

ON THE SUBJECT OF LOVE, COMPASSION, AND SUFFERING:

(Compiled by Carl Pickering)

"Pain and suffering are essential to progressive evolution." -- The URANTIA Book, p. 951

CAIN: Let me, happy or unhappy, learn  
To anticipate my immortality.

LUCIFER: Thou didst before I came upon thee.

CAIN: How?

LUCIFER: By suffering.

-- BYRON: Cain, Act II., Scene I.

The following quotations (unless otherwise noted) are taken from The Tragic Sense of Life by Miguel de Unamuno, in which the Author's Preface concludes with these words: "God give my English readers that inextinguishable thirst for truth which I desire for myself."

"The evolution of organic beings is simply a struggle to realize fullness of consciousness through suffering.

"Suffering is the path of consciousness, and by it living beings arrive at the possession of self-consciousness. For to possess consciousness of oneself, to possess personality, is to know oneself and to feel oneself distinct from other beings, and this feeling of distinction is only reached through an act of collision, through suffering more or less severe, through the sense of one's own limits. Consciousness of oneself is simply consciousness of one's own limitation. I feel myself when I feel that I am not others; to know and to feel the extent of my being is to know at what point I cease to be, the point beyond which I no longer am.

"And how do we know that we exist if we do not suffer, little or much? How can we turn upon ourselves, acquire reflective consciousness, save by suffering? When we enjoy ourselves we forget ourselves, forget that we exist; we pass over into another, an alien being, we alienate ourselves. And we become centred in ourselves again, we return to ourselves, only by suffering.

"The satisfied, the happy, do not love; they fall asleep in habit, near

neighbour to annihilation. To fall into a habit is to begin to cease to be. Man is the more man -- that is, the more divine -- the greater his capacity for suffering, or, rather, for anguish."

Similarly, let us consider the words of Vladimir, in Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot:

"Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? . . . Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. . . . But habit is a great deadener. . . . At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on."

Let him sleep on?! How can this be the attitude of any kind of real love? In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche had this to say of love:

"Love to one only is a barbarity, for it is exercised at the expense of all others. Love to God also!"

And in Thus Spake Zarathustra, he adds:

"Many short follies -- that is called love by you. And your marriage putteth an end to many short follies, with one long stupidity."

Probably no word has ever been so misunderstood and abused as the word "love." More often than not, especially in the so-called "romantic" sense, love is used as a means of forgetting oneself, avoiding the self-encounter of existential freedom and responsibility, a means of losing oneself in the other person. And when two people use each other to lose themselves, what can ever be left that is real? But let us continue in this matter with the experiential insights of Miguel de Unamuno:

"At our coming into the world it is given to us to choose between love and happiness, and we wish -- poor fools! -- for both: the happiness of loving and the love of happiness. But we ought to ask for the gift of love and not of happiness, and to be preserved from dozing away into habit,

lest we should fall into a fast sleep, a sleep without waking, and so lose our consciousness beyond power of recovery. We ought to ask God to make us conscious of ourselves in ourselves, in our suffering.

"The most tragic thing in the world and in life . . . is love. Love seeks with fury, through the medium of the beloved, something beyond, and since it finds it not, it despairs."

What love seeks, therefore, is to establish itself "beyond the confines of the world" -- as if anticipating the potential in reality of the continuity of shared experience. For the truth of love is spiritual love -- unconditional care transcending the limitations of flesh and bone, time and place.

Between the bliss of ignorance and the bliss of knowledge is all of the suffering in the world. The common man is therefore deflected by this barrier, in relationship to which the diversity of the immediate, external world promises comfort and forgetfulness. This is why the truth of spiritual love is essentially heroic, for it begins only on the far side of human despair. To love, therefore, is to first of all discover and consequently be able to share the freedom of knowledge in the grace of God assuring the continuity of being beyond the confines of the world.

"For it is the suffering flesh, it is suffering, it is death, that lovers perpetuate upon the earth. And thus it is that in the depth of love there is a depth of eternal despair . . . [and the] intuition of another world where there is no other law than the liberty of love -- another world where there are no barriers because there is no flesh. For nothing inspires us more with hope and faith in another world than the impossibility of our love truly fructifying in this world of flesh and of appearances.

"Lovers never attain to a love of self-abandonment, of true fusion of soul and not merely of body, until the heavy pestle of sorrow has bruised their hearts and crushed them in the same mortar of suffering. Sensual love joined their bodies but disjoined their souls; it kept their souls strangers to one another; but of this love is begotten a fruit of their flesh -- a child. And perchance this child, begotten in death, falls sick and dies. Then it comes to pass . . . their bodies now separated and cold with sorrow but united by sorrow their souls, the lovers, the parents, through the embrace of despair, discover spiritual love.

"For we love one another with a spiritual love only when we have suffered the same sorrow together, when through long days we have ploughed the stony ground bowed beneath the common yoke of a common grief. It is then that we know one another in our common anguish, pity one another

and love one another. For to love is to pity; and if bodies are united by pleasure, souls are united by pain.

"Suffering is a spiritual thing. It is the most immediate revelation of consciousness, and it may be that our body was given us simply in order that suffering might be enabled to manifest itself. A man who had never known suffering, either in greater or less degree, would scarcely possess consciousness of himself.

"Suffering, and pity [compassion] which is born of suffering, are what reveal to us the brotherhood of every existing thing that possesses life and more or less of consciousness."

As a psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm has observed this in the following way:

"We may begin by saying that the average person, while he thinks he is awake, actually is half asleep. . . . The content of [his] consciousness is mostly fictional and delusional, and precisely does not represent reality. . . . I, the accidental, social person, am separated from me the whole human person. I am a stranger to myself, and to the same degree everybody else is a stranger to me. I am cut off from the vast area of experience which is human, and remain a fragment of a man, a cripple who experiences only a small part of what is real in him and what is real in others.

"[The average person] is anxious, depressed, and desperate. He still pays lip service to the aims of happiness, individualism, initiative -- but actually he has no aim. Ask him what he is living for, what is the aim of all his strivings -- and he will be embarrassed. Some may say that they live for the family, others, 'to have fun,' still others, to make money, but in reality nobody knows what he is living for; he has no goal, except the wish to escape insecurity and aloneness." -- Escape From Freedom, Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism

And so it is that we use one another in the name of "love" to forget ourselves, to flee from ourselves, to lose ourselves. Which brings us to ask, along with Quentin in Arthur Miller's After the Fall:

"What is the cure [for what we do or fail to do on behalf of one another]? . . . No, not love; I loved them all, all! And gave them willingly to failure and to death that I might live, as they gave me and gave each other, with a word, a look, a truth, a lie -- and all in love!"

To really love, one must first of all be free -- and freedom is something altogether different from what it is commonly perceived to be. The only real freedom is freedom from illusion. The most tragic thing of all would be to find oneself in the position of the dying Ivan in Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilych:

"He lay on his back and began to pass his life in review in quite a new way. In the morning when he saw first his footman, then his wife, then his daughter, and then the doctor, their every word and movement confirmed to him the awful truth that had been revealed to him during the night. In them he saw himself -- all that for which he had lived -- and saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death."

On this subject of illusion, Ouspensky admonishes:

"Man does not know himself, he does not know anything, yet he has theories about everything. . . . The influences that increase our slavery are our illusions, and particularly the illusion that we are free. We imagine that we are free, and this makes us ten times more slaves. . . . Attaining consciousness is connected with the gradual liberation from mechanicalness, for man as he is is fully and completely under mechanical laws [the laws of psychological determinism]. The more a man attains consciousness, the more he leaves mechanicalness, which means he becomes more free from accidental mechanical laws. . . . The first step in acquiring consciousness is the realization that we are not conscious [but asleep].  
-- The Fourth Way

To become free in knowing the truth -- that is the aspiration of real love. Moreover, in the words of Miguel de Unamuno:

"It is better to live in pain than to cease to be in peace. "

\*\*\*\*\*

"Humanity is not a state we suffer, but a dignity we must strive to win. A dignity full of pain and sorrow; won, no doubt, at the price of tears. . . . Yet now I know, I know that all this isn't 'a tale told by an idiot . . . signifying nothing'." -- Vercors