

Touchstones of Wisdom

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Reading

from Plato's "Apology" – from Socrates speech to the Athenian jury that convicted him and sentenced him to death:

It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen; it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death. Slow and elderly as I am, I have been caught by the slower pursuer, whereas my accusers, being clever and sharp, have been caught by the quicker, wickedness. I leave you now, condemned to death by you, but they are condemned by truth to wickedness and injustice...

Now I want to prophesy to those who convicted me, for I am at the point when men prophesy most, when they are about to die. I say gentlemen, to those who voted to kill me, that vengeance will come upon you immediately after my death, a vengeance much harder to bear than that which you took in killing me. You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible. With this prophecy to you who convicted me, I part from you.

Sermon

When I entered Haverford College fifty years ago I thought maybe I'd major in political science, since I had an interest in international affairs.

Then I met the philosophy professors.

Back in that time of curricular experimentation (had to keep us children of the sixties happy), instead of a traditional freshman English class, we were each to choose a "freshman seminar," most of the seminars taught by professors from departments other than English. To help us decide we had the opportunity to meet the professors one evening in the atrium of Magill Library. I recall meeting only one of those professors, namely Asoka Gangadean. Not all that much older than us, probably a pretty freshly minted PhD, Professor Gangadean exuded the sort of energy and excitement about his subject that I wanted to be around. My choice was clear.

His seminar topic? "The Nature of Man"

Inclusive language hadn't arrived, but the title would still be dry if it was "The Nature of Being Human." But if the title wasn't exciting, the professor was, and the readings were: We started with Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (so a touch of Buddhism), then some classics of western philosophy, then some Freud and Jung.

But what I remember most is not the particulars of the readings, but the aliveness of the conversations around the seminar table, a sense that we were part of the long stream of philosophers contemplating the meaning of life, what it's all about, how to live a good life, and so on. What could be better than such conversations about things that matter, as I've come to describe them, conversations that might lead to helping us live lives that matter?

Needless to say, I was hooked. My life changed. Indeed, in ways I couldn't yet know, the arc of my life was being shaped.

In retrospect, I see that it was as if I had been unchained from Plato's cave and given a glimpse of the light outside.

Plato's cave?

Here's a condensed and slightly adapted telling of Plato's allegory of the cave, that appears in his dialogue *The Republic*, which somewhere along the way every philosophy student reads.

Imagine this: A group of people who have been chained for their lifetimes to one another in front of a wall in a cave, never knowing another reality. There is a fire behind them, and there are flickering shadows on the wall produced by figures moving in between them and the fire, the figures holding various items in their arms as they walk back and forth.

These chained prisoners can only see the shadows, since they are chained in such a way that prevents them from turning around. They take a certain pride in naming what they see and drawing conclusions about the meanings of what they see.

Imagine further that one of the prisoners escapes from his chains, turns around to see the fire and the source of the flickering shadows he and his companions have been observing – and then makes his way out of the cave altogether into what is at first a world of blinding light produced by the sun.

He now realizes just how deluded he and his companions have been. He returns to the cave to share his new knowledge, his eyes now blinded, so to speak, by the dark. He tries to tell them what he has learned, and they think he has lost his mind.

Now, why, after twenty-five centuries are students of philosophy still exploring the meanings of this allegory – as I did in Prof. Paul Desjardin's Philosophy 101 class at Haverford College half a century ago?

Maybe because we sense a glimmer of truth here.

For however else we might understand this allegory, it suggests that our ordinary experience is not the whole story of who we are and of what life is all about. To put it colloquially, that there is more to life than meets the ordinary eye. Further the allegory suggests that it is possible to escape from the illusory world of the cave in which we live to the light of how things really are: the goal, you might say, of philosophy.

Now, elsewhere in Plato's dialogues, Plato has Socrates declare that philosophy begins in wonder. But the word for wonder in Greek has more to do with "puzzlement" than with "awe" – puzzlement about the nature of life which leads us to want to solve the puzzle, seek knowledge, understand life and the meaning or meanings of life.

So maybe it was not only the exciting professors, but was this sort of "wonder" or puzzlement about the meaning of life that attracted me to philosophy, to this world of philosophers trying to figure things out, and more broadly attracted me to all the wisdom teachers of humanity: philosophers, sages, mystics, some of whom seemed to have achieved something we might call enlightenment, having left the cave of illusion and seen the light.

As for Haverford, as an academic institution the quest for understanding or enlightenment was primarily undertaken through engagement with words, with texts – whether in Plato's dialogues and Aristotle's writings or in the work Descartes, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein – or, as in my second semester freshman seminar, exploring the meanings of the great western epics with Professor Kosman, or, in religion classes reading the Bible, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and on and on.

Here's another example of this engagement with words and texts from another of Plato's dialogues, one of the first often studied in philosophy classes: the *Euthyphro*. In it, Plato has Socrates in conversation with young Euthyphro. Socrates has been tried for the crime of impiety and will soon return to court to defend himself, whereas Euthyphro is on his way to court to accuse his own father of the murder of a servant, which Euthyphro believes to be the pious thing to do, since what his father did was impious, wrong, not pleasing to the gods.

So the dialogue becomes an exploration of the meaning of "piety" – which at the outset Euthyphro believed he had understood completely, but by the end realizes (or at least we the readers realize) that he really had had no idea. For that matter, it's not even clear if Socrates has come to a conclusion on the meaning of piety either. But in any case, we the readers have been invited to think!

As for me, "piety" was not a concept I, coming from a Unitarian Universalist household, had thought much – or at all – about. But by engaging around a seminar table, testing our ideas against one another in conversation about the conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro, a door opened to understanding "piety" in ways relevant not just to ancient Athenians, but to our actual lives today. Would living a "pious" life simply mean living according to ethical standards and values, according to some sense of justice?

Well then, all this sort of thing was the beginning of my personal history of engagement with words and texts (my touchstone texts of all kinds accumulated over decades) as a route toward greater understanding of life and of how we ought to live. And as those of you who have been around Old Ship for any length of time know well, it

is an engagement with text and with each other I have been inviting you to join for all these years together.

And here's a critically important point, which I've already noted, but must emphasize: This engagement with a text – whether philosophy, scripture, poetry – though I first encountered it in an academic institution, is anything but meant to be an academic exercise. Not at all! As I said: Conversation about things that matter so that we might better live lives that matter.

Socrates himself, master of conversation, made this clear over and over and over again. For example:

From the “Crito”:

The most important thing is not life, but the good life.

And from the “Apology,” as you heard earlier:

...it is best and easiest not to discredit others, but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible.

From the “Gorgias”:

I say that the admirable and good person, man or woman, is happy; but that the one who's unjust and wicked is miserable.

Now, at this point, let me say a little about the word “philosophy.” It simply means “love of wisdom.” So... what is wisdom?

Most generally I would suggest that what we might call life wisdom, is knowledge of how best to live based on, grounded in, how things are, on the nature of this mystery we call life as best we can understand it.

This means that it matters quite a bit what we believe life to be about, or what we have experienced life to be.

Do we think it is all meaningless? Just atoms and electrons randomly mixing it up?

Or do we believe there is something we would call a divine purpose to it all?

Do we believe or have we experienced that our lives are deeply interconnected, one with another?

Or do we believe that we are ultimately alone?

Or perhaps we have come to the conclusion that we will never know for certain just what is going on here, but we have discovered what makes for a truly happier life in the midst of the mystery and in the midst of the suffering that life brings to most if not all of us eventually.

Our answers to such questions will shape how we choose to live. Indeed, such questions themselves, as Jacob Needleman has written in relation to Socrates, can wake us up, awaken our conscience to the moral dimension of life and of our life in particular.

Finally for this morning, why do I preach this sermon on the first Sunday of the new year (in addition to its serving as an introduction to my “Touchstones of Wisdom” class)?

Pretty simple.

It seems to me that we are more than ever in need of genuine wisdom – which includes conscience – these days in our nation in particular and in the world.

We need more truth-telling; we need to be reminded that a good life is a life guided by ethical principles, a life lived for others; we need to lift up the ancient teaching that the whatever else the purpose of our lives might be, it is surely not about greed, not about seeking power at any price, not about fame and fortune – that in fact genuine happiness and well-being comes in the midst of service and with gratitude for the simple gifts of life; and we need to re-discover the importance of genuine, reasoned conversation about things that matter, even or especially, with those who might have opinions quite different from our own (this is, after all, what Socrates did – we must do this too).

Most generally: We need to leave the cave of ignorance and live a little more closely guided by the light of wisdom, whether discovered in ancient texts or modern poetry; whether glimpsed in meditation or prayer; whether awakened amidst the wonders of sea and sky, woods and fields; whether experienced through music or art; whether felt in our heart’s compassion for our fellow beings and our heart’s love for those dearest to us.

Here at Old Ship this year, then, may we continue – whether in classes or over coffee – to engage respectfully with one another (and with others in our lives) in conversations about things that matter, so that we might better be able to lead lives of conscience that matter... matter to those we love, matter to our community, and through the inevitable if untraceable ripples of our words and deeds, matter to our nation and the wider world.

To put it another way, the point of the sorts of conversations – and experiences – that I’m talking about is not to win an argument or become “holier than thou,” but to grow as best we can in wisdom and love, and to live accordingly.

May we, at the least, in whatever way is our way, turn towards the light.

So may it be.