

When It All Stops

With the onset of summer people are more active than at other times of the year in the sense of going on vacation. It's a different kind of activity than during the colder months, more visible yet in many ways superficial which many people readily acknowledge. If pressed further, a substantial number of folks prefer that they'd rather not be caught up in such frantic activity. The usual excuse is that they have to go on vacation for the sake of their families, especially the children. And so this yearly ritual contrasts with their regular work is more purposeful and for the most part takes place indoors. It'd come as no surprise that a good number of people miss that daily routine...busy in the sense as purposeful but not as frantic where they feel obliged to have a good time while often faking it.

Should you stop and pay attention, you don't have to engage in this type of busyness. That's more difficult than at first glance. You find yourself forced to do so because everyone else is doing it. Thus we're dealing with a kind of herd activity. If you don't participate in it, somehow you're indirectly ostracized and missing out on something supposedly important. All this is implicit, not explicit. We may shrug it off with a brave face, but the social pressure is stronger than we may admit, and so we cave in.

This observation came from a recent phone call with a good friend in Iceland. I asked what he and his family had planned for the next few months, figuring they had decided in advance upon what they were accustomed to do over the previous years. That is to say, they rented a summer house near Hveragerði, a place renowned for geothermally heated hot-houses. As for the summer house, it too was geothermally heated with access to natural hot pools. Easily I could detect my friend would rather not go but prefer to stay at home. However, as noted in the first paragraph, demands from the family compelled him to engage in what he called in Icelandic...I forget the exact phrasing...but something that amounts to useless busyness.

There's a special reason for this busyness compared with other places. Due to the harsher climate in Iceland, people are serious...really serious...about making the most of the short summer, and clearly I detected that in my friend's voice. Among Icelanders "summer" is a kind of misnomer because it...well...sometimes doesn't exist and generally consists of a hodgepodge of rain with occasional light snow and above all else, wind. Enough of the travelogue.

I write this at the beginning of the summer season when the local news is all about the heat, how to beat it, especially by heading off to the ocean or lakeside. In other words, go anywhere but home as long as there's water nearby. It's a time when the

interior part of the state (Massachusetts) in which I live is pretty much vacated in favor of these resort areas even though there are plenty nice place which don't get much press. The locals...the real natives...are thankful for that. For them staying put is their vacation. Our busy season is a few months down the line when people come leaf peeping which by any standard is outstanding. When hearing reports about how wonderfully cool it is by the coast compared with other places, we have two fundamental options, if you will. One is to get up and go which is far from glamorous (traffic and crowds) or to stay put. Should we stay put, there's a tendency to consider ourselves as out of the loop. Instead of feeling lonely or somehow left behind, stay with this awareness for a while without thinking about the consequences. In other words, be present to it and join in with all those who subscribe to it without reflection.

You can get a hell-of-a-lot mileage from resisting the Siren call of the media as well as indirect pressure from friends and neighbors talking about what they're going to do on vacation. Just think. When you come right down to it, the stress or anxiety we feel doesn't exist in reality. It's something we've manufactured or better, have allowed to be manufactured while remain as unwilling participants. We may acknowledge this to ourselves as well as to others but more often than end to personalize it. Better to do this and be part of the crowd than suffering isolation, real or imagined, mostly imagined.

Recently I had an experience in a hospital which put all this manufactured tension in perspective. It exists between what people do and the situation in which I, the newly hospitalized observer, happened to find myself. While the care was excellent, there's the inevitable wait time between when a doctor sees you. This includes a whole battery of tests and anticipating the results to filter back to you. It had happened what seemed as a countless number of times during my stay of almost a week. Then there was the incessant request for my date of birth. I guess it was to make sure the right person was being dealt with. And so I was faced with a choice. Either accept the situation or to make every effort to have them send me home. I caught myself clearly manufacturing excuses for getting out which of course had no impact and felt somewhat embarrassed later. I'm sure they've encountered the same many a time.

In the meanwhile my room faced a moderately busy road with cars and pedestrians doing their thing two stories below. As this parade passed by my window, it made the time drag out longer, especially the early morning and late evening rush hours when traffic was heaviest. What struck me most of all was the similarity of most cars. The same applied to their colors, either silver, white or black. In years gone by you could easily distinguish between a Ford and Chevy but not now. Then, of course, the evening rush hour was a prelude to the interminably long nights! In the hospital your

perception of time changes significantly because all you do is alternate between being in bed most of the time with sitting by the window. In the meanwhile activity is swirling all around you while you're peripheral to it all.

So when you're watching the world go by while awaiting test results or more accurately, awaiting word to go home, easily you can draw close to The Edge. Almost always you won't fall over, but these situations are enough to have you entertain such a possibility. It turned out that we all struggle with this on to a lesser degree. However, when you have nothing but time on your hands, the situation can become quite intensified. How to handle thoughts which come upon us unwillingly always has been the biggest issue when it comes to prayer or meditation. On a daily basis the struggle is ever present but of a low grade quality pretty much like background muzak. In a situation as in the hospital when you're not well and at the mercy of those pricking you here and there with needles up the wazoo, it's a different story. Never is the difference between this condition and those outside the hospital window ever so stark. Sometimes you wish there was no window so you leap down the two stories.

Nevertheless, sitting by the window while watching the world go by indeed is an experience wholly other compared with those on my side of the glass where we patients are subject to day-and-night pricking and testing. At a time like this you have to be on guard so it won't get to you. The temptation is constant compared with those supposedly enjoying themselves while you're stuck in a place you'd rather not be. For some reason or other the image of drivers stopped at the light while their left arms either dangling out or tapping on the door to the rhythm of the radio brought home this contrast in a more direction fashion. They seemed thoroughly relaxed whereas we on the other side were far from it. One wonders, however, if it's like this in reality. The other temptation is more readily available, the television. No need to get into that with incessant advertising.

All this is nothing new. In fact, no matter what flavor of spirituality we find appealing speaks of the struggle between where we happen to be at a given moment and where we want to be. The Buddhists put it best, I think, by saying the root of all our problems is desire. Again referring to my recent hospital experience, I was there for my own good. Yet I desired not to be confined and subject to a barrage of tests. Clearly desire to be free of this was the culprit. Sticking to that simple realization turned out to be my saving grace.

During that time my attention turned to what the Israelites were experiencing while in the Sinai wilderness for forty years. Geographically speaking, they could have journeyed from Egypt to Canaan (the promised land) in perhaps a week or ten days, the route being straight as an arrow. However, it turned out to be otherwise. A whole

generation was born, came to maturity and died after their predecessors came from Egypt. Talk about two different realities. Somehow the hospital experience paralleled what the Israelites went through because at the root of both was the bugaboo of desire. The people desired to reach Canaan as quickly as possible and were frustrated mightily when they had to remain in the Sinai wilderness for forty years. I by comparison spent a puny few days in the hospital but like the Israelites, was plagued by desire to get out. We may acknowledge the role desire plays in our lives but in reality are quite fearful to relinquish it since we have no clue as to the consequences.

Upon closer inspection of the time when I sat by the window with a view onto a street two stories below, I started feeling quite antsy, something akin to a panic attack though not as dramatic. I wanted to jump through the window and be with those walking on the sidewalk going anywhere but here. In addition to this a few robins were in a tree just about ten feet away doing their thing as naturally as could be. At the same time I heard the hallway traffic outside my room, busy day and night. On my second day I found out about code eleven the so-called elopement alarm. That's when a patient tries to leave. The whole hospital goes on lock-down. I happened to have experienced this several times and hoped the escapees were able to make it out! I found out later that they did not.

The hospital experience turned out to be a great way to observe how I was able to handle (or mishandle) desire which constantly presents itself to us. Forget about eliminating it altogether. That'd be using desire to combat desire, an exercise in futility. The best approach is to acknowledge the existence of desire and be content with that. Wishing it away, albeit subtly, turns out to be—you guessed it—another form of desire though more subtle than fighting it outrightly. As for the variations, literally they are endless. Thus intuiting these ever-changing alterations of desire is a key element in how we comport ourselves in a situation where we're not particularly comfortable. One can't help but recall the famous observation attributed to Heraclitus, "All things are in a state of flux." Winston Churchill put it another way when he defined history, "one God-damned thing after another."

Should you look at this continuous mental flux which pales in comparison with any physical change we find in nature, it turns out that in a way we're attracted to it. I was almost going to say addicted, but that'd be a bit too strong. Its essence consists in movement which makes us invariably drawn to it because we so attuned to equate movement with life. True in many ways but equally untrue where it counts. Thus the hospital experience was one particular experience of movement. Sounds a bit odd putting it this way, but that's what it boils down to. Things were moving along as expected though I was trying my best to direct in in the direction I wanted...to get

out asap. So the key is to refrain from movement which at first sounds rather strange. After all, desire is invariably wrapped up with movement.

Once we've stepped out of a particular environment and find ourselves in another one as outside the hospital, the previous experience is a memory which eventually will dissolve accordingly even if the impressions remain for some time. When we have a whole line-up of such experiences of the same basic character, all contribute to creating a given type of illusion. The individual parts indeed were real as pertaining to this and that aspect of the hospital stay, but over time they lost their impact for lack of a better way of putting it. Now the only thing remaining is memory of it colored by the above mentioned continuous desire to get out as soon as possible even it was contrary to my better health.

In other words, I discovered that a series of such alterations contributed to the birth of the well-known life-as-a-stage syndrome. Often this common observation is left as such; mentioned but forgotten as quickly as it came to birth. Nevertheless, it's worth a closer examination. Basically, some kind of platform set before an audience is required in order to support the actors, events and props which come on the scene, do their thing and then move on. Intuiting this base supporting all this stuff which comes and goes upon it is so essential that we're barely aware of it. That's where our attention deserves to be focused because the stage is an exact image of our awareness. We have to be careful here. While our original insight of a stage is valid enough, how we articulate it as mirroring our awareness is very important. Thus we need to be very attentive and develop all sorts of ill-informed myths. Forget all these for the moment. All we know is that there's something solid and permanent beneath the rise and fall of all the activity. Is this how our awareness functions? That's why the stage is so fascinating.

Despite the stage being a good analogy, it's not delved into as much as we should as offering an important teaching moment. It show that we're dealing with two apparently opposing realities, the one associated with Heraclitus and all the action which takes place upon the stage, that is, our awareness. I'm not sure, but this image of a stage may be attributable to Shakespeare. Such is the environment where desire runs rampant and where we seek to curb it. Indeed, nothing could be more dramatic. Forget if possible about the action taking place upon the stage. It's so autonomous and impersonal that literally nothing short of death can bring it to a halt. That means we have to find refuge in the image of a stage, the foundation upon which all the action takes place. For all practical purposes the stage in and by itself is neutral and imperious to what it supports. This is true in the literal sense.

Should we look at all this from the practical point of view, there's nothing attractive in cozying up to the stage, whether it's empty or occupied. As we know, people don't

go to a play or the like to focus on the platform but upon what's taking place there. There's nothing glamorous about the stage. It's just a block of...whatever though obviously essential. So the best time to befriend the stage—and let's stay with familiar language though it may come across as a bit odd—is when the hall is empty and not a single soul is around. Silence. Actually the more we look at the stage in this situation or when it's at the furthest point away from being useful, is when we see that it abounds with stories of what had taken place on it. Instead of an empty flat piece of whatever, the stage itself comes alive like some enormous living thing that has been aroused but not in the negative sense as in a horror movie. So why not make a play about the stage in and by itself?

As for coming alive, it's done in a secret sort of way when nobody is upon it which also implies no audience seated in the theater. Memory of what has taken place upon the stage before us is crucial to understand its existence. Often we use an expression such as “if these walls could only talk” or the like. In the case at hand, the stage's silence evokes memories in the person beholding it (I prefer this more inclusive verb over, say, looking). In this way the stage triggers a response in the beholder. Some may argue that from this point of view the stage is simply a lump of wood or concrete just sitting there. On the surface, true. However, that's just the surface. We're more concerned with the stage's instrumentality.

Once we allow the silence of the stage to elicit memories, they now populate its surface. Nothing willy-nilly is taking place there as had been the past when we were frustrated with out-of-control images and thoughts racing across it. To the stage's credit, it remains impervious. The stage desperately wishes to communicate this to us so we're not tossed hither and thither like rag dolls. When we speak of memories, they are not of the common type such as remembering such and such an event pleasant or otherwise. This is the realm of *anamnesis* or the very center of our souls in accord with Socrates which comprises our identity and brings us back right up front or face-to-face with our source.

Anamnesis thus becomes our saving grace. Use of this term has divine implications meaning that it doesn't come from us, that we've manufactured it. We can't manufacture gratitude—yes, we can fake it for a given time—but are unable to sustain it over the long haul. Automatically we reveal ourselves as liars, not true to ourselves.

Drawing more on this analogy of a stage perceived in silence or without activity on it happened to lead to another insight with regard to two particular moments of time. For example, more often than not mid-morning through mid-afternoon usually is when we're most active. Should we be shunted off to the sidelines as with my recent hospital experience, mid-morning has a special way of impacting you. Everyone else

is busy with this and that except you who are simply hanging around doing nothing. That's when action on the stage reaches its peak and when we're least forgetful of the stage itself. At this time memories are taking the place of *anamnesis*, the former a superficial imitation of the latter. The only way out is to pull the plug at once. Stop the action, come what may which in the case at hand means sitting by the window in silence. In reality I had done that several times during my hospital stay, and believe me. It came through.

To counter this busy time, consider when the stage is most quiet. That implies two times of the day, bookends of what's in between, namely the two periods of twilight, morning and evening. Personally I prefer the evening, but both are equally valid. The former is a time of semi-light or when darkness slowly but irrevocably moves into light. The latter does the same but only in reverse, from day to night. If I recall correctly, Henry David Thoreau was tuned into this though he didn't look at it from the point of view of a stage. When setting out for one of his famous walks, he never went in an easterly direction, finding it more mysterious to go west where the sun was drawing him to the horizon. He stopped short of breaching this horizon, even insofar as not to go beyond the edge. Better leave things in their native mysterious habitat instead of violating that space.

And so the morning and evening twilight form two bookends or in terms of this essay, we could substitute the word stage. While we're in between them, we can both continue with our distress yet not be bothered by it, a real paradox. We know that we've come from one twilight (morning) and are moving to another twilight (evening). The benefit of both bookends is that they separate two distinct realities we seldom reflect upon yet experience each day, the alteration between night and day. Fortunately for us, we're always on the move.

Getting back to the hospital experience, night is when activity continues but on a lesser scale than during the daylight hours. Often it's more difficult to sleep because apart from the activity taking place just outside one's room, thoughts tend to rush in and threaten to take you over. Time once more to get out of bed and sit by the window looking outside at any activity or even better, tuning in with the native quietness of night. By all means, resist the temptation to turn on the television! If it weren't for that deliberate break, one could lose it. That may be a bit dramatic, but we feel pushed closer to the edge which comprises a darkness that's alien to our very life. Something is lurking there. I venture not to go further than this, but I'm pretty sure it's real and best to be left undisturbed. I felt this in the form of being closed in while waiting for a hospital bed off in a corner of the emergency ward. I had been imprisoned there for a total of fifteen hours. When word finally came that they were

moving me, it was not unlike being released from a dungeon even though the care there was great.

We can situate this with a common saying we hear from time to time. That consists of the need to leave home, move all over the place and then return home. Most of us undergo this experience in one way or another which comprises one of life's rites of passage. After having experienced movement from this place to that, there arises an awareness of not having to go anywhere because we're already where we're supposed to be. However, coming to that realization can be as difficult as trying to focus upon the stage in and by itself instead of the action taking place upon it. And so the need to leave home to find it on the surface counters the image usually associated with Buddhism that we are made whole and entire.

Although it's easy and pleasant to recognize the place in which we're supposed to be, why is it so difficult to sustain? It seems as soon as we have this insight it vanishes which means somehow we have to learn how to uphold it. As for the learning, it doesn't resemble acquiring knowledge in the conventional sense. This is where our friend *anamnesis* again comes to the forefront. *Anamnesis* turns out to consist more of forgetting which goes contrary to how we go about doing things and relating with people. The shedding of our innate capacity to acquire stuff...any and all stuff...turns out to be something outside our normal experience. To our dismay, we're getting nothing in return except grief. However, this grief is a kind of residue from the mistaken illusion of not going forward or better, of not advancing.

That brings up the further question, why bother to advance at all? It seems that rarely if do we question this and instead, press on like lemmings about to run over a cliff.

Coming to a halt is as painful as someone trying to wean him or herself off drugs. Easy on the surface but hard...wicked hard...to carry out. It's worth our due to ponder this or better, allow ourselves to live with this conundrum without trying to fix it. We can't fix it, so the quicker we come to this realization the better off we'll be. The lesson being learned? Hands off, simple as that. Some may ask, is this what *anamnesis* consist of? How disappointing! The person with such expectation is hoping to go somewhere...move from one point to another...without realizing that such movement is the very thing to be dropped.

One way you know you're going along the right path of *anamnesis* is that you get to a point in life when you don't need any more support. In other words, assistance from people, books or even meditation has run its course, and best of all, you know it. At first you resemble a man who despite having had his left arm amputated, still feels it's attached to his body. It takes some time getting used to the fact that you've lost this arm for good, and it's time to move on. In the case at hand, this missing limb

is a boon, not a loss. It turns out we don't need it because, strange to say, everything somehow has been taken care of. Searching for the missing arm is like the above example of having to move all over the place instead of realizing there's absolutely no need to go anywhere.

As for *anamnesis*, this is where our recollective faculty signified by the verbal root *mimnesko* or to remember has the important preposition *ana-* prefaced to it. Our memory functions like it does recalling this and that, but instead is snatched up and transformed by the preposition *ana-* prefaced to it. *Ana-* represents that which is above and to get there one must go up or upon it. So *ana-* tacked on to the verb *mimnesko* takes regular memory and at once lifts up its normal sphere of operation and inserts it into some place new and exciting. In light of this we could say that *anamnesis* is like our recollective faculty taking one huge gulp of reality and casting it into (that is, *ana-* or upon) something completely different and unintended. The best part is that this happens so quickly we don't know the mechanism that's involved. The only certainty is in terms of getting back to what was said above as having to go no place and to do nothing. We're at where we always have been.

This being where we belong can suffer from one difficulty we might be aware of but give little thought. That consists of the mistaken notion we expect to be in some kind of la-la land all the time. Not true, obviously. The issue of continuity remains with regard to daily life. We still have to get up in the morning, have breakfast, go to work, come home and get ready for the next day. That's the type of continuity comprising an endless series of events we associate with being already at home. Interestingly we've been doing this routine for some time but when looking at our earlier experiences, our minds were somewhere else, as far from *anamnesis* as they could be.

In conclusion, for many years I had been reading the Zen teaching of Huang Po. He's a master who minces no words and gets to the heart of the matter. Huang Po constantly harps on how our intellect is the problem and proposes that we cease thinking. He puts this directly and eloquently as though we can do it as easy as pie or if not so, can work our way into it rather quickly. It doesn't work that way whether you're from the East or from the West. Stopping thought is like trying to stop breathing. Nevertheless, the lesson drawn from the way Huang Po gets right down to brass tacks seems to parallel advocating *anamnesis* without having access to that word but to the reality it signifies. You work yourself backward into it, discreetly and without making a fuss. Then we can throw in what Jesus says about forgiving seventy times seven each day. That type of forgiveness parallels the so-called no thought of Huang Po by taking focus off what tends to rivet our attention and loosen it from the object's compulsive grip that we've unwittingly allowed to develop.

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