On My Mind: At Fifty

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On My Mind

At Fifty

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Turning fifty proved to be anti-cathartic. Nothing happened. My fear was that life would just get flatter and grayer. There was little left to do but turn inward. When my attention engaged in reflection, the truth that slowly emerged was how much ambition had been generated into the outer world by me and people like me. My notion of my own actions had been blurred. Rather than simply being in it, I was truly of it. My voice had been raised in the realms of the world, the flesh, and the spirit. Above all, I wanted to be heard. Then something shut down at fifty. It was as if one of the soldiers in the armies of Arnold’s “Dover Beach” suddenly laid down his arms. The rest of them seemed to keep on fighting, but to me came the realization that only by retreating from the fray could I cease being controlled by it.

Many learn to drop out long before half-a-hundred years old, but those of us gifted with a voice are tempted to keep on talking. After all, it was in the word that life was born, and now that we see it clearer, we think we can make it re-born, not so much in our own image, but one we had handed to us from one noble thinker or another. I, like many articulate ones, spoke my hand-me-down theories from pride. Then came anger that no one was listening, envy that others instead were heard, despair things would not be shaped as they ought, greed for an opportunity, and, inevitably, gluttony and luxury to assuage failure. This observation is not a confession but a simple explanation of why the anti-climax of life’s pirouette after fifty decades caused hardly a stir. At fifty, I no longer hope to speak conclusively, possibly because after that many years of being passionately of it, the repetitive, fated quality of the debate is obvious.

Looking back, I wondered how my life came to be as it is. In John of the Cross’s Dark Night of the Soul is an answer. Four concepts shape the individual and must be calmed before one can be quiet. They are: fear, grief, joy, and hope.

Fear may strike a chord to those born in or near 1940, the year before Pearl Harbor, as I was. First came the Holocaust and soon the Bomb. Both of them blitzed me from the newsreels when I was a child. What sticks especially are those haggard souls staggering out of liberated death camps in black and white images moving across the screen. The message that came with them was that they can do anything to you—anything—and, in turn, make you do exactly what they desire. We simple children wanted to howl our disbelief and outrage. Later on some did, but to what avail? The Nazis were only one evil in a century whose dance is death. Wars, rumors of wars, and plagues have characterized my fifty years. The serial killer is definitive of something in human nature in my time.

My generation’s reaction to our fear was multiple, with the existential philosophy, hatred of our rock of despair, holding sway in the 1950s. No values became the value. The next decade flirted with self denial and Orientalism, as if to say: you cannot hurt me; I already have obliterated myself. What followed was yet again another war. The fears unleashed in the twentieth century scrambled our thoughts. Outside of technological advances, what have we contributed that is not beholden to, or claimed by authority from Freud, Marx, and Darwin, the great warriors from the past century.

My ethnic background also comes under fear. Whether in the melting pot of old, or the cultural diversity of the new, my people got opportunity, but not respect. In college, my sociology teacher once called me to her office and, when I told her I was second generation, defined for me what I was and what I could and could not do. There have been walls and ceilings ever since. When I looked for work in academics, I received blatant comments on my name, and my wife was once turned down for a job by her alma mater because I was both Italian and Catholic. The fear is of being ashamed. I was sent out to make peace with a society from which, in some ways, my family was set apart. It was a partial success. The worst of it is that I have little patience with those who refuse to learn English and use it well. I sometimes feel as cold as the ice that greeted me. No one in America has been taught to be guilty about the early ethnic groups, and I don’t feel guilty about the later ones either.
By grief, John’s second concept, I mean loss of the splendid self-love which comes from something still yearned for yet irrevocably gone. It is a shiny feeling and warms me, but it is also essentially dramatic with little real power. It comes both in and out of one’s personal darkness, and is lost, except for the memory powerful enough to recall and hold the new voices of entitlements at bay. Believe it or not, even at fifty, I am essentially happy and do not much grieve. St. Paul said the past is all garbage anyhow.

That leaves joy and hope, two seemingly odd gifts to dismiss from one’s life before coming to rest in the God whose perfect love casts out fear. Joy means excitement, what lifted me up. John’s point is that only in aridity can God mold, otherwise the proud self, bewailing its ailments and singing its joys, wriggles free from His firm hand and is lost in its own confusions. It is a hard lesson, but then what has gone up in my fifty years has inevitably come down, and vice versa, as one assumes it does for all people. The batterings of happiness and misery must be rebuffed before the soul can come to rest. I once prayed with some friends who lived on the street. They were pretty much unafraid and did not grieve over the past. What did they want? Peace of mind. Amen to that.

To find hope in John’s list was a shock. When all else fails, there is always hope. But John of the Cross, whom I dub Cross John, declares this, too, must go. At first I gave John’s four-some a quick look and rushed on. John, however, is not just another granola guru to wile away the time with magical obscurities. He is hard. So is life at fifty when it’s flat, especially when you’ve done everything you were taught to, judged not, put yourself in other people’s shoes, given way to the braying hordes that insist you do so, and come to find there are no rewards. What you really have done is repeat history and recapitulate Original Sin, particularly if in the back of your head is the hope that I, the grand exalted and now separated-from-the-rest-of-them I, is eager to live as he chooses, finally. Such a hope is a snare founded in pride and followed in sequence by the rest of the seven deadly sins. Everything goes round and round, so that at fifty it appears as if nothing has meaning. Nothing does until one is removed from the battle.

I only wish to tell what experience was at a key point in my life, not to sermonize. I doubt my thoughts and feelings are original. It is commonplace that men and women feel taken aback at fifty. A simple reason is that fifty is enough; there is nothing new under the sun. Perhaps at this age, we conclude we have done our best and ought to see at least a sliver of the great light. If the moment of this turning is allowed to restrict us, or if we can only continue by the delusion we are still nifty at fifty, we have lost an opportunity. My effort is to describe my experience of the moment. What will develop from it is unknown to me.

Still there is the lovely admonition of Ecclesiastes to “enjoy yourself with the wife of your youth.” That one I try to live up to, possibly because the wife of my youth is my last best flesh and blood guru. I did seek counsel of a spiritual adviser recently, and he, God love him, told me: “Jung said it’s all outer ‘till fifty, then all inner.” Another formula. What else I do specifically is unimportant. Abstractly I try to pick up the cross laid down for me. What exactly that is, I am not yet sure. I think it is the Cross of sin (the wages of death), not so much my sin but the sin of those I see stumbling. St. Paul put it thusly: “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the Church.” In order to carry that burden, I suppose God has been weeding out my fears, vanities, excitments, and false hopes. I most likely will have to stop figuring and simply be whatever I am. I will have to stop trying to be better than I am.

What this acceptance will mean for me is to be ordinary. Maybe seeing the blaze of one’s commonness is the beginning of the loss of self which prefigures agreement with the divine. At least it feels that way in my spirit at fifty, shut down on various passions and newly aware of old truths.