

Before Our Feet Hit the Ground

*To philosophize means to remove oneself not from the things of the everyday world but from the usual meanings, the accustomed evaluations of these things.*¹

The article at hand hopefully will align itself with this statement as best as possible.

At the time of this writing news broke about a devastating attack by Hamas against Israel, one that came out of the clear blue. As it turned out later, this was the worst such attack in Israel's history. Where this will go is anyone's guess. As for the timing, it came when I was giving some thought to the inner turmoil everyone experiences, where it comes from and how it affects us. Of course there's the Really Dangerous Stuff that explodes such as the case at hand and has far-reaching implications. While that makes the headlines, I'm more interested in the small stuff as it affects us all. Often we overlook the latter which unfortunately spills over into the former. In fact, we see little or no connection. One is too small and the other is too big. Nevertheless, both are comprised of the same material.

At first glance this aligning of two apparently different circumstances may come across as well-intentioned but essentially a waste of time. However, I found one thing to be certain. Our slide...perhaps better taken as a downward spiral...into negativity seems unavoidable. Because the scale on which we operate is small, we don't consider it worth our attention. We're too caught up in the minutiae to see the larger picture. Part of our problem is that we feel that focus should be on issues affecting many people in a big way. Indeed, the bigger the better. Why bother with things generally deemed insignificant? However—and this is a Big However—addressing the minutiae of life is almost always overlooked. Directing our attention to them perhaps is the best approach to saving the world. Such is the theme of the article at hand.

¹¹ **Leisure, The Basis of Culture** by Josef Pieper (p. 117 Kindle format). Personally, I like to take the verb to philosophize in the original sense as to love or perhaps better, to befriend (*philos* or friend) of wisdom, *sophia* also as technique, know-how and at times can suggest a certain back-handed approach to things.

Shortly before this latest Middle East conflict I was wondering why upon waking up and even before planting my feet on the ground so many negative thoughts flowed incessantly through my mind. "Negative thoughts" may be a bit strong, but I use the phrase anyway, a kind of catch-all. In reality, they lean more to being gloomy and, of course, insignificant almost to the point of embarrassment. Recently during a typical daily situation (pretty much the same as the previous day and the one last month...last year) the title of this essay suddenly hit me. I figured it was apt, descriptive of the precise moment when we all rise from sleep and shortly before the day begins. Then I discovered that the transition from sleep to wakefulness, common as it is, is the biggest shift we experience as we go from one mode of existence to another. I use unprofessional language here simply because of ignorance, but the drift of this is clear to everyone.

As for these negative thoughts, they continued throughout my daily first-thing-in-the-morning routine. I link these five words with hyphens deliberately to show that such thoughts continue unabated through each of the regular things we do at the beginning of a day. We move from washing up, doing #1 or #2 (or both), breakfast, shaving and brushing of teeth. I consider making the bed as a way we cap off these activities. It's a gesture done with almost a public character saying that night is behind us and the day lays ahead. I estimate that all these activities usually done in a blur take about thirty minutes or less. We vary the schedule here and there depending, but essentially that's it.

Now the day begins. But guess what? The negative thoughts are just as must present now as at the beginning, only now they take on greater clarity by reason of having shaken off our drowsiness. As for the middle part of the day, that's usually taken up with work and dealing with people. Even though we have negative thoughts at that time, for the most part they're superseded by practical matters. We don't have time to entertain them or as a friend once remarked wryly, for them to entertain us. Also, we're moving from one thing to another, too quickly for them to stick. Thus the thoughts that are taking place this time differ only in intensity, not quality, compared with when we wake up.

We don't have to be expert psychologists or therapists (whichever term is applicable here, I'm not sure) to know that we're more susceptible to less than

desirable thoughts at night than during the day. That's why I prefer to focus upon some kind of dividing point between the two halves of our life, being asleep and being awake. Should we muster enough attention to focus upon what transpires in the border zone...the first thirty minutes or so upon waking up...we see these negative thoughts pretty much in the raw or with no embellishment.

While many people will agree this is a common experience, they'll poo-poo it precisely because it's so common. By reason of the apparent insignificance it doesn't merit our attention. However, we're prone to ignore it at our own peril. Again, alarmist thoughts can come to mind over giving too much attention in an attempt to elevate something minor to a level beyond it's worth. Most people would agree that on the surface this appears true, and we can get away with it for an extended period of time. However, stretch this experience of stagnating in daily negative thoughts out to several months down the road and voila, still no difference. That's a short time, but extend it out even further—a few years and then to a whole lifetime—and we have something quite depressing.

Instead of quickly dismissing these early morning experiences which color the day about to unfold we can instead seek to personalize them. That means introducing an element of fun into the equation. For example, towards the conclusion of our morning routine we can put mocking words in their mouths directed towards us such as "Consider how gloomy you are right now. Follow through on that by seeing what you can come with next to badger us for the rest of the day. We will be at your heels constantly, ever making our presence known. We won't force you to conform to us but eventually you'll give in by our silent presence."

I put the activity of these first thirty minutes as such in an attempt to objectify what's going on because when personalizing it, we see more clearly the mechanism involved. In other words, the morning actions which I had linked as consisting of five parts (usually five but by not necessarily so) become an objective reality easier to observe and to take apart piece by piece. This dissection is important. Why so? Intimately linked with it is the slowing down of time, of viewing all the parts first as a whole and entire as they pass by us in a blur and then once dissembled and reassembled, what has bothered us is now seen for what it's worth.

This disassembling of the pieces involved is available only when at a super-slow speed. It reveals far more than available to us in normal circumstances when those negative thoughts rumble through our minds. When we apply this to the ultra-mundane details which mark the start of our day, suddenly we find ourselves opening a treasure chest of unsuspected, completely...and I mean completely...overlooked insights. If perceived properly, they can add significant insight and even more, work to change our lives for the better. Actually they don't do a thing. The only thing which can be labeled as change is our looking at them.

Nevertheless, the resistance is formidable. It seems so strange that such a simple gesture is frowned upon, even worse, rejected with some force. Perhaps it's too mundane for anyone's good. Nevertheless the prospect of overcoming this is right before us. It's only a matter not where we look but how we look, more precisely, looking straight at the situation without a desire to alter it. That, of course, is Step Number One. Capital letters are intentional because it includes the whole package. In actuality there is no step number two or the like though what follows from Number One does so as part of it.

By this slo-mo approach I don't mean dragging out each step nor even physically slowing them down upon waking up. The reason? It's too artificial and involves too much effort. Once again, the task at hand consists of watching them plain and simple. Often we tack on to this gesture available to anyone at any time conditions. That is, we think it's necessary to act according to high moral standards, be holy or the like. While that wouldn't hinder, this gesture of looking which is more akin to beholding precludes all those add-ons.

Take a concrete example, a recent experience when I decided to start an exercise program. I'm not into body building nor anything rigorous as that but felt a need to get the blood flowing. Interestingly, it was hard to get underway but the reward, even after some fifteen-twenty minutes, is wonderful. However, for some reason or other that beneficial memory failed to carry over to the next day, so when the time rolled around, I faced the same resistance. At first it was strictly personal but soon discovered it was a common experience. Armed with that consolation, I decided to do nothing nor to speak with anyone but just watch the resistance. I hadn't the slightest clue as to where it came but came it did for which

I was grateful. Enough for that day. Somehow I realized it would offset any sluggishness I'll experience on the morrow. Again, nothing earth-shaking but akin to applying a spirit of watchfulness to that first thirty minutes in the morning, a world of difference.

In order to introduce some consistency here I found there was a need to pull a trick on myself. Nothing magical or the like but to look at the resistance straight on without a desire, not even the slightest, to wish for the same resolve tomorrow to do my exercise. Again, this is really small, even banal, because by default we entertain an idea that we should be engaged with more important stuff. In fact, we believe that we're destined for it. As with our morning routine, we essentially despise the details even when acknowledging their necessity. And since we can't rid ourselves of the necessity, at least we can hold our nose and go through with it.

A major lesson emerges from this experience. The very restricted scope of our early morning and very physical actions can be broadened out. Pushing them to the max, we can extend them to the universe. In other words, there are no limits. Part of our problem is that even unconsciously we desire something peculiar to ourselves and ourselves alone regardless of how insignificant it happens to be. We don't want to share a damn thing. The only condition is if we have vastly more of the good stuff. In that case we can be "generous" and mete it out accordingly.

We live in the physical world, so no getting around that fact regardless of what persuasion we happen to be. It's unavoidable. As for rising in the morning or when we put our feet on the ground, we're in a state that's half mental and half physical. Within that short time lasting approximately thirty minutes we experience a strange combination of what usually isn't present the rest of the day. First of all, the physical sensations are more pressing, especially when we get older. They're amplified by reason of just having emerged from sleep, so naturally we're slower to react. Despite this, our focus naturally drifts along with the thoughts and perhaps emotions that crowd in on us. A carry-over from sleep? I'm not qualified to say so, but it seems they're a continuation of what we had been subject to now in our waking state.

As noted earlier, always...not just sometimes...these thoughts are of a negative variety though not blatantly so. It's all low grade stuff, difficult to lay hold of and thus easily dismissed as being no big deal. Besides, having just gotten out of bed we're still too tired to be roused to a fuller extent. Because our intelligence isn't focused and we're not as much governed by what we plan to do or not do, it's a time more suited to watch each and any thought pass by without interfering in their rise and fall. When we look back at this time later in the day it seems like another world. We wonder how one led to the other, but that happens all the time.

We might experience a certain wistfulness in our attempts to recapture that time when we're more disposed to watching a milder or more diluted form of negative thoughts. However, soon we discover that a key component is not to interfere with them...period...then or now. This can't be repeated enough. When we first try our hand at this during waking hours it's more difficult, but recollection of that time can be inserted into the present. Such is the powerful ally of recollection-as-*anamnesis* which we'll get into later on. Sometimes we think it'd be better to insert positive thoughts early in the day. Sounds like a great idea. The problem is that it lasts a nanosecond or two but no more. The reason? Too much work. Besides, this is our normal *modus operandi* during the course of the coming day, and we wish to avoid that if possible.

Another lesson emerges. The very focus on the physicality of these early morning activities leads to an awareness that our inherent negative thoughts and emotions are more malleable than we had anticipated. For a long time we thought they were pretty much fixed in stone. To discover this as otherwise indeed is a major first step. How do we go about it? First we have to align ourselves to the moment-by-moment stuff streaming by us. "Stuff" indeed is a great word. It's a catch-all and leans slightly towards the negative but not too much. In sum, "stuff" relativizes what we're acquired and have come to believe as being important. On the surface this focus on what's physical comes across as purely robotic. Robotic indeed first on the physical level which spills over to the mental level. The two become aligned. Instead of being a frightening prospect, the paralysis this alignment produces does not come from our personal machinations. It's as blind as the operations of nature. Discovering this turns out to be a super-huge

discovery. It allows body the body and thoughts to run their own restricted way while we are apart from them just watching.

Now we're in a position where we sit back and enjoy running on automatic pilot. As on a ship or plane, once in that mode we're freed up to do things that had escaped us. This is a bit inaccurate. Better to say we enjoy everything as it presents itself to us. If and when things aren't to our liking, we recognize them and let them pass on. The Best Part is that the negativity which had seemed so endemic now dribbles away almost magic-like. While focus here is on the rise and fall of negative thoughts, the same applies to that which is positive. *Mirabile dictu*, the two turn out to be comprised of the same essence, an insight available only from the robotic point of view. In daily life this nullifies just about everything. It lays the axe to the root of all our problems, and the only way to see if this works is go out and try your hand at it.

At this point we can consider some background material which may help us better understand the inherent negativity which I've associated with the first thirty minutes or so upon waking up. Take, for example, the Latin adjective *curvus* which can mean bent, crooked as well as curved...pretty obvious just by looking at it. The renowned Lewis and Short online Latin dictionary presents *curvus* in basically a negative light. *Curvus* refers to a downward trend afflicting human nature as opposed to the opposite which is *erectus*, standing upright. From what I gather, this seems to be a favorite theme of some of the Cistercian Fathers, notably Willaim of St. Thierry and Bernard of Clairvaux.

Because I have some familiarity with Bernard, I prefer to focus upon Sermon Twenty-Four ² of his **On the Song of Songs**. Section #6 begins appropriately enough with a description of the human body, that physicality discussed above which is the basis for everything. Note some key words in bold because they tie in with *curvus*:

*Quanquam et corporis staturam dedit homini Deus **rectam**; forsitan ut ista corporea exterioris viliorisque **rectitudo** figmenti hominem interiorem illum, qui ad imaginem*

² **On the Song of Songs II** (Kalamazoo, 1976).

*Dei factus est, spiritualis suae servandae **rectitudinis** admoneret, et decor limi deformitatem argueret animi.*

“God indeed gave man an upright stance of body, perhaps in order that this corporeal uprightness, exterior and of little account, might prompt the inward man, made to the image of God, to cherish his spiritual uprightness; that the beauty of the body of clay might rebuke the deformity of the mind.”

Rectam is applied to *staturam* or that which is straight or proper signifying how a human being made by God is supposed to comport himself. It’s the exact opposite of *curvus*. If we look at the so-called biblical “fall,” the Lord lines up the serpent, man and woman and lays it thick on them. While the two humans remain standing both through and after this hardcore lecture, the Lord takes great pains telling the serpent that from now on it will go on its belly (cf. Gn 3.14) inferring (mythically, that is) that it had been upright just like the man and woman. And so this serpent on its belly, close to the ground, now becomes the primary agent that will trip up future human descendants. In other words, the serpent had been *rectus* but now in a permanent state at the bottom of the *curva*. This is now its natural habitat.

Although Bernard starts with the body, our physicality, *viliorisque* rendered “and of little account” at first doesn’t seem so. Most likely he puts it this way in order to make a point. That means we shouldn’t pass over the importance the physical realm is for the interior, the two adjectives being *exterioris* and *interiorem*, both self-explanatory. This section concludes with *rectitudinis* or uprightness which is more or less equivalent to the image of God, the exact opposite of *deformitatem* or deformity as applicable to *animi* or that which is life-giving and animates body and soul.

Moving ahead to section seven, we have “Those whose souls (*curvae animae*) are warped in this fashion cannot love the Bridegroom.” Here *curvae* is applied to *animae* which infers that although the soul is invisible, it’s curved or bent over. That means it will take on a physical representation which mirrors this condition and does so through the body or better, how a human being comports himself. The reason for *curvae animae*? *Quaerae* and *sapere* or to seek and to taste with regard to those things literally upon (*super*) the earth. If we read a bit further,

there's the phrase *curvitas animae* or literally "curvature of the soul," *curvitas* inclining more towards crookedness and crookedness in turn leans toward being crippled in a permanent condition. Contrary to this we have *meditari* and *desiderare* or to meditate and to desire things that are above or *sursum*. Thus *super* vs. *sursum*. Such is what's meant by rectitude or uprightness as in the previous paragraph.

This digression, if you will, with regard to St. Bernard is intended to tie in with that snapshot of our lives represented by the first thirty minutes or so when we put our feet on the ground upon waking up. As intimated above, we do this each and every day but tend to miss what's being communicated. Something from somewhere is trying to reach out to us, not so much to correct us but to point out the value of robotic existence. Paradox of paradoxes. The more we restrict ourselves the freer we become. So when we miss the opportunity as is often the case during the rest of the day...99.99% of it...twenty-four hours later we find ourselves back again but have a crack at it all over again. At first it may look Sisyphus-like but in reality another golden opportunity is presented to us.

Clearly we have a unique opportunity to learn from this apparently measly percentage. There's both an advantage and disadvantage present. The obvious disadvantage is that we've just gotten out of bed and are trying to shake off the night's sleep. There is, however, an advantage. This drowsy condition allows us to see thoughts flowing through us like a sieve. Actually they're more like a flood through a sieve, a carry-over from sleep. In a way, it's easier to tune into this powerful flow and watch where it goes. Like Jesus says of the Spirit and wind, we don't know the source, just that it comes and then goes. Actually this turns out to be irrelevant to the point at hand. These thoughts, by reason of being likened to a flow of water, rush downward. A certain type of gravity is at work analogous to physical gravity responsible for making an actual torrent. Obviously this means the source is above and goes to below in a natural way, that is, from above as the source we can pinpoint but is beyond our comprehension. Instead of that, our attention is to be on the flow, gravity at work.

So what's at stake here is that this gravitational force can be tentatively identified as where the *daimones* live. As chiefly associated with Socrates, a daimon is a

spirit which exists in between that which is divine and that which is human. I.e., a *daimon* is neither but *metaxu* or in between the two and thus difficult if not impossible to define, let alone lay hands on. That's the way it should be, something we find almost impossible to accept. I use daimonic here perhaps inaccurately but with the intent to show an activity taking place somehow within but without us during this first thirty minutes of awareness as just described.

This puts another angle on the downward gravitational force so endemic as to how we conduct our lives and show us how closed we are to other options. While *curvitas* indeed remains, it becomes a place *metaxu* between above and below where the *daimones* can intervene favorably on our behalf. They do this chiefly by allowing us to see in the sense of stepping back while at the same time remaining in that from which we've taken the step back. That is to say, two opposites are at work without them coming into conflict. We remain susceptible to the downward slope of *curvitas* but if and when we slide that downward, the *daimones* are there not unlike angels to lift us up.

A quick sidenote here. Every so often you'll hear physicists claim we're living in a hologram or artificial reality not of our own making. They're spot on as to acknowledging a reality other than what we're used to but go overboard, it seems, based on calculations that supposedly have impact on the daimonic world as described above. End of sidenote.

Getting back to St. Bernard, not being attentive to what's transpiring while we're in the midst of it is the actual sliding down the *curvitas*. We don't do it in one fell swoop but gradually, almost imperceptibly. The problem now is compounded by the fact that we keep sliding down without reaching the bottom. The further we go, the further away we are from the point from which we've departed. Not only that, the curve represents a bend where soon we lose sight or awareness of our origin. Like a train going around a corner, it's not sudden but gradual. At this juncture it's crucial to realize that one function of the *daimones* is to make us pay attention to the physicality of our bodily actions as during the first thirty minutes of being awake goes a long way to dissolve this curve.

This may work for one day which gladdens us. However, to sustain the momentum, if you will, we need to carry over memory of that time to the next

day. Here I mean memory in the sense of *anamnesis* or recollection that our origin derives from some other place, if you will, than our physical existence. As anyone who engages in a daily regime such as exercise or study realizes, the succession of days comes upon you in relentless fashion. That's a way of thinking that fortunately *anamnesis* precludes. In other words, we're not doing our daily routine in Ground Hog Day fashion.

While *anamnesis* is ever-present to us we are not ever-present to it. We've come to distinguish ourselves as having it let's say "on occasion" as opposed to not so. Only during those intervals when we "aren't it" we're apart from *anamnesis*. We make an appeal, as it were, to have it operative in our lives, of allowing *anamnesis* to give form to our awareness. It's a really tough thing to grasp by reason of the simplicity involved. One quick way of looking at this is as follows. "Being *anamnesis*" is when we're leaning more towards reversing the *curvitas* whereas "not being *anamnesis*" means we're continuing along in our so-called normal lackadaisical state of mind. In other words, we're continuing on the slippery slope of *curvitas*.

One may ask if there's a way out of this dim view of both ourselves as well as reality. Actually one exists that takes into consideration the slide down this *curvitas*. When you look at it, it seems pretty much fixed and unmovable. Such is the unconscious influence which the physical reality of gravitational pull has on us. It's more insidious by reason of being on the daimonic level, that is, hard to discern unless we're attuned to it. In Plato's **Symposium**³ we find a presentation of what a *daimon* actually is for. Keep in mind that I'm lifting this from Plato and inserting it into another context, the *curvitas* of St. Bernard. Perhaps this isn't permitted, but I can't resist the temptation to do so.

³ **Symposium** 202e-203a, **Plato, Complete Works** edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997). Often I've referred to this passage as well others from the same dialogue. It's an endless source of inspiration, containing something always new while always old. This quote which I came across on the Internet sums it up perfectly in the words of the philosopher Whitehead: "[Plato's] inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization [has] made his writings an inexhaustible mine of suggestion."

The reason for this insertion? *Daimon* in its in-between role (i.e., *metaxu*) can be situated somewhere along the *curvitas*, that is, between the top and bottom:

“They (*daimones*) are messenger who shuttle back and forth who shuttle back and forth between the two, conveying prayer and sacrifice from men to gods, while to men they bring commands from the gods and gifts in return for sacrifices. Being in the middle of the two, they round out the whole and bind fast the all to all. Through them all divination passes, through them the art of priests in sacrifice and ritual, in enchantment, prophecy, and sorcery.”

Thus a *daimon* can act like a guardian angel or those angels descending and ascending Jacob’s ladder (Gn 28.12+). By reason of being *metaxu*, it’s endowed with greater mobility than us and has the power to restore us to the “top” or in Bernard’s words, *erectus* as noted with regard to section six. Let’s keep this association of *daimon* in mind with regard to the intent of the article at hand. Say we slide down that *curvitas* relative to our nature as Bernard says by not coming to grips with the first thirty minutes of our waking. The next time we’re at it—the next day in our lives or tomorrow—we have another chance. While *curvitas* may be fixed, our ability to go up can be accomplished with ease. However, keep in mind this is going against the grain of non-physical gravity which is much harder than any physical gravitational pull.

Such is where the *daimones* come to our aide, again they representing a way of putting the whole experience mythically. Speaking this way invites considerable ridicule, that we’re making something up to explain the inexplicable. It turns out that the very suggestion of a transcendent or semi-transcendent reality is repulsive. Okay if presented in familiar Christian terminology but this is different or should we say, more to the point, going all the way back some 2.500 years ago. So with the guidance of a *daimon* as it was with Socrates, we’re able to see right before our eyes that this reality impinges directly upon our banal, day-to-day lives. Admittedly it’s close to impossible to admit that the companionship of a *daimon* is waiting to be with us throughout the coming day. Our problem is not accepting this reality but some kind of weird inbuilt need for us to suffer considerably and employ super-human effort to reach them.

We may welcome the prospect just described but more often than not we reject it. We're too taken-aback by the possibility of having some greater reality in our lives all the time. It's too good to be true, that something can come to our aid in our endemic habit of drifting in and drifting out of awareness with regard to transcendent reality. Again...yet over again...the *metaxu* nature of a *daimon* comes to our rescue. We insert *metaxu* mythically, as it were, into our lives and let it go from there. In a sense, we throw everything to the wind and let reality take its own course. The alternation between accepting and rejecting the presence of a *daimon* is going to come anyway, so why bother getting worked up into a lather about it.

By way of conclusion, a brief note regarding the well-known "pray always" quote from scripture (Ephesians 6.18), the first sentence there running in full as "Pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication." This is a verse worth close attention to the prepositions. It starts off with *dia* or through with regard both *proseuche* and *deesis* or a petition and an urgent request with the adjective *pas* or all modifying them. We could add the preposition *pros* prefaced to both the noun *proseuche* itself and the verb *prosecho* also in this verse which indicates directness or immediacy. Next come two instances of the preposition *en* or in: with regard to *kairos* or time-as-special-occasion (intervention) and with regard to *Pneuma* or Spirit.

Should we string them altogether we get *dia* → *pros* → *pros* → *en* → *en* (through → towards → towards → in → in). This might be going overboard but I do so deliberately to see the dynamics of *proseuche* as a relationship with God. It goes from one stage to another and so forth which implies alteration, not sameness or even constancy. The advantage of picking apart a sentence like this is a direct way to overcome the inconsistency inherent in our lives. We're always wabbling this way or another which is something St. Bernard was keenly aware of in his monks. He capitalized on the idea of *curvitas*, of how human nature left unattended has an inherently downward inclination. Again, there's no such thing as a solution to dissolve this once and for all except bringing to bear our attention to the banal details of our daily life starting when our feet hit the ground each morning.

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