

Perpetually Distracted



There's a story in the Hindu tradition that runs something like this: God and a man are walking down a road. The man asks God: "What is the world like?" God answers: "I'd like to tell you, but my throat is parched. I need a cup of cold water. If you can go and get me a cup of cold water, I'll tell you what the world is like." The man heads off to the nearest house to ask for a cup of cold water. He knocks on the door and it is opened by a beautiful young woman. He asks for a cup of cold water. She answers: "I will gladly get it for you, but it's just time for the noon meal, why don't you come in first and eat." He does.

Thirty years later, they've had five children, he's a respected merchant, she's a respected member of the community, they're in their house one evening when a hurricane comes and uproots their house. The man cries out: "Help me, God!" And a voice comes from the center of the hurricane says: "Where's my cup of cold water?"

This story is not so much a spiritual criticism as it is a fundamental lesson in anthropology and spirituality: To be a human being is to be perpetually distracted. We aren't persons who live in habitual spiritual awareness who occasionally get distracted. We're persons who live in habitual distraction who occasionally become spiritually aware. We tend to be so preoccupied with the ordinary business of living that it takes a hurricane of some sort for God to break through.

C.S. Lewis, commenting on why we tend to turn to God only during a hurricane, once put it this way: God is always speaking to us, but normally we aren't aware, aren't listening. Accordingly pain is God's microphone to a deaf world.

However none of us want that kind of pain; none of us want some disaster, some health breakdown, or some hurricane to shake us up. We prefer a powerful positive event, a miracle or mini-miracle, to happen to us to awaken God's presence in us because we nurse the false daydream that, if God broke into our lives in some miraculous way, we would then move beyond our distracted spiritual state and get more serious about our spiritual lives. But that's the exact delusion inside the biblical character in the parable of Lazarus and Dives, where the rich man asks Abraham to send him back from the dead to warn his brothers that they must change their way of living or risk the fiery flames. His plea expresses exactly that false assumption: "If someone comes back from the dead, they will listen to him!" Abraham doesn't buy the logic. He answers: "They have Moses and the Prophets. If they don't listen to them, they won't be convinced either, even if someone came back from the dead." What lies unspoken but critically important in that reply, something easily missed by us, the reader, is that Jesus has already come back from the dead and we aren't listening to him. Why should we suppose that we would listen to anyone else who comes back from the dead? Our preoccupation with the ordinary business of our lives is so strong that we are not attentive to the one who has already come back from the dead.

Given this truth, the Hindu tale just recounted is, in a way, more consoling than chiding. To be human is to be habitually distracted from spiritual things. Such is human nature. Such is our nature. But knowing that our endless proclivity for distraction is normal doesn't give us permission to be comfortable with that fact. Great spiritual mentors, not least Jesus, strongly urge us to wake up, to move beyond our over-preoccupation with the affairs of everyday life. Jesus challenges us to not be anxious about how we are to provide for ourselves. He also challenges us to read the signs of the times, namely, to see the finger of God, the spiritual dimension of things, in the everyday events of our lives. All great spiritual literature does the same. Today there is a rich literature in most spiritual traditions challenging us to mindfulness, to not be mindlessly absorbed in the everyday affairs of our lives.

But great spiritual literature also assures us that God understands us, that grace respects nature, that God didn't make a mistake in designing human nature, and that God didn't make us in such a way that we find ourselves congenitally distracted and then facing God's anger because we are following our nature. Human nature naturally finds itself absorbed in the affairs of everyday life, and God designed human nature in just this way.

And so, I think, God must be akin to a loving parent or grandparent, looking at his or her children at the family gathering, happy that they have interesting lives that so absorb them, content not to be always the center of their conscious attention.

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