. Right away we both knew something huge was present in our midst, and without further ado he wanted to know how much I understood his words. Clearly it was up to me either to grasp it or let it blow by more or less undiscovered.

Later that day and in subsequent days I asked myself what in God's name did Roger mean by the gift of immaturity? I had a fairly general but superficial knowledge of spirituality but never came across that. Then I reflected on what I knew of him, that his words represented a cunningly devised way not so much of presenting himself but of concealing himself. Surely if you don't want to get noticed, immaturity was the way to go! No question about it. Just consider our own personal experience. At the same time immaturity is something which makes us all cringe and wanting to desperately avoid.

When it comes to seeking God we hear the inevitable spiel about self-abnegation and humiliations, the very staples of the spiritual life yet at the same time boring as hell. Also we can live with being humbled, misunderstood and a whole array of other afflictions. However, being perceived as immature

hits home and hits really hard. Perhaps it's the most difficult affliction from which to recover if you can do so at all.

What I just mentioned leaves a permanent trail that's difficult to erase. By that I mean the impression immaturity makes on another person is close to indelible. We've been hit in our most vulnerable spot, one we never knew existed and do all we can to backtrack. Being labeled as immature sets us up to be compared with other people who presumably are mature. It has a unique way of turning us against them, a continuous tension where we're being compared to some ideal. Indeed, it takes a lot of courage getting beyond that, hence the need to consider immaturity as a gift.

However, once you learn to swallow the bitter pill of immaturity—keeping in mind that it has a lot to do with our lack of human growth—you're reduced to the basics. By that I mean relying on the body's physical movements and overall behavior. That, of course, is something that can't be taken from us whether we're mature or immature. We have the same corporeality as Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler and Mother Teresa. The only difference is—and it's a major one whether we're saints or sinners—that just about everyone else ignores this corporeality. People bypass it in favor of what's supposedly more excellent or suited to their own projected ends. Besides, it isn't "spiritual." Roger never spoke in such terms, but I could see that he knew which was which.

The nagging problem is that we have a devil of a time getting to realize that the ordinary conceals the extraordinary. We may hear of instances where this is true yet have a hard time accepting it. The refusal almost seems hardwired into us. That's why this reference of what's corporeal may initially be acknowledged but in the longer term is rejected. A parallel to this concerns Naaman the Syrian general afflicted with leprosy who scoffed at the suggestion of washing seven times in the Jordan River.³ Keep in mind that this idea came from a girl...like Roger?...who was carried off on a raid making it seem even more preposterous. Naaman put it well: "I thought that he (Elisha) would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper." [vs. 11]. The real clincher is in

3 Second Kings, Chapter Five

the next verse: “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel?”

Returning to Roger as well as concluding with him, I’m left left with a memory that can be described as bittersweet. Bitter in that I had lost someone precious and sweet in that I got insight into an approach to the spiritual life that to date was to the best of my ability unheard of. Clearly the latter outweighed the former. Strange to say, somehow I knew that I will meet Roger again. Not just that, but I will enjoy being with him forever. There’s an expression, blood is thicker than water. I prefer to say that spirit is thicker than blood. This may come across as an exaggeration but far from it. It’s literally true.

Being considered as immature is as low on the scale you can get, more so than the run-of-the-mill humiliations as already noted. Why so? It’s because memory of them tend to stay not just with you but in the memory of other people. Every now and again someone comes to the fore to remind you why you are as such. So if you desire immaturity as a gift, that is, as something freely bestowed, watch out. You have to be pretty sure the consequences involved. Being aware of that, of course, is absolutely essential because your entire world is about to be turned upside down. Those closest to you may turn out to be your worst enemies. In fact, you may be living under a cloud of permanent suspicion and doubt. This is wholly different from being unfairly labeled as some kind of outcast or pervert which is way over the top.

Being considered immature shuts the door with a pretty firm slam. The challenge facing you now is that of remembrance, a counter *anamnesis* if you will. More on that in a subsequent article. Always you will have memories of when you had been considered immature and sometimes wish to lash out. No doubt about it. If there’s ever a lifestyle where you’re living on the edge, this is it. But before you take it up, consider that it opens a hidden doorway to freedom. This freedom isn’t based on recklessness but on something like the Hebrew original of Psalm 88 verse 4 that reads literally, “set free in the dead.” Though I haven’t the details of how Roger got to where he was, I’m pretty sure what I just presented isn’t far off the mark.

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