

GANZ - #9 - REWILDING THE WORD (MAY 2024)

A Story

I want to recount a conversation that I had this week.

He and I found ourselves, at one point in our conversation, reflecting on the relentless calamities happening inside a formerly distinguished Institution. We had been noticing too many evidences of its lostness, its progressive self-destruction under bleakly vague leadership.

Except in idea, perfection is as wild
as light; there is no hand laid on it.
But the house is a shambles unless
the vision of its perfection
upholds it like stone.¹

We might with merit have also considered whether an Institution *can* disintegrate, *can* cease to exist. The answer is that in one way it can, and will, and perhaps should; in another way, it cannot except when people lose hope.

The Latin roots of the verb “to institute” suggest that the external form of an “institute” – its structures; its history; its practices – is always and only the outward sign of an invisible reality – “as wild as light”. The invisible reality is the *Idea* for the sake of which a particular institution operates as a more or less sufficient **manifestation** of that Idea.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to manifest**” – 1.a. - ?a1425 – *transitive*. To make (a quality, fact, etc.) evident to the eye or to the understanding; to show plainly, disclose, reveal. Also *reflexive*, esp. of supernatural beings.

You and I have never known a noble Institution of wisdom that fully manifests the Idea that was its founding, and its sustaining, inspiration - “that splendour which she fitfully reflects.”²

¹ Wendell Berry “The Design of a House” from his *Findings* collection of poems.

² From C.S. Lewis’ famous sermon, “The Weight of Glory” (1942).

I recalled a poem by David Whyte in which he spoke of a “bright home”. (By the way, a “house” [an external structure] may, or may not, become a “home” [a spiritual event].)

This is the bright *home* [not house]
in which I live,
this is where I ask
my friends to come,
this is where I want
to love all the things
it has taken me so long
to learn to love.³

I began to wonder about hope. My conversant and I “had hoped” (see Luke 24:21) that this Institution might find itself again and become the grace that it had been historically. We got to the point in our conversation where he remarked, expressing what we both felt: “Too much to hope for, I know.”

I began to wonder whether he and I were placing our “hope” in the wrong place, placing our hope in the Institution rather than in the Idea (in this case the divine Idea) for the sake of which it was built and made operational for the common good, in the service of Heaven’s kingdom.

I found myself feeling the need to be careful about what hope meant, and to what reality it is properly ordered. I knew that it was Institutions (both secular and religious ones, working together but for different purposes) that murdered Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Lord who chose to call us, to make us, His friends. This stern fact alone should remind us about where hope belongs and where it does not belong – *Ave crux, spes unica*: “Hail the Cross, our only hope.”⁴

As we all have seen to our dismay, it is strikingly easy to dismantle, to wreck an Institution. But it is far more difficult to destroy an Idea, because *hope properly attaches itself to the Idea not to the Institution*. In relation to the founding and sustaining Idea,

³ David Whyte (b. 1955) in his collection *The House of Belonging* (1996). In the *Best Poems Encyclopedia* online we read: “David Whyte is an Anglo-Irish poet. He is the author of ten volumes of poetry and four books of prose including *The Bell and the Blackbird* (2018), *The Sea in You* (2016), *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words* (2014), *Pilgrim* (2012), *River Flow: New & Selected Poems* (2012), *Everything Is Waiting For You* (2003), *The House of Belonging* (1996), *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of The Soul in Corporate America* (1994) which topped the best seller lists, selling 155,000 copies, *Where Many Rivers Meet* (1990) and *Songs for Coming Home* (1984). He holds a degree in Marine Zoology and has worked as a naturalist guide in the Galapagos Islands.”

⁴ This Latin expression is the motto of the Congregation of Holy Cross (founded in 1837), who founded, for example, the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and the University of Portland in Oregon.

“Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat”⁵ – this is how C.S. Lewis puts it.

Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013) in his Encyclical letter to the world – *Spe salvi* – wrote concerning the supernatural (Christian) virtue of hope:

Only when the future is certain as a positive reality [the Idea of it] does it become possible to live the present as well. So now we can say: Christianity was not only “good news” – the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In our language we would say: the Christian message was not only “informative” but “performative”. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – *it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing*. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. *The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.*⁶

Two things to notice about this word from Pope Benedict XVI: First, Institutions can and do “make things happen” but they will never be “life-changing.”⁷ Second, Institutions do not have hope,⁸ only people can have that – “the one who has hope lives differently”.

And so when Institutions break down, it is in a way a comforting reminder to put our hope in the right place: in the *person* of Jesus Christ – *God’s luminous Idea made incarnate*, Who manifests fully and sufficiently what a human being can be and is for. The Catholic Church also presents for our contemplation a luminous congregation of those throughout history who never lost hold of the founding Idea (Jesus called it “the Kingdom of God”), who served it steadfastly and creatively, and who over and over again proved its enduring power and effectiveness ... even as the walls were brought down around them. We call them *saints*.

⁵ From C.S. Lewis’ famous sermon, “The Weight of Glory” (1942).

⁶ My italics added. “To the Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Men and Women Religious, and to all the Lay Faithful: On Christian Hope. Given in Rome, at Saint Peter’s, on 30 November, the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle, in the year 2007, the third of my Pontificate.”

⁷ Institutions in their self-flattering ways like to imagine, and then to market, that they “change lives”. No, they do not. But Institutions, good ones, give work to and support people who *can* change lives.

⁸ I still remember how powerfully I felt the impact of something that Fr. Gordon Moreland, SJ told me, who recognized – because I so often talked about it – the degree to which I sought to love the Institutions inside of which I carried out my spiritual mission and from which I felt that I had a right to expect love in return. He said to me, “Rick, you need to understand that Institutions do not love people; they love themselves.”

A Text – “Abide not in the realm of dreams”⁹

1. Abide not in the realm of dreams,
O man, however fair it seems;
But with clear eye the present scan,
And hear the call of God and man.
2. Think not in sleep to fold thy hands,
Forgetful of thy Lord’s commands;
From duty’s claims no life is free,
Behold, today hath need of thee.
3. The present hour allots thy task,
For present strength and patience ask;
And trust His love whose sure supply
Meets all thy need abundantly.

A Close Reading

“Abide not in the realm of dreams” – The most famous biblical text concerning “abiding” is found at the center of John’s Gospel (John 15:1-8). In that text, Jesus gets to the very core of all that His life and works have been meant to demonstrate to His disciples, to all among whom He carried out His public life. The *Jerusalem Bible* translates “abide” as “remain”, as, for example, “If you **remain** in me and my words **remain** in you” (verse 7). J.B. Phillips translates “abide” in different ways depending on the context, such as at the same verse 7: “But if you **live your life in me**, and my words **live in your hearts**, you can ask for whatever you like and it will come true for you.” Two things strike us here. First, if our hymnist means by “dreams” *day-dreams*, then right up front he is summoning us to get to work and quit lallygagging.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**daydream**” – A series of thoughts or yearnings that distract one’s attention (esp. pleasantly) from the present; a reverie. Hence:

⁹ A hymn by **William H. Burleigh (1812-1871)**, about whom *Hymnary.org*, quoting from John Julian’s *Dictionary of Hymnology* (1907) writes: “Burleigh, William Henry, an active reformer and member of the Unitarian body, was born at Woodstock, Connecticut, Feb. 12, 1812, and brought up on a farm at Stainfield in the same state. In 1837 he went to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, where, having been previously apprenticed to the printing trade, he published the *Christian Witness and Temperance Banner*. In 1843 he undertook the duties of editor of the *Christian Freeman*, at Hartford. From 1849 to 1855 he was agent of the New York State Temperance Society; and from 1855 to 1870 Harbour Master at New York. Died at Brooklyn, March 18, 1871.”

an idle fantasy or vain hope, typically concerning ambitions of happiness or success (cf. pipe dream n.).

But if by “dream” he means that from which the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. so famously spoke – “I have a dream”¹⁰ – then this stanza is not a dissing of dreams (in the Bible, it is very often through dreams that God is able to communicate most directly and effectively with human beings). Rather the value of one’s dreams lies in our ability not to consider them as *merely* dreaming (i.e., daydreams) but as communications to be taken seriously and *discerned* – “What do these strange images, and the feelings that they evoke in me, mean?”¹¹ Dreams may reveal to us how to proceed and with God’s abiding help – “and it will come true for you.”

Matthew 2 (NAB): ¹³ *When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt,* and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. ¹²

“Behold, today hath need of thee” – We might recall, and reconstruct in our prayerful imagination, what Moses felt before God at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Surely he was overcome with both awe and holy fear. Surely he would have felt the power of God, which simultaneously would have caused Moses to feel not powerless but at least feeble¹³ by contrast. And when Moses heard God say that He “had surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows” (Exodus 3:7), he would have guessed that God would then say, “Now, watch what I do to fix this!” But no, God said, “Come now

¹⁰ The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., a speech delivered on 28 August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Find the full text at:

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>.

¹¹ I have appreciated the work of this man. See Jeremy Taylor, *The Wisdom in Your Dreams: Using Dreams to Tap into Your Unconscious and Transform Your Life* (TarcherPerigee, 2009).

* Biblical and nonbiblical traditions about Moses are here applied to the child Jesus, though the dominant Old Testament type is not Moses but Israel (Mt 2:15).

* *Flee to Egypt:* Egypt was a traditional place of refuge for those fleeing from danger in Palestine (see 1 Kgs 11:40; Jer 26:21), but the main reason why the child is to be taken to Egypt is that he may relive the Exodus experience of Israel.

¹² *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 2:13-14.

¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**feeble**” - 1. - c1175 – Of persons or animals, their limbs or organs: Lacking strength, weak, infirm. Now implying an extreme degree of weakness, and suggesting either pity or contempt.

therefore, and *I will send thee unto Pharaoh*" (Exodus 3:10), or as our hymnist put it: "Today hath need of thee." How could this make sense to Moses who had just experienced himself as feeble at best before the living God? Moses and St. Paul would have much to share over coffee.

2 Corinthians 12 (NAB): ⁵ About this person* I will boast, but about myself I will not boast, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Although if I should wish to boast, I would not be foolish, for I would be telling the truth. But I refrain, so that no one may think more of me than what he sees in me or hears from me ⁷ because of the abundance of the revelations.¹⁴

An Action

In our current American moment, we all recognize around us people for whom we feel little patience. And as we feel our impatience, we also sense that our hope – the theological or supernatural virtue – is being threatened, drained of its force in us. Who could have guessed (I did not) that hope and patience go together? Pope Francis in a recent Audience¹⁵ said: "The world today is in great need of this Christian virtue! **The world needs hope, just as it needs patience, a virtue that walks in close contact with hope.** Patient people are weavers of goodness. They stubbornly desire peace, and even if some of them are hasty and would like everything, and straight away, patience is capable of waiting. Even when around us many have succumbed to disillusionment, those who are inspired by hope and are patient are able to get through the darkest of nights. **Hope and patience go together.**"

Our action, then, may helpfully be to *practice* patience each time we impatiently react to difficult people. Notice that we say to *practice* patience, because it *does* take practice! My sister Carol likes to say, "We need to remember that people are doing the best that they can." To say this to ourselves and to feel the truth of this statement is to have strengthened, incrementally, the virtue of hope in us. To grant to obnoxious others the possibility that they are doing the best that they can is, against our perception of them, to sustain hope in them and for them.

* *This person:* the indirect way of referring to himself has the effect of emphasizing the distance between that experience and his everyday life, just as the indirect *someone in Christ* (2 Cor 12:2) and all the passive verbs emphasize his passivity and receptivity in the experience. **The revelations were not a personal achievement, nor were they meant to draw attention to any quality of his own.**

¹⁴ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 2 Co 12:5-7.

¹⁵ Pope Francis I – General Audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall Wednesday, 8 May 2024.