

THE WORLD WILL NEVER MAKE US HAPPY

When I was a child, I often heard the hymn, "Faith of Our Fathers." It is quite moving and appeals to our natural reverence and love for parents and grandparents. But implicit in its lyric is the claim that what has long been accepted as true must necessarily be true: to doubt the warrant of tradition is to be guilty of impiety. From our earliest years, we are subjected to this intellectual intimidation: we come to feel it is wrong to think about certain things. This attitude helps to ensure the survival of religious traditions, which lend coherence and continuity to life, but it also perpetuates ignorance and superstition. Tradition is a mixed legacy.

But tradition is fast losing its hold on us, and the Rubicon of doubt is crossed with much less trepidation now than it was formerly. But old ideas can shed their religious garb, assume modern dress and continue to walk among us, unnoticed. Aspects of Predestination can be seen in behaviorism or determinism. Prosperity as a sign of Divine Election is a deeply rooted belief, and wealth is still widely regarded as a gauge of moral worth, even among the irreligious. And the claim of being a chosen race is taken up by whatever nation or ethnicity is in the ascendant in worldly power. One could go on.

And mixed in with the remnants and recasting of religious doctrines are the competing maxims of science and commerce. Like our ruined cities, our minds have become a jumble of decaying structures; our thoughts are like graffiti and faded advertisements for businesses that no longer exist. We stumble about, salvaging bits and pieces from the rubble, trying to make sense of who we are. This fragmentation of ideas has left most of us with an inability to articulate a unified vision of life.

But there is one overarching idea to which all contending parties give their allegiance. It is this: that the world should make us happy.

So unquestioned is this assumption that to doubt it may be likened to apostasy. People are forever diagnosing what's wrong with the world and prescribing remedies, for it is assumed that everything should and can be arranged in a way that will make us happy. That the world is exactly as it should and must be is a thought that seldom occurs to anyone. To express it in polite

company would be considered gauche. One would be regarded like one who has just knocked over an expensive vase or spilled red wine on the white carpet. Truth is a faux pas. But to say as much would only be to point out what is plainly to be seen: life is organized in a way to frustrate our desires, that is, to make us unhappy.

If the purpose of life were our happiness, then it has failed in that purpose so miserably that we might be justified in assigning the creation to an incompetent demiurge; or we might shake our fist at Heaven and curse the power that has placed us in a world in which torment is a prelude to death. Lear's assessment of our plight seems to ring true: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport."

If we believe that we are made from nothing by a benevolent Creator who loves us, then we face the difficulty of explaining why this love should be expressed in such peculiar ways. That a good man in his prime, the hope and support of his family, should be struck and killed by a drunken driver with a long criminal record makes no sense to us, but it is allowed. Indeed, it is ordained by Providence, for all things happen according to the Divine will. The cruelty and capriciousness of this will is evident on all sides, and we can only justify it with the weak acknowledgement that we are incapable of understanding the ways of God. And this loving deity not only delivers many in this life to the cruelest sufferings for no apparent reason, but he has created a place of eternal torment for those who fail to love and honor him in the manner demanded. But to question God's goodness and love is forbidden, and we are counseled simply to bow our heads and say, "Thy will be done," and then to pursue happiness in the world, as though this were the Divine plan.

But if this were the plan, it is impossible to explain why the world is such a sorry place, or why we are such fragile creatures, susceptible to injury and annihilation in a thousand ways. None of our merits appear to count in the ledger of fate. Virtue wins us no credit or security. No matter what we do, we remain like one hanging off the edge of a cliff, knowing his strength will soon fail and he will plunge into oblivion.

But we soldier on with a fatuous optimism. We spend our lives amassing wealth, or simply trying to stave off poverty; we acquire education and pursue

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careers; we achieve what we can, professionally and personally. We marry and have children and spend much of our time worrying about their welfare and fretting over their future. Our progress through life is an alternation of the trivial and the tragic. At last, if we are able, we retire and play golf. Then, our body begins to break down and we become consumed with repairing and maintaining it: knee replacements, hip replacements, pacemakers, bypass surgeries, etc. And we come to rely so heavily on the pharmacopeia that we need pill containers with separate compartments marked with the days of the week so that we can sort our medications and be certain to take them at the designated times. But death comes nearer each day, waiting to erase whatever we think we possess or have achieved. And in moments of honest reflection, we know that all is slipping away from us. The words of T.S. Eliot resonate: "...I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker..."

The eternal Footman knows that we are soon leaving, despite our desire to stay, and that nothing we can do will prevent our exit. Patiently, he waits, smiling in derision at all our subterfuges, our attempts to ignore his presence, even as we move closer to the door. He is not taken in by our cheerful bluster.

That life's purpose is not human happiness is a fact as glaring as the noonday sun. But our entire economic, political and social organization rests on the illusion that whatever ill befalls us represents an aberration or injustice that can and must be corrected. Our public discourse has become, in consequence, an attempt to assign blame for all that works against our happiness, with rival factions pointing the finger at one another in an ever-mounting hysteria. "This must be fixed!" we shout. "I can fix it!" says the politician or priest. And we place our hope in such claims, voting and watching the news; praying and going to Church. But we are always disappointed. Then, we try to escape our disappointment with distractions. Food and television are popular pastimes. Colored pixels, a soft couch, a full belly - all producing a stupefaction that has become our refuge. That the national high holy day is Super Bowl Sunday, observed by gluttony and drunkenness, testifies to what a paltry affair life is for so many.

Those of us who are more refined, more cultured, transfer some of our pleasures from the senses to the intellect. We then feel superior to the hoi polloi. But intellectual pleasure has its limits. It takes us out of ourselves for a time, then

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drops up back into ourselves, into the very thing we were trying to escape. It's worth considering that the greatest works of literature are tragedies. They expose the vanity of striving for satisfaction in this world. Hamlet can't act because he knows the futility of action: "O cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right!"

One of the greatest sages the West has produced is Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher who was ignored in his day and, for the most part, dismissed by posterity on the grounds that he was a pessimist. It seems that such a charge is considered sufficient for removing anyone from serious consideration. Optimism is held to be the only valid outlook, treated as though it were a self-evident truth. "Let's apply our minds to figuring out how to make the world a happy place. That's what we're here to do." This sums up the approved attitude that is urged upon us.

Yet, pessimism about the prospect of worldly happiness is what has informed the noblest visions of life available to us. Christianity, in its highest and truest expression, counsels us to turn away from any hope of happiness in the world, which is regarded as a place of suffering. Every garden, no matter how pleasant its prospect, is seen as a Garden of Gethsemane. Likewise, the Buddhists call every pleasure a "*dukkha yoni*" – a womb of sorrow.

Christianity is essentially an ascetic religion, and those most committed to its principles freely give themselves to a life of celibacy and self-denial. And in India, the same path is followed by renunciants who want, above all else, what is called *moksha* – freedom. And the freedom sought is no longer to be subject to the illusion that happiness is to be found in the pursuit of worldly pleasures.

Vedanta is the wisdom tradition of India. It is decidedly pessimistic. Yet, this characterization is not quite accurate, as pessimism connotes a personal attitude or feeling. Vedanta is impersonal, and it is not an attitude or feeling but a recognition of reality: the truth. And the truth is that we are not born to be happy in this world. We are here to learn that happiness, as we usually conceive it, is impossible.

Many Westerners come to Eastern thought with the hope that Vedanta or Yoga or Buddhism or Zen will deliver the happiness that has so far eluded them. They want to adopt a new regimen or practice, that is, to do something to become happy. The aim remains the same, but the approach has shifted.

Now, the desire for happiness is our principal motivation: it is why we do whatever we do. But to believe that happiness can be had by doing anything is our great mistake. We think that our lives can be arranged in a way that will make us happy, so we keep rearranging our lives, substituting one mode of living for another, in the hope that we will happen upon the magic formula and happiness will be ours. But we never succeed, for we have mistaken the whole purpose of our life.

We are here to be unhappy. We are here because desire has brought us to this place where satisfaction is forever out of reach. We are like dogs chasing our tails. We run panting after the unattainable until we collapse and die. And all the while we wonder why we are miserable. We think, "Something must be wrong with the world, or something must be wrong with me, for I am supposed to be happy, am I not? So, the problem must be identified and addressed. Then, I will be happy." Few ever consider that the world does not need to be fixed, for we are not meant to find our happiness in it.

The notion that some primeval calamity explains our unhappiness and that it is somehow deserved used to make sense of our situation and offer us some consolation. It explained our unhappiness as a necessary consequence of being a descendant of Adam and Eve. But the idea of Original Sin is now derided. It has been largely replaced by the "I'm OK, you're OK" vapidness of pop psychology. But I'm OK and you're OK, why isn't everything else OK? The fact is there's something wrong with me and with you and with every one born into this world. What is it?

It is the very thing that caused us to be born: desire.

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As soon as we open our eyes upon the world, we begin to chase happiness. From the satisfaction of simple appetites, food and warmth, we gradually develop desires that far exceed the requirements of maintaining the body. Why should this be so? Animals are content when their basic needs are met. But men are never content, always manufacturing new desires which soon acquire the aspect of dire needs, no matter how frivolous they may be. We go from wanting sound legs on which to walk to thinking we must have a Mercedes in which to ride. And having acquired a Mercedes, we may then set our sights on a Ferrari.

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We follow one pursuit after another, with desire driving us on like a sharp spur in our side. And no sooner do we achieve what we had longed for than we become dissatisfied with it. It is not what we had imagined; it is not enough. And we conceive our next desire, one that promises a new and greater pleasure. We go from restlessness to a moment of peace, then fall into boredom and become restless again. Eventually, our bodies become old and weak, our senses lose their sharpness, our minds become dull. Most of us settle into a routine of small pleasures while we wait for death. If we are among the few who are given to reflection, we may come to suspect that life is something of a fraud. We sense that we've been had. But by whom and for what purpose, we are uncertain. Most of us leave this world little the wiser for all of our pains.

The fact is, life is a fraud, at least as most of us understand it. So long as we are chasing some object of desire, we are participating in its grand deception: that the world can make us happy. If we examine our personal history, we see that our life has been a series of episodes marked by the effort to attain one thing or another: an academic degree, a job, a car, a house, a spouse, more money, children, honors, reputation, power over others, etc. We have been in incessant motion, and the cause of our striving has been the belief that we are here to be happy and that happiness is to be had by fulfilling the desires we conceive. Can anything be more patently false?

Some of us recognize that fulfilling one desire after another is like trying to empty the ocean one cup at a time. A new desire, like a new wave, is always on the horizon. When we are ready to abandon the enterprise, or at least not to invest our hope of happiness in it, we are fit to receive one of the greatest blessings life can bestow: dispassion. We lose our taste for worldly life. That which was once sweet becomes bitter or bland. We are no longer tempted to the table, to the false feast.

In the higher reaches of most religious traditions, dispassion is seen as the prerequisite for wisdom. It is only when one loses his hunger for pleasure that he becomes receptive to truth. And the truth is that nothing in this world can satisfy us. What can?

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There is an image offered us in the Katha Upanishad as an aid to understanding the nature of desire. We are told that God made a mistake: he fashioned human beings with our senses pointing outward. But a wise man corrected the mistake by focusing his attention inward, and there, he discovered his true self.

To say that God made a mistake is to acknowledge that nature, uncorrected by wisdom, will lead us astray. Our attention will be drawn in the wrong direction, where objects appear like mirage water in the desert. We begin our trek toward the seeming oasis, but we never reach it. The closer we get, the more it recedes.

The wise man in the Upanishad recognizes that he is looking for satisfaction where it can never be found. He turns his attention away from the world. He stops chasing objects that appear to be the source of happiness and begins to wonder, “Who is this being who wants to be happy? Why do I feel unhappy to begin with?” We can do the same.

When we initially turn inward, we first acknowledge that we are here, in this perplexing world, where nothing is as it seems. Now, it seems that we are a body. It seems that there are objects outside of our body – other people and things – that can give us pleasure or pain. We then set about pursuing the sources of pleasure and avoiding the sources of pain. There is no freedom in this, but mere reaction. And we want freedom for it is our nature. We can only have it when we stop reacting to the stimuli of external objects, like iron filings being pulled toward a magnet.

In our body, our animal nature, we have no freedom. Hunger, lust, pain and pleasure are the events in the life of the body. And the mind? There is no mind, really, but only thoughts. The word “mind” signifies the notion of a knowing entity in which thoughts arise. But if any such entity exists, it must be separate from the thoughts. What is mind separated from thoughts?

When we speak of the mind, we are referring to a power, not an entity. This power pictures the world of objects according to the qualities of our senses and the coordinating faculty of our brain. The result is a thought, an image. We take these images to be real. That is, we believe that these images exist independently of the thought that is their only shape and substance. This is how objects are

conceived. Once we have given birth to them, they become our world. Why is it not a happy world?

Because some of the images that appear in our awareness arouse what is called desire: we want to possess them. But if the image is in our awareness, we already possess it. What we usually mean by possession is some form of bodily union with an object: I want to sit in *my* house, drive in *my* car, count *my* money, have sex with *my* partner, etc. From among all the images that appear to us we select certain ones that we call “mine,” and others that we want to call “mine’ but which as yet elude our grasp. We believe that if we can collect all the objects we want for our own, we will be happy. But we are never happy so long as we are engaged in this collection of objects.

First, we can never have all the things we want for the simple reason that our capacity to form desires is endless. It is not as though there are, say, 52 things I need to complete myself and then I’m done. There are 52 million things, and that’s just the beginning. Desire is a bottomless barrel. We can never fill it, and most of us will die trying.

Second, as the objects of desire are essentially thoughts, they have no abiding substance. What we take to be objects is existence seen through the filter of the senses and the qualities of the mind. We don’t see existence, which is unchanging; we see the thoughts, which are ever changing. And we attribute the reality of existence to the ephemeral thought, to the object. Trying to possess the object is like hugging the air: we end up with an armful of nothing.

Third, as thoughts are not separate from our awareness, we cannot own them: we are them. Perhaps, it is better to say that they are us, for we are not contained in a thought, but all thoughts are contained in us. What we really long for when we chase objects is our own self. We want to possess that which we already are. What we need to do to be happy is to know what we are. If we project our self into thought, into an object, we will want the object because all we ever want is our self. And our body, and every thought, is a projection of our self into an object.

Maya is largely misunderstood to mean that we should deny the evidence of our senses; that the world we experience is not real. This is why many Westerners reject Vedanta as a mental construct it is impossible to believe in. But

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Maya is not the world we see. It is rather the world as we misunderstand it. As Goethe expressed it, it is not the senses that deceive, but the judgment.

The world is a manifestation of God, or Ishwara – whichever you prefer. As we are part of that world, we are also a manifestation of God, or Ishwara. We are individuals, yet our individuality is dependent on God, in whom we live and move and have our being, as St. Paul expressed it. When we realize that we have no being independent of God, we will stop trying to be God. Original sin is often understood as the primal calamity that came about from an individual trying to be God.

We are one in the indivisible being, the supreme reality, but we act in this world as individuals with a particular destiny. We did not create the world. To say that we are the supreme reality is a dangerous statement because it is both true and false, depending upon the level from which we understand it. Being/awareness is ultimately indivisible, so in that sense we are God. But being/awareness expresses itself in the empirical world as individuals, so in another sense we are not God. The human ego, the limited self that identifies with the body and mind, does not determine the course of the world and the laws that limit it. This must be clearly understood.

The love that we mistakenly pursue in objects is really the love we have projected into the world. We are trying to take back that which we have unknowingly given away. And we try to take it back by assuming the power of God and trying to arrange the world so that we can possess all those things to which we have attached our love. But the ego is not God, and when it tries to usurp God's prerogatives, it makes itself unhappy and frustrated. Despite the many grand pronouncements one encounters in modern spiritual teachings, we do not create the world or our own reality. We live as individuals in the world and our reality is the embodiment of a myriad of factors the mind cannot comprehend or control.

If we are to have any hope of happiness in the here and now, it must rest on something the contemporary world finds difficult to accept: humility. We have to acknowledge the limitations of the human instrument that is the vehicle for the limitless being/awareness in which it rests. It may have become a hackneyed expression, but it is nevertheless true that we must "Let go and let God."

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The mention of God is sure to arouse resistance in many. One appeal of Vedanta and Buddhism for many Westerners is that it seems to avoid the theism of Judaism and Christianity. But the fact is we are not self-created individuals, and it is as individuals that we are presently living in the world. A great deal of confusion arises from loose language about our nature as pure being/ consciousness or brahman. For some people, these words become ideas that they use to deny the reality of ordinary experience. But we can only begin where we find ourselves. And we can only take one step at a time. To try to pole-vault our way to pure being/awareness, as though the body/mind need not be taken into consideration, is not possible. We can break our metaphysical necks trying to do it.

The simplest approach is always the best. Taking a step back from abstract notions, no matter how lofty and appealing, and looking at who we are and where we are as individuals is the place where we must start.

We know that we want love and we try to find it in objects and in other people (considered as objects). We also know this doesn't work. The only way to find the love we long for is to realize that we are not the ego, but an expression of God or Ishwara, an expression of love. And this love, although expressed as our individuality, is ever rooted in the love that transcends it. When we turn to our source and realize that we are grounded in love, we will no longer try to wrest it from others. But the ego must bow to Ishwara if we are to know our true Self.

With humility comes love. With love comes the only happiness that is possible to us in this vale of tears. The world does not need to be fixed. It can never make us happy no matter how it may be arranged. When we stop trying to be God, the weight of the world will lift from our shoulders. Then, we can accept whatever comes our way. The world is no longer a problem to be solved. Our individuality is no longer something to be cast off or thought away. It, too, is a gift of love, for as long as it lasts.

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