

SEEING THE TRUTH, SLOWLY

*Some insights, like one's sense of mortality, can unfold slowly –
and bring their own gifts in return.*

The usual story of revelation involves lightning bolts or thunder claps, blinding flashes, dazzling awakenings, *son et lumière*. We picture momentous religious announcements that occur with Hollywood production values. Think of Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus. Or think of a verbal summons: an annunciation by Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, or the calling of Matthew. All of these are spiritual. And sudden.

Scientific awakenings and discoveries are also, occasionally, sudden and unexpected. Think of Archimedes (“Eureka!”), or Newton and his apple, or Alexander Fleming and his bacillus culture.

Other revelations—I’ll call them aesthetic ones—occur when a piece of music, a play, a painting, a book, even a building, stops you in your tracks and releases something into your soul. You feel inspired, humbled, uplifted. Emily Dickinson said famously, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”

Every reader or museumgoer is waiting for these experiences. You know that you have changed, or have been changed, as a result of something outside you affecting something within you. Kafka said that we need books “that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” Art, like angels, can terrify.

All of these events are tumultuous, life-transforming, and often inflected with as much pain as pleasure.

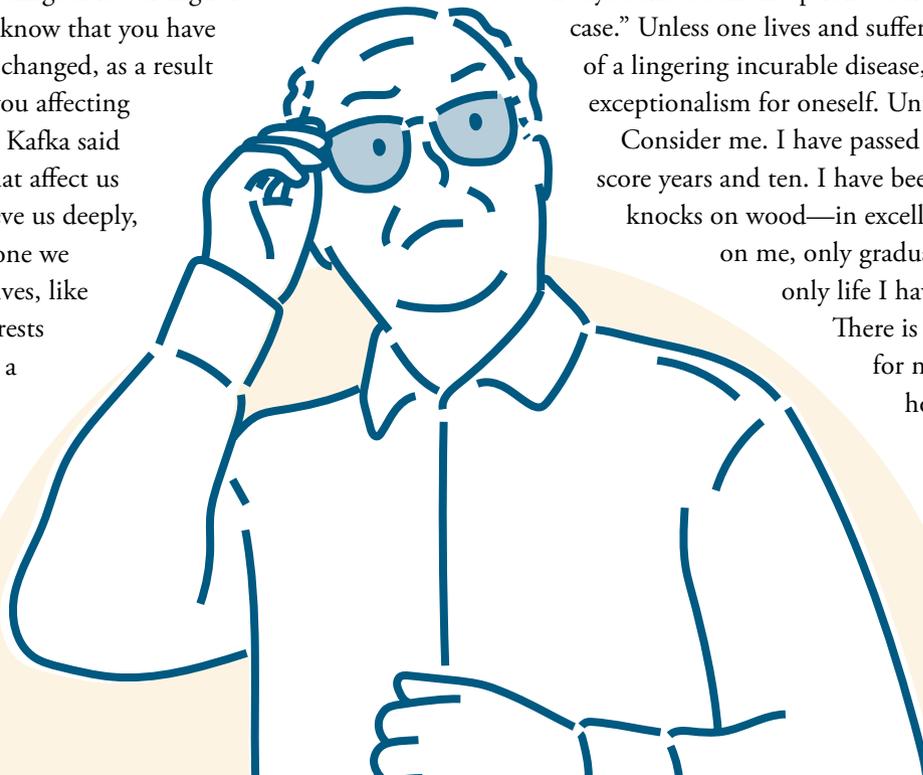
More mundane revelations can be quieter, slower, and accumulative. The last book of the Christian Bible is called, in Greek, “Apocalypse,” an “un-hiding,” or unfolding. I wonder whether the unfolding can be gradual and not, in our usual drum-roll sense of the word, “apocalyptic.” There is no sudden illumination. There are no trumpets. Instead of peeling layers off to show what is inside something, these ordinary revelations work with the force of dull repetition until, at some point, we accept a truth that we had

known all along but did not really know in our gut that we knew. Perhaps a better way of describing what I am reaching for is to call it a slow drip.

My subject? I am thinking, without pathos and without bitterness, of our universal mortality. William Saroyan said it best. On his deathbed, he observed, “Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.” Unless one lives and suffers under the curse of a lingering incurable disease, one always claims exceptionalism for oneself. Until almost the end.

Consider me. I have passed my biblical three score years and ten. I have been—here’s where one knocks on wood—in excellent health. It grew on me, only gradually, that this is the only life I have. I am not religious.

There is no afterlife in store for me. If I’m wrong, I’ll hope for the kindness of a benign universe and what John Keats said—namely, that we “shall enjoy



ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated.”

What, I sometimes wonder, would my heaven have? To start with, the seven pleasures I wrote about a decade ago in a book of essays: reading, walking, looking, dancing, listening, swimming, and writing. With the exception of the fourth item, these are all solitary things. Heaven will also have other pleasures, other gerunds, social ones: eating, joking, and flirting, above all.

I doubt that any of this will come to pass. My real revelation, gradual in coming, might terrify some people, especially religious ones: Life is not a dress rehearsal. It is what we have. There’s no point in looking back.

As I geared up for my fiftieth high school reunion in 2012, I was awash in nostalgia. After all, nostalgia is the “balm of fear,” in the words of the writer David McGlynn. Senior citizens look back to better days, or days that perhaps only seemed better. (Well, right now, we would be correct. To people of any age, last year must certainly seem better than today.) We had our days of wine and roses, of adolescent angst fueled by cigarettes and hormones, the urge to escape to college and to enter into adulthood.

My high school classmates, most of whom I had not seen in decades, made for a representative selection of post-World War II America. We grew up in suburban Philadelphia. We became doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, teachers and professors, scientists and engineers, financiers, shopkeepers, social workers, dental hygienists, housewives, you name it. Most had

With age can come the wisdom that living in the moment is more important than ever. Ultimately, now is all we’ve got.

become grandparents. Most had retired, or have retired since. Many had moved to warmer, southern climes.

The country club event itself was an anticlimax. I’m not sure what I was hoping for, but one lesson I learned was that if you go through life without expecting anything, you will not be disappointed. I had placed too much trust in what I imagined would have been a golden glow coming from the past to illuminate the present and the future.

I was wrong. Looking back is a fool’s enterprise. Why relish what has fled? There is no purpose in retrospection other than indulgence. Life is a series of small victories that end in one giant defeat.

What would be a proper alternative? Looking forward? No, that is the province of the young. We, the old, know exactly what the future holds. Every day we live, life becomes shorter. Why look ahead? There is no purpose in anticipation other than seeing the “vast deserts of eternity”—that phrase is from the seventeenth-century English poet Andrew Marvell—that stretch before us.

My revelation came as a surprise even to me, and it was thoroughly banal. The moment of birth is the

beginning of death. Life exists only in the present moment. Neither looking back nor looking forward can provide the satisfaction that life *in the moment* always offers. A thoroughly secular man, I have entered my Zen stage. *Now* is all that matters.

As I write these words, I am – like many people throughout the world – sequestered. I am aging in place. I find no cause for alarm. My outlook has not dimmed. It has brightened. I am not waiting for anything—neither the messiah nor the resurrection nor an eternal life.

Eternity is this moment. Earlier this year, before the universe began to shut down, the waitress who handed me my plate of huevos rancheros in a Manhattan Mexican diner said, “Enjoy!” And I did.



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