

Space in the City – 22nd October 2008

Some Day I'll Find Me

*“Someday I'll find you,
Moonlight behind you,
True to the dream I am dreaming.”*

So Noel Coward delights us with his romantic dream from “Private Lives”. Years later Harry Williams cribbed the title “Some Day I'll Find You” to give a dry nuance to his autobiography. Harry was a Cambridge Don before joining the Community of the Resurrection and was echoing his spiritual search here. By changing **you** to **me**, I've twisted the object of the search from God to self. Not that I think the two are separate, for “know thyself” is the common advice given by spiritual guides as a step on the road to understanding the divine in our midst.

Easy you might say, I know no one better than myself. Perhaps. On the other hand, experience suggests there is still more to discover. Does retirement offer help in the quest? I hope to show it can.

I have to confess I was apprehensive about retiring, partly because some of my friends had found it enormously difficult to adjust. The reason wasn't just about the loss of the status that work may confer; it was more a question of role. I can imagine the train of thought. *“Once I was marginally useful, I contributed something, but now – who am I? What can I do? The phone doesn't ring any more, no-one wants me or depends on me now!”* In the light of which, perhaps we should add *Retirement* to the three great traumas of life – death, divorce and moving house!

In the event, for me, it wasn't the catastrophe some of my friends experienced, and I soon began to enjoy my new status. Once over the critical hump one can look back and say, *“been there, done that, now for the next thing”*. And in the context of this talk, I would pose the question *“and does the next thing involve finding the real ME?”* Having a role, be it paid employment or running a home, gives an aim to life, but it can be so time-consuming that one easily forget there is something beyond. Being released from that role, might well kick-start an interesting voyage of self-discovery, leading to the realisation that you are someone special, even with no job, no role. Why? As the TV advert says *“because you're worth it!”*

Every age brings its plusses and minuses, and now at 64 or more, if we are prepared to stand back a little, there are discoveries to be made! They may be about oneself, about the world and even about God. This like every other

stage is a significant step on our earthly Pilgrimage. Most of us, looking back, can trace the steps on that Pilgrimage – they are often more evident in retrospect than at the time. But the essential lesson is that the journey never comes to a halt, and we are still on it now.

To quote R.S. Thomas from his poem “Retired”

Not to worry myself any more

If I am out of step, fallen behind.

Let the space probes continue;

I have a different distance to travel.

I like “*I have a different distance to travel*”, which is why those who profess that they have never been so busy and don’t know how they found time to work, worry me. A genuine response no doubt, but one about which I am a little suspicious. It fits in all too well with the modern culture of ‘filling the time’. Many of you will recall the joke about the countryman found admiring the scenery, who when asked what he was doing, declared that “*sometimes I sits and thinks, but mostly I just sits*”. Sadly this is not a culture we admire any more.

Being alone is not something we find easy, and I’m not discussing genuine loneliness here – that is another matter. As I walk about town I have the abiding thought that I wish I had shares in a mobile phone company. You may have noted a new posture, the “eyes-down-stoop” adopted by the young as they constantly text each other. Even the old can have seemingly everlasting conversations, which often amount to know more than what time to put the chips on for tea. It seems that there are those who cannot bear to be out of contact with someone they know, even at the supermarket cash-out!

Don’t worry, I’m not here to knock the present age or engage in nostalgia; note that this talk is written on a Mac laptop with all the current software updates! However, I think retirement can pose the ultimate questions – *What’s it all about? What am I here for? What next?* Questions easily put to one side while the pressing business of earning a living or running a home commands so much of one’s attention. Joseph Campbell puts another slant on it: “*People say that what we’re all seeking is meaning for life.... I think what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we feel the rapture of being alive*”. Now there’s a thought, **the rapture of being alive**, and I suggest the first step, rather than trying to answer all the big questions, is to come to terms with who you are. As I mentioned before, *Know thyself* is the advice of the spiritual guide. It requires the acknowledgement that we all live behind a persona, personae even, and will continue to do so, but just for our own sake

its worth some reflection on what lies behind. Watching a documentary on Peter Sellers, my Goon Show hero, the universal comment was that no one knew who he really was, and, more devastatingly, perhaps he didn't either.

Whether Douglas Adams was a Goon Show fan, I don't know, but like the Goons he captures insights that only the offbeat can. A materialistic world needs those who can hold a mirror to our follies. Remember the "Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy"?

What is the answer to life, the universe, and everything? For seven and a half million years, the stupendously powerful, office block of a machine had whirred. When it came to announcing what it had discovered, crowds had quite understandably gathered. "You aren't going to like it," the supercomputer Deep Thought warned. "Forty-two," it said, with infinite majesty and calm.

He had hit the nail on the head; we expect something wonderfully exotic, when the answer all the time is the simple but illusive. "42".

So what we are looking at is not just a retirement issue, it is a life issue, and one easily avoided by escapism. One of the best illustrations for me is the so-called celebrity culture. Now I speak as one who has appeared in *Hello* magazine, well a sort of side view of my elbow and nose did! But despite the buzz of standing next to someone who the paparazzi were really after, I do wonder about it all.

Of course the cult of the celebrity can be found in earlier ages, but now it has grown wings with the advent of TV and glossy magazines. Human curiosity is natural enough but what worries me is the tendency to live your own life through the glitterati, the film star or the soccer player. It conjures up a vision of a vacuous world where values are dictated by the choices and life-style of the giddy few, offering little but vicarious fulfilment to the rest of us.

The point I make is about a spiral of escapism. I can more easily understand the gin palaces of another age when life for many was desperate and without hope. But today there is so much opportunity for the engagement of the intellect and the imagination, so why are we running away from it, preferring instead retail therapy and fantasy land?

Again Joseph Campbell puts it in a nutshell: *"One of the many distinctions between the celebrity and the hero is that one lives for self while the other acts to redeem society"*. And behind the heroic one finds compassion. We are all given a glimpse at some stage that there is both love and suffering at the heart of the universe. The cross on the wall is not just an ornament. Here is the possibility of a breakthrough. False gods slide into

insignificance if we are able to enter the world of self-giving love, to which Jesus of Nazareth is the window.

Rowan Williams in his Easter sermon this year said:

“We face a culture in which the thought of death is too painful to manage. Individuals live in anxious and acquisitive ways, seizing what they can to provide a security that is bound to dissolve, because they are going to die. Societies or nations do the same. Whether it is the individual grabbing the things of this world in just the repetitive, frustrating sameness that we have seen already in fact the mark of an inner deadness, or the greed of societies that assume there will always be enough to meet their desires, the same fantasy is at work.”

So in retirement we have a God-given moment to sit lightly to these anxious and acquisitive ways, to get off the merry-go-round and be different. O.K., its tough losing the role that gave you a position not just in work but also in the wider society and even the family. However, there is another view coming out of the Old Testament if we care to note it. Some of it wishful thinking, no doubt, but nevertheless a vision of society where the old are valued, their advice sought as elders and an expectation that they might take it easy – consider Micah:

“but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid”.

Here is a pastoral view in every sense, and above all a respect for you as you. In contrast I put ‘Retirement’ into Google and after wading through endless websites on pensions, financial advice and housing, I eventually found a site offering me expert advice on retirement, so I thought you might like some of the articles on offer. Actually they were all well meaning but pretty anodyne, so I won’t quote!

Again contrast Zechariah.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand for very age.

Now Jerusalem might not be a very ‘hep’ place by our standards but it was the action-packed centre of its day, and the old are not expected to go on achieving – sit back and enjoy it is the cry!

There are all manner of things to come to terms with when you are 64, and I am not denying that. There is usually a feeling of leaving projects incomplete “those things we ought to have done”, resulting in a degree of frustration, something I felt keenly myself. The wise tell us that is true whenever one moves on, but that does not alter the feelings with which we are left to deal. Again there is the loss of companionship and, however

annoying some people were, at least one was engaged with others in common cause. What now, one asks on retirement, no cause and a big blank.

So what of the positives? Let me quote a friend:

We consider ourselves very fortunate to be here. Everything is within easy reach, and we have become involved in a number of local organizations. Looking back on over 40 years of ministry, I have many happy memories, but there is no part of my life to which I would wish to return. Things got better and better, culminating in retirement, which is best of all. One is free of those aspects of church life which one found irksome, but the gifts one has accumulated over the years, and priesthood itself, can now be used with much greater freedom.

“*There is no part of my life to which I would wish to return*”. I admire that as it shows an acceptance and coming to terms with life as it is: a desire to live in the present not the past. It is not easy for everyone to be in that place. The bereaved, the lonely, the friendless, will all look back to better times and wish they were still there – I have seen enough of that to realize how tough it can be. Acknowledging such sadness, what is it that can move us on? That is what I am emphasizing as the first step.

Well, I have no magic formulae, no “42”, but when I reflect on my own work, I realize just how many problems of folk I know were based on guilt, and so I have always felt a need to try and relieve it. Not easy! And I’m not talking just about the big things, guilt seems to pervade so much of day-to-day living – decisions, relationships, world poverty, regrets about the past and so on. So my first step would be trying to find some inner peace, it will never be complete but the real **me** is bound up with it. Not so surprising when one considers that the Ministry of Jesus began on the note “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.*” So in this first step offering a way forward by coming to terms with one’s past.

Perhaps it all comes down to recognition of both mortality and immortality. Here we are for a short span playing our part; John Donne emphasizes our connectedness and our contribution with “*No man is an island*”. While mysteriously and simply the fact of death connects us to the other, the something beyond, values which transcend the everyday.

A Sunday broadsheet commenting on the Easter sermon of the Archbishop quoted earlier said this:

As Dr Williams says, “our anxious and acquisitive ways” are a symptom of our reluctance to ponder the awful fact of our mortality. Never has it been easier than now to avoid thinking about death... In such a society, it is the duty – arguably the primary duty – of a prelate to drag before our gaze that which we would rather not contemplate.

For this is no argument about life after death, it is about a realization that our pilgrimage is one of discovery. We do not have to take on board everything that is thrown at us in the marketplace of fashion and conformity. Beyond the loss of Role, our attempts at escapism and above all our weight of guilt, there are discoveries to be made. Reality is not confined to what we see, hear or smell, it is to be found by the echo of the external by the internal finding **the rapture of being alive**. And at the same time being in touch with our compassionate self and thus be more in tune with the Creator and His Creation.

Our fulfillment may never be complete and the pilgrimage goes on, but it is in the context now of having **a different distance to travel**. When we are 64, we can sit back, decide for ourselves and most of all be ourselves. **Some day I’ll find me**, is my theme perhaps we are well on the way when, like my friend, we can say: **“There is no part of my life to which I would wish to return”**.

Let RS Thomas have the last word:

I think that maybe

I will be a little surer

Of being a little nearer.

That’s all. Eternity

Is in the understanding

That that little is more than enough.