



TRACKS

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb “to **track**” - I.1.a. - 1565 – *transitive*. To follow up the track or footsteps of; to trace the course or movements of; to pursue by or as by the track left; with down, out, up, to follow up or trace until found or caught.

The accomplishment of our national Election last week compelled me to think deeper about what had happened. We eventually learn that rarely do we understand something consequential happening while it is happening. It is only afterwards that we may begin to understand – ³² Then they said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?’ ¹ - if we have trained ourselves in the discipline of *recollection*.

But what is **recollection**? What does the dictionary say?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**recollection**” – 3.a. – 1633 – The action of recalling something to the memory; the mental operation by which objects or ideas are revived in the mind; an instance of this.

¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 24:32.

Notice “the action of calling something to memory”. When one is in the thick of a significant event, we are invaded by images and feelings, taken possession of by our *reactions* to it. In short: *we lose our composure*, we lose our “calmness of mind, self-possession.” A deliberate, dispassionate “calling into memory” is not possible. The impact of a particularly difficult circumstance renders us, at least for the moment, *intemperate*. We are dominated by our feelings. Consider this that Josef Pieper wrote:

The infantile disorder of intemperance, on the other hand, not only destroys beauty, but it also makes a person cowardly. Intemperance more than any other thing renders a person unable and unwilling to “take heart” against the wounding power of evil in the world.²

When a circumstance has knocked us off our foundation, we must insist that we regain our composure, forcing ourselves to quit *reacting*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the intransitive verb “**to react**” – 4. – 1795 – *intransitive*. To act in opposition to some force, pressure, or tendency; to respond with hostility or a contrary course of action *against* something.

It is for just such moments that the cardinal virtue of Temperance comes into play, helping us get our disordered affections back into right relation to our intellect.

Reacting to something is *not* the same as thinking about it.

How are we to stop reacting, so that we can with composure begin to think?

Well, I have found it helpful to have ready at hand certain words to repeat to myself. Some of my favorites are these. (1) I say to myself, ‘*Steady, Rick*’ - a command to myself; or (2) I repeat to myself, saying it in a non-cynical or bitter way, “Rick, it just *is*”, or as my longtime friend, Gary, likes to repeat, “It is what it is”. This reminds me that *reality is filled with help* if we accept it, “taking a long, loving look at the real”; or (3) I recall how Jesus, awakened by His terrified disciples shouting at Him in their sinking fishing boat, stood up and rebuked the storm.

² In *Josef Pieper: An Anthology*, selection #29. At this current cultural moment in America, we could hardly do better than to read the works of this learned and wise scholar of the virtues. That is, reading his works in close relation to the Scriptures, to the Gospels in particular, because in Jesus we can see what these virtues look like when fully possessed by and activated in a person.

Mark 4 (NJB): ³⁹ They woke him and said to him, 'Master, do you not care? We are lost!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Quiet now! Be calm!' And the wind dropped, **and there followed a great calm.**³

I ask Jesus, serene and fierce, to stand up inside my inner tumult and rebuke my reactive state of alarm or anger or confusion, asking Him to restore my composure. Only when calmness returns – we call it self-mastery - I regain my capacity to reconstitute the whole calamitous experience in my memory and to begin to think about it, asking Christ to help me understand what (actually) happened.

Luke 18 (NAB): ⁴⁰ Then Jesus stopped and ordered that he be brought to him; and when he came near, Jesus asked him, ⁴¹ **"What do you want me to do for you?" He replied, "Lord, please let me see."** ⁴² Jesus told him, "Have sight; your faith has saved you."⁴

In these days after the national and State elections, what has my recollection begun to reveal to me?

Well, first off, in the proper theological understanding of discernment, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, we are *never* given by God the ability to know what someone else is supposed to do, or even what we are supposed to do (i.e., inside of some group of belonging). I am only given by the Spirit the ability to know what *I* must do given the concrete circumstances into which I have been thrown.

Again, what has my recollection begun to reveal to me?

The political waves of discontent, of vengeance, of settling scores, of being offended will wash over us, threatening at times to drown us, sometimes tempting us to despair or to indulge a self-satisfied cynicism, encouraging us to indulge in name-calling rather than honoring the only Name that matters. Yes, all of this.

John 16 (NAB): ³³ I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world."⁵

But my recollection reminds me that there is nothing, in all of this chaos, that directly affects my ability, my responsibility, to do what I am capable of doing for others, doing

³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mk 4:39.

⁴ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Lk 18:40–42.

⁵ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Jn 16:33.

that with all the love in my heart, exercising every power of mind and heart on behalf of the common good. Remember how our world began with the words, “Let there be light” ... and there was light? Well now that light is me, each one of us, a “temple of the Holy Spirit” as I was taught who I am, and to Whom I belong, when I was a Catholic youth being prepared to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Matthew 5 (NJB) – ¹⁴ ‘*You* are light for the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub, they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way **your light must shine in people’s sight**, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven. ⁶

I love this word from Paul’s most “fiery” letter:

Galatians 5 (NJB) – ¹³ After all, brothers, you were called to be free; do not use your freedom as an opening for self-indulgence, but be servants to one another in love, ¹⁴ since the whole of the Law is summarized in the one commandment: *You must love your neighbour as yourself*. ¹⁵ If you go snapping at one another and tearing one another to pieces, take care: you will be eaten up by one another. ¹⁶ Instead, I tell you, be guided by the Spirit, and you will no longer yield to self-indulgence. ¹⁷ The desires of self-indulgence are always in opposition to the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are in opposition to self-indulgence: they are opposites, one against the other; that is how you are prevented from doing the things that you want to.⁷

Let us together pray for our composure, for a strengthening in each of us the habit of recollection, and above all, that we each may be made worthy to be of real help to God.

⁶ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 5:14–16.

⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ga 5:13–17.