

ABOVE the SUN

*The Search for Lasting Meaning
In a Passing World*

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To my children—
May we one day dwell together in that realm above the sun!

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Chapter 1

MAN THE WANDERER

*“Even in the night his mind does not rest” (Eccl. 2:23).*¹

The old cliché “stop and smell the roses” is meant to encourage one to break out of the monotony of the everyday long enough to notice what is going on around him, to take the time to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. This wise adage fails, though, if it entices one to only enjoy the things of the world on a sensory level. To stop and smell the roses is good as far as it goes. But to relish only the fragrance of the rose without penetrating the deeper truths embodied within it—its signification of romantic love, the echoes of eternity contained in the concentric folds of its petals—is something of a tragedy: the two-dimensionalization of the rose.

The poet has ever derived inspiration from this enchanting flower. Dante Alighieri used the imagery of the rose in its unfolding glory to describe the assembly of the holy ones in heaven. “In fashion then as of a snow-white rose,” he wrote, “Displayed itself to me the saintly host, / Whom Christ in his own blood had made his bride” (*The Divine Comedy: Paradiso, Canto XXXI*).² For Shakespeare the rose’s fragrance was emblematic of inner purity; and just as its outward appearance was embellished by its scent so also was youthful beauty enhanced by a virtuous heart.

O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give.

¹ *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (RSVCE)*. All scriptural references in the text are to this edition unless otherwise noted.

² Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008), p. 674.

The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
 For that sweet odor which doth in it live (*Sonnet 54*).³

Beyond enjoying the rose with the senses, it is incumbent of a rational creature to ponder how it came to be. If it came to be merely by the accidental forces of nature, without plan or design, then the glory of the rose is ultimately hollow, having no lasting meaning beyond the momentary pleasure it gives. And why does it please us to see and smell it? The experience of the rose goes beyond simply satisfying our sensory organs; something intrinsic to it feeds a yearning deep within us: the desire for beauty. How is it that we as human beings possess the capacity to appreciate beauty? Why are we driven to seek it out in the world around us? The rose is not for food. Why then are we so drawn to it? Something far more profound than a mere evolutionary urge to survive is at work here. The Book of Genesis tells us that “out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (2:9). It is almost as though we were made in such a way that our thirst for beauty would come before our hunger for food. We might even say our spiritual appetite takes precedence over our bodily appetite; for *beauty is food for the soul!*

A friend of mine shared with me the striking experience he had in driving to work one morning, realizing all of the sudden that the leaves on the trees had changed color. Autumn in all its august splendor had come, but my friend had previously been too preoccupied with the circumstances of his personal life to notice it. After this he learned not to become so caught up with the day-to-day that he would lose the sense of the greater mystery, of God’s master plan, unfolding around him—a plan of which he was an integral part.

³ *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), p. 113.

Ecclesiastes assures us, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted” (3:1-2). Like my friend, we too tend to take the change of seasons for granted. And in those rare times that we do stop long enough to appreciate the natural beauty of it, we seldom go on to enter into the supernatural mystery enshrouding it. “He has made everything beautiful in its time,” Ecclesiastes goes on to say; “also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11). The sacred author affirms in this verse how far God’s ways are above our own; and how heavenly wisdom infinitely surpasses earthly wisdom (cf. Isa. 55:9). Pondering these truths elevates us above the everyday, opening us up to an experience of wonder in the presence of God. It is in this spirit that Longfellow writes,

Wondrous truths, and manifold as wondrous,
God hath written in those stars above;
But not less in the bright flowerets under us
Stands the revelation of his love.

Bright and glorious is that revelation,
Written all over this great world of ours;
Making evident our own creation,
In these stars of earth, these golden flowers (*Flowers*).⁴

⁴ *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, edited by Horace E. Scudder (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1893), p. 5.

Drawing a contrast between divine and human knowledge, Pope Francis explained to the crowd in Saint Peter's Square how the former "allows us to grasp, through Creation, the greatness and love of God and His profound relationship with every creature." And the Holy Father continued,

"When our eyes are enlightened by the Spirit, they open to the contemplation of God in the beauty of nature and the grandeur of the cosmos, and lead us to discover how everything speaks to us of Him and everything speaks to us of His love. All this arouses astonishment and a deep sense of gratitude in us! It is the feeling we experience when we admire a work of art or any marvel that is the result of the genius and creativity of man: before all of this, the Spirit leads us to praise the Lord from the depths of our heart and recognize, in all that we have and are, a priceless gift from God and a sign of His infinite love for us" ("On Knowledge").⁵

The human heart instinctively seeks God; and whether we are cognizant of it or not, He continually calls out to us, even in the things we see around us in the natural world. This is to be expected since the world is His creation. There is a divine truth conveyed unceasingly in nature's ongoing cycle of sprouting, blooming, withering, and budding new life—a truth concerning our own birth, death, and resurrection. Nature, God's creature, daily serves to instill this truth in our hearts and minds.

Concealed in the visible world, just a thin layer beneath the surface, lies a transcendent message—the answer to that question of questions: the meaning of life. It has been there all along, yet we have often proven too dense to receive it. The created world around us cries out to us on and on, season upon season, that life is good and beautiful; and that we are the very pinnacle of created beauty. "In God's eyes we are the greatest, the most

⁵ *Zenit: The World Seen from Rome*, Vatican City, May 21, 2014; <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/on-knowledge>.

beautiful, the best things about Creation . . .,” Francis went on to say. ““But father the Angels?’ No the Angels are beneath us! We are more than the Angels!”⁶

The witness of nature, the changing of the seasons, assures us earthly life is transient, but also that death is not the end of us, that after death comes new life. Of course, for this message to be received one must want to receive it. We human beings possess the gift of free will: the ability to choose to believe or not to believe, to see or not to see.

“For what can be known about God is plain to them,” the Apostle Paul says of unbelievers,

because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened (Rom. 1:19-21).

Saint Augustine of Hippo, proclaims in his *Easter Sermon*, near the start of the fifth century:

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everywhere, question the beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air; their souls hidden, their bodies evident; the visible bodies needing to be controlled, the invisible souls controlling them; question all these things. They all answer you, “Here we are, look; we’re beautiful.”

⁶ Ibid. The angels are sent to serve man according to God’s purpose (cf. Heb. 1:14). While they far surpass us in power and intelligence, moreover, it can nonetheless be said that we are “more” than they by virtue of the fact that the Son of God took on our human nature and redeemed us (cf. 1 Cor. 6:3; Heb. 2:16).

Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable? (*Sermons*, 241).⁷

The world's beauty speaks to us of God; but what about the darker aspect of our earthly existence? What about death? We are continually reminded of the transience of life, that our time here is passing. Even if our rising again is symbolized in the coming of spring, even if we intuitively sense there must be life for us out there beyond the grave, still we have no tangible proof of that life, but only the vaguest dream of it. "Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?" asks Ecclesiastes (3:21). Many in the world today would sympathize with these seemingly nihilistic sentiments. What is the meaning of the ongoing sequence of life and death in which we find ourselves? Is there any deeper meaning to it all? Or are we mere flotsam caught up in the cosmic ebb and flow; erring in attempting to assign a significance to it?

The answer to that question resides in the fact that we alone among all earthly creatures are cognizant of our being caught up in this ebb and flow. The lower animals do not spend time contemplating the reality of the world. They peaceably participate in it without asking questions. They are only passively aware they are part of an ecosystem—nor do they stop to question their role in that system. They simply accept it, living and dying as they are meant to do, without ceremony or doubt. This is because they act solely on instinct. They are not free, as we are, to choose their actions.

Our freedom to choose is apparent in the spirit of defiance prevalent in our popular culture today. We hear it in the phrase that has become something of a battle cry for secular progressives to justify anything from body piercings and substance abuse to abortion: "*It's*

⁷ *The Holy See*; http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20000721_agostino_en.html.

my body; I can do what I want with it!” We see it conveyed, subtly and not so subtly, in movies, TV shows, and advertising. We hear it in music, such as in the opening lines of Miley Cyrus’ “We Can’t Stop”: “It’s our party we can do what we want / It’s our party we can say what we want / It’s our party we can love who we want / We can kiss who we want / We can screw who we want.”⁸ While we can be sure the singer did not intend for these lyrics to verify the Christian doctrine of human free will, that is precisely the truth to which they ultimately point: the distinctive ability of the human person to do what he or she wants to do.

Of course, the cultural forces today are merely promoting a half-truth concerning free will: that we are free to succumb to temptation. The flipside of the equation, though, is seldom voiced: we are also free to resist temptation. The truth is *we can stop*. Yet to do so, to maintain self-control, we must rely on the power of God’s grace. Our nature is weak and in the face of great temptation we may feel helpless to sin. Upon hearing our Lord’s teaching on the need for detachment from worldly possessions for salvation, the disciples reply with astonishment, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus, though, answers them saying, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:25, 26).

There is a constant battle underway within the human soul between the outer call to worldliness and the inner call to holiness. Coming to trust in God is not magic. The transformation from sinner to saint is a process that ordinarily takes a lifetime, for “he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22). Even for Paul, who experienced a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, there were moments of guilt and anxiety in the face of human imperfection. “I do not understand my own actions,” the Apostle confesses. “For I do

⁸ *Ryan Seacrest.com*; <http://www.ryanseacrest.com/2013/06/03/world-premiere-listen-to-miley-cyrus-we-cant-stop/>.

not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:15, 18-19). Paul’s lamentation underscores our dependence on grace for holiness. Our self-awareness of our fallen state, the realization that our sinful behavior is wrong, can be agonizing indeed. And post-modern man in all his shining defiance has not really forgotten this. For it is a truth written on his heart, even if, unlike Paul, he lacks the humility to acknowledge it.

Stepping back for a moment from the daily reality of our struggle against temptation and sin, we might ask ourselves the more general question of why we are the only beings in the world that commit sin. Is this horrible imperfection simply a part of our DNA, so to speak? Are we sinners by design—as the oak produces acorns so we produce sin? If this is our purpose, part of what we were originally meant to be, then truly we are the most loathsome creatures in existence—ininitely far beneath the animals who do not sin.

Yet there is something else within us: a conscience that assures us sin is not our first nature, but rather a kind of adopted, second nature, something we have acquired that has become intrinsic to us. As Pope Francis affirmed, even the non-believer has a conscience, which informs him on the good and evil of his actions. “There is sin,” said the Pontiff,

even for those who have no faith, when conscience is not followed. Listening to and obeying conscience means deciding in the face of what is understood to be good or evil. It is on the basis of this choice that the goodness or evil of our actions is determined (“Letter to a Non-Believer”).⁹

⁹ *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, September 18, 2013, p. 9; *Eternal Word Television Network*; <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/fl1ltrscalf.htm>.

The condition of sin runs contrary to who we really are or were meant to be: our true purpose. Each of us knows instinctively that we are called to something greater, called to holiness. But like Paul we grieve that we lack the power in and of ourselves to attain this goal.

This present precarious state of being caught between our fallen nature and innate desire for perfection reveals that earthly life is inevitably, as Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper describes it, a constant “state of being on the way” (*status viatoris*)—“the inherent ‘not yet’ of the finite being” (*On Hope*).¹⁰ Our time on earth is really a pilgrimage, a journey toward contentment. While in the positive sense this “not yet” state of ours orients us toward fulfillment, at the same time it contains the negative potential of “the absence of fulfillment,” a reminder to us that as created beings we came forth from nothingness and may in the future return to it. Sin, in fact, which Pieper calls “the reverse side of human freedom,” can be thought of as the willful turning away from the bright path toward perfection to submerge oneself in the void of nothingness (*ibid.*). “Eternal damnation,” he writes,

is the irrevocable fixing of the will on nothingness In damnation, the positive side of the *status viatoris*, the orientation toward fulfillment, is definitively cut off and destroyed; thus isolated, the negative side becomes an absolute value. The inner “not yet” that once characterized the creature’s nature is changed into a characteristic inner “not” (*ibid.*).¹¹

Such a decision, the choice of endless nothingness or hell, would run contrary to our first inclination toward salvation and eternal life. Still, our future ultimately comes down to a basic choosing of light or dark, good or evil. Each of us instinctively senses the weight of this decision, and we often respond to it by using the diversions of daily life to distract us from it.

¹⁰ Translated by Sister Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 13.

These diversions, though, can hide more than the unsavory realities of sin and death. They can keep us from relishing the true beauty and goodness of life as well. Getting caught up in the transitory, we can lose sense of the eternal.

We alone among all earthly creatures possess a moral center to choose good or evil. It has become fashionable today to deny the supremacy of man over the animals by virtue of the fact that he murders and wages war, while they do not. It is true, animals kill only for survival while man may do so for motives such as lust, greed, envy, and vengeance. But the one who would seek to use our capacity to commit immoral acts to suggest our inferiority unwittingly undermines his own argument. For this self-criticism, our ability to judge the morality of actions, others' as well as our own, illustrates our superiority.

That we sometimes choose evil over good is far less important to the subject at hand than the fact that we are able to choose at all. Animals, locked into obeying their instinct, may only react to bodily needs. And so long as these are met the animalistic soul is satisfied. It is as Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan, observes: "When an animal has nothing to do, it goes to sleep. When a man has nothing to do, he may ask questions" (*Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*).¹² He goes on to say there is "an awakening in one's intelligence," which amounts to the "release from the dominance of biological drive and from the routines of everyday living. It is the effective emergence of wonder, of the desire to understand" (ibid.). It is my friend's sudden realization that autumn had come, and with that realization an instantaneous detachment from daily concerns and deeper grasp of life's meaning.

¹¹ P. 15.

¹² University of Toronto Press, 1992, p. 34.

Man alone desires to have more than his bodily needs met. He alone can rise above instinct in his thoughts and actions. Put in a threatening situation an animal will strike, but man may weigh the moral implications of the situation and calculate his options before acting. If he is self-centered, he may choose the way of self-preservation, even to the point of murder. If he is altruistic, he may put the needs of others above his own, even to the point of self-sacrifice. In her classic, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book which, in eliciting sympathy for the plight of the African slave in the American South, helped ignite the Civil War, Harriet Beecher Stowe's protagonist, having been sold to the wretched trader, Haley, chooses, in a Christ-like way, not to escape in order to spare his family and fellow slaves from the same or worse fate. "If I must be sold, or all the people on the place, and everything go to rack," cries Tom, "why, let me be sold. I s'pose I can b'ar it as well as any on 'em."¹³

Evolutionary theories that insist all actions are attributable to utilitarian motives aimed at survival are at a loss to explain this enigmatic quality of the human person. Our penchant for altruism, like our ability to reason and moralize, is not essential to our basic survival. Neither are the conscience and free will. Or maybe we should say these are not needed for our bodily well-being, but are for our spiritual.

The animal, again, is contented so long as he is fed and sheltered. But man is not. Indeed, we would tend to wonder about the state of mind of the person who, having his material needs met, would find lasting fulfillment. There is something dehumanizing in the lack of desire to expand one's scope beyond the material things of life.

¹³ New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005, p. 39.

Our freedom to choose reinforces the story of our origin relayed in Genesis, which reveals we were made in the image of God; and that, misusing our freedom, we disobeyed the divine law and fell from grace. In the wake of this Fall we grapple with concupiscence and the general clouding of the intellect—“and their senseless minds were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). Though we still carry God’s law within us (for we are made in His image), our view of Him has become obscured. We have lost touch with the greater invisible world ever around us to which we belong in spirit. We bear now the defect of having to see in order to believe.

Although a darker side to human nature exists, it would be false to conclude man is totally depraved. For obviously he is also capable of tremendous good. Animals may not murder, but neither do they build hospitals, schools, orphanages, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, churches. Man alone does these things. The human person is capable of both good and evil. Catholicism comprehends in the fullest sense this basic truth of who we are, upholding as doctrines of faith both man’s original sin and original goodness. Though we are fallen, we retain a remnant of the goodness we had before the Fall. And though wounded by the Fall, we are called to perfection.

When we sin, we tend to look back with regret that we failed to take the right decision. As innately as we know we are imperfect, we feel also the call to transcend our evil tendencies, to ascend to a higher form of being—something not temporary and fallen, but bright and everlasting. That we are called to this higher state is the only conclusion, given all that we know about ourselves, that finally makes sense.

We are indeed pilgrims on the way. Ours is a state of constantly striving after something just over the horizon, to a mysterious place above the sun. Consequently, we are

ever hungry seeking to be fed; lonely seeking companionship; fatigued seeking rest; questioning seeking answers. In the end our transient condition comes down to one of two possibilities: either our desires will be fulfilled or they will not. Either our situation is hopeless or it is not. Either in our final moment we will pass into oblivion or into a realm of eternal life. The rational person must necessarily bear, even if buried down within the depths of himself, a flicker of hope in the latter, lit and placed there by the hand of his immortal and benevolent Creator.

It is natural for us to ask about the meaning of life, and it is likewise natural for us to assume there is an answer to this question. The dream of eternity is the only possible answer to life's question the rational soul can accept since any alternative answer points to the absurdity of life and to despair. It is, as Augustine declares to the Lord at the opening of his *Confessions*: "Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee" (I).¹⁴

As strong as the pull toward goodness and life is, we retain free will and with it the possibility of turning away toward darkness. Thus, the reality of these two paths ever tugs at us. Ever the two voices beckon to us: the outer voice of the world and the inner voice of our conscience. Two voices; two ways stretching out before us. Daily, what will it be—good or evil; light or dark; hard or easy; narrow or wide?

¹⁴ Translated by E.B. Pusey, D.D. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1907), p. 1.