

Humanism and Spirituality: Living in a Fragmented Time

Matthew Ies Spetter

QUITE A few years ago I heard the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm speak about his then recently published book *The Sane Society*.

He said that what he really wanted was to pose the question: "Is a sane society still possible?"

His central assertion was that Western civilization is losing its ability to think objectively. This trend, which he perceived in economic, political as well as intimate relationships, filled him with foreboding about the coming human environment of the West. When the conditions of society and of personal lives are overcome by anxiety, the irrational will become the yardstick of interpersonal relationships. The ability to love would be one of its first victims. As a result, Fromm felt there would be brutalization and increasing loneliness for the individual. He expanded upon these themes in his later book *The Art of Loving*.

As I consider the New Age movement in America's present, I see it both as a movement which seeks to escape from the hold of objective reality, which seeks to escape from the hold of the objective mind and at the same time as a hunger for purpose. People who have experienced a sense of emptiness claim that they want to rediscover "something holy" as New Age writer Paul Cowan wrote in his book *An Orphan's History*. This quest he - and others - maintains can only be fruitfully pursued by turning inward and to find there "meaning and love of life." It is the ancient biblical admonition that one must lose one's life in order to find it.

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The nature of that quest is based upon the belief that an utterly private dimension will in the end produce a sense of community with all that exists. Therein lies supposedly the promise of developing alternatives to mass culture and mass civilization. It is here that lies the fundamental difference between an ethical humanist point of View and the New Age cult.

In Ethical Culture the search for meaning is based upon the relational as the essence of the sacred. We are what we are with others. There is no revelation of wholeness by contemplation.

That is the moral commitment of the unique person; it is the dynamic force by which to be a good influence in the world. Being so engaged - that is by ethical activation - one may also discover and intensify one's own moral growth. To be human means to touch the edge of possibility of the elements of the shared life. It requires choice. It is what Martin Buber meant by saying that the essence of the human encounter is dialogue and that "community is where community *happens*."

Can a saner human order be built by inwardness, the "silence" of the Zen Buddhist model for example? Does individualism suffice to build the social organs and institutions that rescue the person from the encroachment of mass civilization? The ethical-humanist proposition would be that it cannot!

Without a growing reality of interconnectedness of lives with lives, of families with families and communities with communities, the consciousness of a "better" world will not prevail. Human wholeness is not born in "splendid isolation," but in the give and take within the team structures of which we are a part in our homes, our work and our communities. It is the religious brought down to earth, the sacred built but not miraculously bestowed. The personal search which is so dominant in New Age writings is to the humanist but the beginning of what faith in the human potential urges us to be engaged in. What matters to us are human origins, the functional affirmation of the worth of the person in the down to earth reality of one's life. There is no preordained meaning. Meaning has to be created by *how* we live.

We do not deny other faith systems but our own is primarily involved in making our lives ethically vital. That is our ultimate responsibility flowing from the claim of our human status. A humanist accepts no exterior power, no inevitability for good to triumph.

Beyond Abstraction

When one looks at human history as an abstraction the picture is grim. One can be easily paralyzed by pessimism. I do not know what "world history" means, and I don't think anyone knows or is smart enough to make such a judgment. But as a humanist and an agnostic, I do know that there is an urge in people to live and build. I cannot derive encouragement from an abstract image like "world history" but I can find meaning and encouragement from the way I choose to live my life. When we do that we are no longer mesmerized by the abstractions but concentrate instead upon what each of us can do in good relationship with others - that is the base line of humanist religion. What each of us needs is concrete involvement in creating a better life; each of us where we stand and with whatever personal resources we have of caring, of life, or courage. This is also true of families and entire communities - how men and women nurture each other. The good and the universal must always begin locally, in that personal realm of any genuine ideal. There never has been such a religion of human initiative before, a human attempt to distill meaning out of the universe, just as no one has yet lived in a peaceful world community. But because we can imagine the possibility, we can believe in and we can work for it. This is what William James meant by speaking of the "leap of faith." Without that, nothing changes. I always say this to people who tell me they are "tired liberals." Tired of what? Faith of what is better will bring it about. We are not gods and goddesses, but we *can* find paths to a life with meaning and substance.

Living in a metropolis like New York one is witness every day to the ability to endure, to make something of one's life. Beyond all the diversity in people's backgrounds the overwhelming majority of us live together as human beings. Often we pass through the barriers of problems and heartbreak, because beneath it all there is great fortitude: that of parents trying to raise their children well; that of husbands and wives caring for each other as they grow old; or that of a younger generation overcoming the discouragements of an irrational economy which threatens their well-being. Yes, we hear most of all on the news about the aberrations, the horror stories, the crimes, the despair and squalor. And yet, in their common, down-to-earth lives millions preserve their sensitivity, their

concern for others, and their determination to uphold a moral quality in their lives against all that so easily degrades and demeans.

The personal destinies of these many millions and the destiny of our world as a whole are part and parcel of the overarching human effort throughout the ages to keep life sacred, to shelter humanity from the darkness of disintegration and despair.

There are many examples of truly heroic actions. Think of these three young men who threw their bodies against the tanks in Moscow to stop the reactionary putsch. But there are also the courage and dignity of so-called "ordinary people." I am thinking of a family in which, after a perfectly normal first child, a second child was born severely handicapped and emotionally undeveloped. Because of the recognition of that boy's right to love and affection, because of his full acceptance into the mainstream of that family, both he and his older sister became a splendid team of youngsters. But it took courage and maturity for the parents to show that both children were equally important. And it became more poignant and dramatic when a third child was born, in perfect health, and that child became the special little sister to the handicapped boy. Love, when extended without condition makes the difference. Shared responsibility and involvement of father and mother turned the burdens of that family into a marvelous challenge that elevated all of them. So much incredible courage goes unheralded, yet it exists.

I was made acutely aware of this while visiting one of our members in a hospital, when I wandered quite by accident into the department of the chronically ill. Here were people who knew they would probably leave the hospital only in one fashion. One could feel the pain and affliction, the severe limitations imposed upon them for as long as they continue to live. A man called me over to his bed, and pointing to where his leg had been amputated he simply said, "Three years, three years." I felt almost ashamed to walk out of that area, after having observed such courage beyond all courage - a will to live, an unspeakable stamina for life.

Shared Universe

But also in less dramatic circumstances each of us has to find out what we live for. It is solitary labor. Yet we are members

of a greater purposing community. By "greater" I do not mean greater in numbers, but rather greater in sensitivity, greater in understanding, greater in feeling the other truly as neighbor, greater in humility and consciousness about each other.¹

When I refer to "personal destiny" and "what we live for," I have a specific humanist framework in mind. We are all part of one life-impulse. Our essential ground is the same: we all come from father and mothers. Therefore, our ultimate destiny is similar, is one with all that exists. Together with all others we are part of all the good and the pain of existence, of all the striving and hoping and in the end of all death. Therefore, we must derive our courage and our strength from one another as we are bound up in each other's lives.

Our destinies are not just determined by accidents of existence. They are also determined by how we choose to guide our lives - by what values, by what faith, by what qualities. In this, we can sustain one another, so that there will be a balance in our expectations and a sense of proportion about our triumphs and our losses. Our needs as human beings are much the same. But what we can hope for - our dreams and what we do about them - is up to us, to our practice of using life-affirming norms. Without sharing those aspirations, we are only half alive. But when we share both our joys and our sorrows, we can help build a capacity of growth to deal with real life situations. Survival within a shared universe of caring is what gives us the substance to live.

The ancient Greeks thought that each one of us, when we are born, is given the gift of an attending spirit. That spirit would guide each person to his destiny. They called that spirit our *Daimon*. But it was not just a gift. It was given to each person as a challenge to grow progressively more mature, more humane and more alert in realizing one's potential as a sharing, committed man or woman.

At the center of that obligation is the need to discover one's worthiness as a person in one's own right - to become a person of conscience and a person capable of love, of quality and responsibility, or soundness in one's relationships. The values for which we are responsible guide us to our destiny. In short, a life in harmony with one's deepest self, happiness and satisfaction derived from the good way one aims to live - one's own destiny one's own *Daimon*.

¹ A.D. Black, et.al, Human Relations in a Divided World, NYSEC, March 12, 1978 (Address)

Of course that is very different from the Jewish, Christian or Islamic way of thinking, which hold that each life belongs not to the individual but to God. God imposes his external authority upon the individual and thereby determines his destiny. The humanist way seeks to internalize the good-standards not imposed by fear of the all-powerful God, or by guilt. This entire philosophy is splendidly detailed in a book by a former colleague, David Norton, now a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Delaware.² Norton mentions an ancient Greek legend. Sculptors in pre-hellenic times used to make small statues of a half-God called Silenus. It was a potbellied half-God, no splendid Adonis. But the bust of Silenus revealed a hidden truth. Inside the clay was a golden figurine to be discovered only when the bust was opened. Beneath the clay lies the essence of life, the summum of our person, the *Daimon* of our destiny. Every person is in fact a Silenus, ordinary in appearance and a bit flawed on the outside, but pure gold within. "Pure gold" in the sense that each of us must live out his own truths, each of us has to live out his own commitment to integrity, to those real qualities worth living for. And so more and more we are able to affirm the worth of those we share our lives with, complementing each other as men and women, as parents and children bringing out the "pure gold" in each other. Here you have the courage and the ability to love, which are the central premises of Ethical religion - "live, so as to evoke the best that lives in others and thereby have a chance to promote that best in yourself as well."

Our sense of self worth comes from encouraging that same self worth in the lives we touch, not by worship, not by prayers, but by a process of human growth - a culture of ethical values. Not the show, not the imitation of others. But rather by discovering the rock bottom truth about yourself and by being aware that the gift of *Daimon*, the spirit that guides you - that this gift is there for you as an obligation to fulfill your life's possibilities. Whether you are applauded by the world or not, you will have made your trust in yourself manifest, open, clear.

We are not tragic heroes because one day we will all die. We are potentially affirming human beings, endowed with the capacity to pit that which we have faith in against the often brutal fate that life can subject us to.

² David L. Norton, *Personal Destinies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1986

I am reminded here of an article in the *Journal of the Academy for Religion and Mental Health* which referred to the fact that nurses may help seriously ill people accept a changed self-image because of what a patient has to face in a totally altered reality. In that sense each of us is that half-God Silenus: the clay that will be broken open. It is in the midst of great suffering that what we really are, as this man, this woman, in our essence - will become clear. And so at happy times life's content is radically changed, as when a woman had given birth. It is but too easily assumed that by her very nature a new mother will know how to deal with totally changed roles. Interacting with one's baby does not only mean cuddling or diaper changing and feeding. It also means revealing to oneself "giving" qualities - emotional requirements which are very demanding. The so-called "post-partum depression" is often the result of too much pressure to adjust. If ever, that is the time when supportive encouragement can make all the difference. The ocean of change which has taken place needs verifying, needs finding out what the new life demands in depth as well as what this life needs in daily care.

But what we live for is often only clear to us as intuition, as a perception of ourselves and the relationship we have to others who are central to us. Life, whether in joy or in sadness, calls for the clear revealing of the heart, the deepest feelings made clear amidst so much that is uncharted, so much for which we are not really prepared. Many of us, as the poet Roethke wrote, have "to take our waking slow" so that "by going, we learn where to go."

For in fact there are two destinies impacting on each one of us. There is our personal realm, what we make of our lives and how we navigate through all the problems and heartaches each of us encounters. There is the larger issue of the destiny of our communities, our nation and the world.

These two destinies are intertwined but they are not the same. We live in a fragmented time, a time in which it is very hard to keep a sense of wholeness.

Is our society coming apart?

Often one feels as if things are coming apart. Mter recent riots in Crown heights someone asked my opinion about what she felt was rising anti-semitism among the black community. I gave her as my opinion that what happened in Brooklyn

was only on the surface a question of race or religion. In fact, the causes of destructiveness and violence are social and economic - hopelessness, with nearly 60% of black young people dropouts and unemployed. This creates a ready-made mob, whether in New York, Los Angeles or Washington, DC. This is not to excuse brutality and crime. Nor does it sanction the idiocy of rioters screaming "Heil Hitler," knowing that this will provoke utter anxiety in any Jewish group.

Here we have two historically victimized groups, each with its own history of pain, its isolation from the rest of society and its pattern of living in a given neighborhood with tightly drawn territorial lines. But hate and pain are the outcome of social, ideological and religious separation. Hate and rage are not preordained historical necessities. They are fabricated by the irrational and can be swept away by those with a social conscience who act to bring people together in their essential humanity.

The fact remains that a young Rabbinical student from Australia was lynched by a gang of black men. The fact remains that anti-semitic utterances have become condoned in some black circles, that Aids is blamed on Jewish physicians, that Louis Farakan and Al Sharpton are riding high. The person who had asked for my opinion was not satisfied with my response. "Jews were prominent in the civil rights struggle," she said. "How could black people hate us so much?" She continued, "What I am afraid of is that I will learn to hate as well, because I am terribly afraid and I want to l~sh back." What this woman fears applies to many other Americans. Think of the riotous behavior of pro-life demonstrators in Wichita, Kansas. This was not a proclamation of rights, but a demonstration of willful rage and hate, sometimes physical violence. Think of the violence propagated toward millions of the young by hard rock singers, their contempt of women, especially their celebration of disjointed minds. Violent crime, the plague of rape - all of these are expressions of rage. Hostile, abusive crowds at sport events excited by players who physically assault each other on the field or on the ice-skating rink. Some players even go after particularly abusive fans in the stands. There is a great deal of unbridled rage around, a great deal of wanting to inflict pain upon others, and feeling entitled to do so. A symptom mirrored by the mere fact that we have wife-battering clinics! Race seeks a target, and the easiest target is always the one closest by. We see that in the destruction and van-

dalism we have had to deal with here at our Society again this summer. With social and public services being curtailed, with unemployment and poverty epidemic, we can only wait with trepidation for the irrational to explode - to become larger and deeper.

But is that the destiny of America? It is a question as old as human civilization. Can reason and shared purpose overcome the wild impulses of alienation and destructiveness? It is an age-old drama again played out in Europe, in Asia and Africa, as new nations arise and passion and prejudice set group against group, religion against religion, tribe against tribe.

A remarkable analysis of the cause of the irrational today can be found in the latest book by the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin of Oxford University. He called his book *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*.³ That strange title is based on a saying by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Wrote Kant, "Out of timber so crooked as that from which the human being is made, nothing entirely straight can be hoped to be built." (1784)

Berlin does not use the word "crooked" as meaning dishonest, but rather in terms of the paradoxes and contradictions in people. His main concern is in finding out why our generation has had to live a relentless procession of murderous tyrannies such as Fascism, Nazism and Bolshevism, and why today nationalism and racism are increasing. All these twisted ideas began with concepts in people's heads.

In Berlin's view ethics is simply concerned with how people treat each other "how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do." What values they live by, what they think their brief lives are *for*.

People Molded by Ideology

If that is the core of it all, what then in our make-up is responsible for injustice, cruelty, people using each other? Berlin's questions are relevant to anyone who has lived as a conscious human being through two world wars, the bestialities of Hitler and Stalin and the death of 55 million people, mostly defenseless civilians, in World War II alone.

One cause is the delusion that there is only one true

³ *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Alfred A. Knopf NY, 1991

answer to the human situation; another, strongly held among both Fascists and Bolsheviks was that their ideology alone determined historical evolution, and that people therefore had to be molded to reach this blessed state of paradise on earth as determined by their ideologists.

Another major cause is the rebellion against reason, an authoritarian assumption that human beings cannot be trusted with freedom. As one critic of the Enlightenment, the Frenchman Joseph De Maistre, wrote, "in the whole vast dome of living nature there reigns only open violence... (Man's) destructive hand spares nothing that lives. He kills to obtain food, and he kills to clothe himself, he kills to adorn himself; he kills to attack; he kills to instruct himself and he kills to amuse himself; he kills to kill."

That dark vision of the irrational in human nature is certainly not strange to us who live in this worst of all centuries. The entire earth, wrote De Maistre, is but an altar "for blood sacrifice." Therefore people need the strong hand of authority like, e.g., the Roman Catholic Church. They are by nature incapable of ruling themselves. This stress upon the impotence of man's better qualities was no doubt at the heart of Nazism and Fascism. As Hitler said in one of his speeches to a group of young people, "I want you to regain the good conscience about cruelty. The Aryan "race" had to be vital to rule - human nature had to be changed.

Obviously, the ideas at the foundation of America's beginnings were a direct challenge to these visions of the vitalistic irrational. Here was the proud proclamation that every human being, just for *being* had natural rights which no one could take away from him - "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal: that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights That was a giant step forward in human evolution (and yet slavery persisted for another 90 years!)

Here was an optimistic vision of humankind, of possibility, of reason infused by knowledge. Yet the counterforces were never really overcome. The mystical and the tribal remained just as strong and so it is even today. Even today Billy Graham can draw 250,000 people into Central Park with a message of superstition, or submission to the gods, to an imaginary Father as the condition for being saved in the world to come. "Mankind has sinned" and New York is. Graham said, "the

Sodom and Gomorrah" of the world. Only faith in the blood of Christ can wash away our sins. Without that conversion we will certainly be destroyed. It is the same anti-Enlightenment philosophy as that of the 18th Century French philosopher I mentioned - who saw the human being as a destroyer and a killer - basically unworthy.

Marxism began as a defense against such reaction, but in the Soviet model it became a nationalistic, oppressive anti-reason tyranny. Isaiah Berlin's conclusion is that we see today an even more intense nationalism worldwide and that technology and science have had very little impact upon collective human behavior. He sees that the longing for mystical, authority-directed social bonds are still stronger than the benign internationalism of a United Nations.

The Paradox

Of course there are today also more hopeful signs. Among many young people there is a desire for a smaller simpler social context rather than the gigantic scope of the manipulated, corporate society we live in. But nationalism and ethnic chauvinism are persistent also. Groups such as the Lubavitchers are typical of people who in their anxiety seek no new world, but long for ancient and supposedly simpler times and who thus insulate themselves from the rest of the world. We can see it in the countries breaking away from Communist rule both in the USSR and in Yugoslavia. We see the reemergence of anti-semitism as a political movement in Poland even though there are no Jews living there. The paradox of the "crooked timber of humanity" lies in that people who seek to overcome earlier humiliation and suffering often revert back to the very anti-social practices that enslaved them earlier. Certainly for us, as humanists, this is a crucial challenge, namely, how to make the legacy of the Enlightenment strong and relevant once more. None of this is simple.

In an excellent essay, Professor Alain Touraine⁴ of France called our present time the era of democratization. But as we see in Eastern Europe democratization can lead to uncontrolled chaos in the streets, as recently happened again in Rumania. Liberal democracy depends for its survival upon agreed-upon social and ethical principles. Otherwise the

⁴ In *Rackham Report*, School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, Summer, 1991.

process can very well turn against itself. Paradoxically, the process of democratization and political freedom can lead to new oppression since people recently liberated have no experience with political parties or the balance of power necessary for liberty's survival. Democracy is a fragile flower, easily overcome by unrestrained nationalism. There is a need for new moral convictions, Professor Touraine writes, to overcome unbridled control. Since many former bureaucrats are still in power the newly emerging nations, liberated from the Communist yoke, remain threatened by disruptive forces that feed upon chaos and uncertainty. Democratization requires a responsible socio-ethical basis if democracy is to flourish as an adjunct to human dignity, the safeguarding of human rights and economic opportunity.

It is significant to me that just this past year we have had Ethical Humanist groups join us in Hungary, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and China.

A New World Ethic

It would be silly to engage in light-hearted optimism. History could repeat itself in Europe, the ghosts of the past certainly have not departed. That turbulent small nation, Serbia, played a crucial role in unleashing World War I.

Here in the U.S. it could be that Mr. Bush is as blind as Herbert Hoover was in declaring that "prosperity is just around the corner," when in fact the economic indicators are pointing downward. All this is a possible and clear cut danger. The human species is rarely entirely out of the woods!

But on the positive side one can say people the world over have started to realize that a new world ethic is needed. We do not need one religion or one ideology, we need new binding norms for living: values and ideals and goals, the realization of human promise and human well-being. I can have respect for the person who says that all values must begin with a faith in God, the God who made man in his own image. But then this person has to take into account all the crimes committed in the name of all the different gods, all the frightful errors in terms of faith, truth, human sexuality and so forth.

On the other hand, if I believe that a new world ethic is needed I have a similar task. Since my thinking bypasses the belief in a God-Father, since I state my belief in the innate worth of the human being as such, I have to deal with the

inequities, iniquities, cruelties and irrationalities of the world. Both the God-believer and the man-centered Humanist can find each other in fulfilling concrete obligations and tasks here on earth. We can differ in the creed, but we can unite in the deed. That is why our Ethical Culture movement has held - wisely I think - that we welcome into our midst those who consider Ethical Humanism as a religious way of life as well as those who see it mainly as their world view, their "Lebens-Anschauung." In the face of this, it seems confusing, but probing deeper it makes great sense to so unite people who have ideals and who want to better human destiny here and now.

Many of us settle for no positive affirmations. We hang on but too easily to different kinds of negativisms, complaints, even cynical doubts. Many people settle for too little and expect too little of themselves. When we do not keep faith with what our human destiny promises we become emotionally and spiritually impoverished. Lowering the level of our expectations is a poor way of dealing with our lives. We should not be less than what we can be, both for ourselves and for others. Recently I reread that immensely moving book *Hope Against Hope* written by Nadezhda Mandelstam. She was the widow of one of the most gifted Russian poets, Osip Mandelstam, who was destroyed in one of Stalin's concentration camps. Mrs. Mandelstam's book is a handbook on human dignity in the midst of terrible sorrow and injustice. She did not give up, for her own sake and in tribute to her husband's goodness and courage. She described how at times all she could do was scream out her pain. She wrote, "to scream, this pitiful sound... is a concentrated expression of the last vestige of one's human dignity. It is a (human) way of leaving a trace of telling people how he lived and died. By his scream he asserts his right to live, sends a message to the outside world demanding help calling for resistance. If nothing else is left, one must at least scream. Silence is the real crime against one's humanity."⁵

I quote this because of the profound power which it transmits to us. Not the power which the heavens proclaim, but the power insisting upon our part in this world - the human power. The root of the word "human" is the Latin word "humus" which means earth, clay, dust. We are all bound to one another by the "mortar" of that origin.⁶ It binds us to those we love

⁵ In *Hope Against Hope*, Atheneum, NY, 1970

⁶ In *A New Humanism* F. Forrester Church (Rel. *Humanism*, Vol. XXV, Winter, 1991)

and cherish just as much as to those who might do us harm. But here is where our destiny begins, in the most humble and essential ground of earth. It binds our lives as well as our mortality. And in between we have this immense possibility of building something of quality and hope to live for. We too are part of the fountain of creation. Our gift, our *Daimon*, our spirit, is waiting for us, unawakened and still until we stir it into life.

When the painter Vincent Van Gogh was asked by his brother Thea why, in all the agonies he was suffering, he kept on painting so many self-portraits, the painter answered, "because I am trying to find a deeper resemblance of myself than a mere photograph. "

It is that "deeper resemblance" we need for each of us to see when we search to know what we live for.