



A Contemplative Christmas Eve

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Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Excerpt from This is Water

Excerpts from the 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address
May 21, 2005 David Foster Wallace

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?"

As I'm sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive, instead of getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your own head (may be happening right now). And I submit that this is what the real, no bullshit value of your liberal arts

education is supposed to be about: how to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out. That may sound like hyperbole, or abstract nonsense. Let's get concrete.

The plain fact is that you graduating seniors do not yet have any clue what "day in day out" really means. There happen to be whole, large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches. One such part involves boredom, routine, and petty frustration. The parents and older folks here will know all too well what I'm talking about.

By way of example, let's say it's an average adult day, and you get up in the morning, go to your challenging, white-collar, college-graduate job, and you work hard for eight or ten hours, and at the end of the day you're tired and somewhat stressed and all you want is to go home and have a good supper and maybe unwind for an hour, and then hit the sack early because, of course, you have to get up the next day and do it all again. But then you remember there's no food at home.

You haven't had time to shop this week because of your challenging job, and so now after work you have to get in your car and drive to the supermarket. It's the end of the work day and the traffic is apt to be: very bad. So getting to the store takes way longer than it should, and when you finally get there, the supermarket is very crowded. And the store is hideously lit and infused with soul-killing muzak or corporate; you have to wander all over the huge, over-lit store's confusing aisles to find the stuff you want and you have to maneuver your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts and now it turns out there aren't enough check-out lanes open even though it's the end-of-the-day rush.

So the checkout line is incredibly long, which is stupid and infuriating. But you can't take your frustration out on the frantic lady working the register, who is overworked at a job whose daily tedium and meaninglessness surpasses the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college. You finally get to the checkout line's front, and you pay for your food, and you get told to "Have a nice day" in a voice that is the absolute voice of death.

Then you have to drive all the way home through slow, heavy, SUV-intensive, rush-hour traffic, et cetera et cetera. Everyone here has done this, of course. But it hasn't yet been part of you graduates' actual life routine, day after week after month after year. But it will be. And many more dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines besides. But that is not the point.

The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing is gonna come in. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm gonna be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop.

Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me. About MY hungriness and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home, and it's going to seem for all the world like everybody else is just in my way.

And who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are, and

how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem in the checkout line, or at how annoying and rude it is that people are talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line. And look at how deeply and personally unfair this is.

Or, of course, if I'm in a more socially conscious liberal arts form of my default setting, I can spend time in the end-of-the-day traffic being disgusted about all the huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUV's and Hummers and V-12 pickup trucks, burning their wasteful, selfish, forty-gallon tanks of gas, and how spoiled and stupid and selfish and disgusting we all are. You get the idea.

If I choose to think this way in a store and on the freeway, fine. Lots of us do. Except thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn't have to be a choice. It is my natural default setting. It's the automatic way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I'm operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world, and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities. The thing is that, of course, there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations.

In this traffic, all these vehicles stopped and idling in my way, it's not impossible that some of these people in SUV's have been in horrible auto accidents in the past, and now find driving so terrifying that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive. Or I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people probably have harder, more tedious and painful lives than I do.

Again, please don't think that I'm giving you moral advice, or that I'm saying you are supposed to think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it. Because it's hard. It takes will and effort, and if you are like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat out won't want to. But most days, if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she's not usually like this. Maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer.

Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible. It just depends what you what to consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, and you are operating on your default setting, then you, like me, probably won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're gonna try to see it. This, I submit, is the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship.

The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and

being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing. I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound.

What it is, as far as I can see, is the capital-T Truth, with a whole lot of rhetorical niceties stripped away. None of this stuff is really about morality or religion or dogma or big fancy questions of life after death. The capital-T Truth is about life BEFORE death. It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water." "This is water."

Homily

What is water?

As I read the story of the birth of Jesus this year, for the first time my eye was caught by Joseph. In our manger sets Joseph stands. Though we are told that God is the father of baby Jesus, Joseph completes the family set. It is Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. Joseph takes his pregnant, young wife to Bethlehem to be registered. It is Joseph who attends the birth of Jesus along with the stable animals. After a bad dream, Joseph leads his family to safety in Egypt.

And when you think of it, Joseph has a pretty tough road to follow. Joseph and Mary are engaged to be married when Mary is "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Now, I can't speak for men in Palestine two thousand years ago, but I know that today in the United States, this would be a tough pill for any man to swallow. Your fiancée is pregnant with another man, the Holy Spirit's child. My New Testament translation explains that Joseph was "dishonored." I don't know too many men who would have the fortitude, compassion, and faith to remain with a fiancée pregnant with someone else's child, through childbirth and beyond, let alone bear the ridicule of family and friends.

We are told that Joseph was a righteous man, and he must have been compassionate because he was "unwilling to expose" the young Mary to "public disgrace" which would have been a terrible plight for a young, pregnant girl. However, before he sets aside their marriage, an angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him to be not afraid, it is all OK, this baby is from the Holy Spirit. And Joseph, for reasons we don't know, agrees. Perhaps Mary is particularly kind or beautiful, or trustworthy, or he really loves her or she really loves him or both, or knows he will have a better life with rather than without her.

Or perhaps Joseph understood that this is water. This is water. This is the living stream and awareness is everything.

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after death. The capital - T Truth is about life BEFORE death. It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water." "This is water." It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out.

For our holiday miracle tonight I ask you to ponder what is real and essential to and for you and this world? Is it your looks? Your money? Your position? What your friends say? What society says? What political candidates say? In his commencement speech Wallace addresses all these things and suggest that we will die a thousand small deaths before we truly expire, if these categories are how we measure worth and meaning.

Instead he proclaims that every day we swim through water and forget what holds us together. You and I are subject to daily indignities, annoyances, dramas, and mistakes. Wallace's shopping experience is a metaphor for the hourly boredoms, pettiness, and routines that make up most of our lives. They can, in fact, be soul crushing, so that you and I only focus on getting one place farther in line, on the highway, at the job. And yet, within sight, reach, awareness, is always, always water.

It is always present. We are always in it.

The living stream. The place we are no longer stranger or a guest, but like a child at home. Water. For some of us it is God, for some of us it isn't. It truly doesn't matter what you call it, just as long as you reach for it in your daily awareness, as long as you stretch farther than our shared default settings of immediate needs and feelings to the exclusion of all else, including the moon that rises, the sun that shines, the others humans in this world, and the birds that sing.

To bring this into clearer focus, I recently spoke to a family member who was totally dismayed that the United States would take in 10,000 Syrian refugees. This person said to me, in a social conscious liberal arts form, that we can't feed and care for the homeless people already here. How can we take in refugees?

How could Joseph marry Mary? How? How?

Because "if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down. Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that's capital T Truth is that you get to decide how you're gonna try to see it." You get to decide if you will learn to read the stars that shine in your soul. You get to decide what to worship.

Earlier in the week at the meat counter there was problem with the price, then the computer. The young man behind the counter apologized as time stretched on. I said "It's all good" and since no one was behind us I asked him about himself. My son looked at me and said "This is water."

This is water. This really is the job of a lifetime, for you and us, and our world, I wish you way more than luck. We need water.

Closing Words

I salute you! There is nothing I can give you which you have not; but there is much that, while I cannot give, you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today. Take Heaven.

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in the present moment. Take Peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet within our reach is joy. Take Joy!

And so, at this Christmas time, I greet you, with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee away.