

Memories Of Manual Labour

Recalling happy memories of past years is perhaps a useful therapy during those seemingly long night hours when one is confined, in a foreign land, to a hospital bed and cannot, for a variety of reasons, enjoy the peace of sleep. During two such occasions, not that long ago, I found myself dwelling on my years of outdoor manual labour; on some four decades of cycling English lanes, tracks, and roads; and on the years spent running in the hills of South Shropshire and in places such as the Lake District.

In retrospection, this dwelling on such times quite surprised me, given my past married lives, my past predilection for the company of women, and the very many times I had been subsumed with love, or a passion, for a particular lady and had enjoyed with and because of them nights, days, weeks, sometimes months, of blissful happiness. Perhaps, I wondered, such a dwelling during such conditions revealed something about my character. Of how I am an outdoor, country, person by nature who by choice would choose to work alone; and someone perhaps too selfish, and too self-absorbed, to be a happily married man.

Suffice to write, now, that the memories that brought the most inner peace were those connected with outdoor work. Of those Summer days in Shropshire when - in the large garden of my employer - we would all sit down to enjoy our outdoor lunch prepared by his wife. Of days spent, over a decade later, on a farm in warm or hotful Sun, alone in a twenty-five or thirty acre field, forcing bamboo canes - many six feet in length - by hand into often hard ground next to recently budded trees planted in rows. Of the dry dusty days of laying irrigation pipes and setting up the 'rain gun' sprinkler system with its large hose reel, enjoyed especially when the pump was the old Ford tractor with water drawn from the nearby river home to Kingfishers and bounded by many weeping Willow trees. Of, in early Spring, those cold days when the few of us out in the fields would sit around an open fire to eat our lunch. Of those six straight weeks worked without a day off one Spring when, delayed by bad weather, we were finally able to prepare the soil and plant. Of those flash floods that flooded the lane beside one of the fields of the farm and of the car that became stuck, requiring two of us to bodily lift the lady driver out and carry her to dry land to later on fetch the tractor and tow her car from that lane back to the unaffected main road. Of the days spent one Autumn using a hand-held 'thumper' to erect new fence posts. Of the hours, the days, the weeks, spent alone in fields hoeing the weeds out by hand from between the planted trees with my 1950s hoe whose long hickory handle years of use had made smooth. Of - years before, on another farm - the restful needful lunch (washed down by local cider) that followed hours of mucking-out pig sties by hand using a shovel and a barrow wheeled up a plank onto a trailer, hitched to a tractor, which when full I drove away then tipped to form or join another pile ready for the muck-spreader...

Had I then - during those years - the understanding and the self-insight I believe I now possess perhaps my life would, could, should, have been quite different and I would not have caused the suffering, and the deaths, that I caused. But was that person, so happily working in such places, the real me? Yes, I do feel so, now. How then - why then - did I always seem to (after months, a year, or several years) drift away from such work back to occupy, preoccupy, myself with some political or some religious machination? It is just too easy, too trite, to say or write that I was a 'complicated' person. More truthfully, I was flawed, unhealthy. Suffering from extremism: for that infection wrought an inner dissatisfaction, and so greatly disturbed my psyche that I felt I had 'a duty' to do, and pontificate about, certain things. For that infection caused me, as so many others, to have that hubristic certainty-of-knowing that engenders violence, hatred, terror, and oppression. I, as so many, had exchanged that real outdoor world - which centuries of toil had created - for some idealistic, ideological, dream we carried around in our head:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw

Our land, the dead land, while we extremists wreck havoc among the living land that provides us with the means to live and which, were we only to know it, nurtures the numinous from whence derives the culture that keeps our human hopes, our very humanity, alive.

For me - as for many others century following century - *pathei-mathos* was a cure. Yet there is not, and cannot be, any absolution: I was an ideologue, a leader, a fanatic, who enthusiastically taught, proselytized, persuaded, propagandised, and incited. Thus I alone was responsible for what I said, what I wrote, and what I did - for the suffering caused - during my extremist decades, just as I alone was responsible for the hurt my selfishness, my self-absorption, personally caused to others: wives, lovers, partners, family, relatives, and friends.

There appears to be, however, one small consolation, at least for me. Which is that such outdoor work - and reflexion upon it - slowly provided, slowly built within me, the insights and the feelings that led to that 'numinous way' I refined, after 2011, into my philosophy (or perhaps more correctly, into my *weltanschauung*) of *pathei-mathos*. Insights and feelings greatly added to in 2002 when I began work on another farm, and which work first led me to seriously doubt my commitment to the Muslim way of life, and write letters containing words such as these:

There is a lovely, simple, pleasure here in this field. Spring is most certainly here: in the meadow fields, seedlings of the late Spring flowers push up through the tufts of grass whose frost-bitten ends are joined by shoots of new growth. Already some

flowers bloom in the grass: there, a Dandelion; there: almost two circles of Daisies. And, to compliment the calls and songs of other birds, the loud repeating call of the Parus major.

It is good to be here, with an unobstructed view of the sky, and I watch the clouds, borne as they are on a still cool breeze that begins to chill my hands, a little. But there is Sun, warm, when the altocumulus breaks. On the horizon in the North, beyond the tall old Oak, small Cumulus clouds drift toward the hills, ten miles distant. Thus am I again - for these moments - at peace with myself, this world, listening as I do to a large flock of Starlings who chatter among themselves in the trees across from the drainage ditch, there by the copse of Ash, Oak, and a few young Beech [...]

Work, yes there must be work: toil enough to keep that balance. And work with these my hands, outdoors where lives the silence that I love as I feel the weather, changing, bringing thus an empathic living for me, in me, and for this life that lives around, emanating as it does in this grass, those trees, the clouds, the soil, the water, those flowers, the very sky itself.

But, as so often with me, the insights, the feelings, were swept away by not only my tempestuous inner need to do what I considered was then my duty but also by a life-long love of, a desire for, challenges, pontification, and conflict. Such insights, such feelings, were always - sooner or later - so swept away. Until that fateful day one May.

"The defining moment, for me - in terms of understanding myself, in terms of understanding politics and the error of my decades of extremism - was the tragic personal loss of a loved one in May 2006. In the hours following that event I just knew - tearfully knew without words - my own pathetic failure; what I had lost, what was important. Thus there came upon me that day a sense of overwhelming grief, compounded by a remembrance of another personal loss of a loved one thirteen years earlier. For it was as if in those intervening years I had learned nothing; as if I had made the life and the dying and death of Sue, in 1993 - and of what we shared in the years before - unimportant.

I have no words to describe how insignificant, how worthless, I felt that day in May 2006; no words to describe, recall, retell, the remorse, the pain. Suffice now to recount that my life was never, could never be, the same again. Gone - the arrogance that had sustained me for so many experiential decades. Gone - the beliefs, the abstractions, the extremisms, I had so cherished and so believed in." *No Words Of Mine Can Describe The Remorse*

How stupid, how very stupid, I have been: for almost all of my adult life. That it required the shock, the personal trauma, of the suicide of the woman I loved to break my arrogance, my selfishness, my self-absorption - and cure me of my need for challenges, pontification, and conflict - most certainly reveals a lot about my character. That apparently jumelle nature of a person who found peace, contentment, in working outdoors with his hands but who also could not, in his weakness, resist that arrogant desire to zealously interfere in the lives of others, to propagandise and proselytize; an interference, a proselytism, born of a hubriatic certainty that he 'knew', that he 'understood', or that he had discovered the right way (political or religious) of living for others, and

therefore had some sort of duty to act, wrecking havoc and causing suffering as he did so, always making excuses for himself. For every and any cause does so hallow havoc.

See with what heat these dogs of Hell advance
To waste and havoc yonder World, which I
So fair and good created, and had still
Kept in that state, had not the folly of Man
Let in these wasteful furies [1]

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[1] *Paradise Lost*, Book X, vv. 617-620

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