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*The* FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Brian Merry

Taking Stock

April 2021

# Taking Stock

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Springtime evokes images of change, reawakening, and new beginnings. Nature is preparing, instinctively, in response to elemental cues. Though subject to nature's laws, human responsiveness is also conditioned by free will and a complex host of emotions and socio-cultural learnings. Nothing is straightforward, despite so much taken for granted. Earlier New Year resolutions and wishes, for example, may by now be severely tested, if not forgotten. The Roman god Janus was worshipped as the controller of beginnings and journeying, depicted as a double-faced sculpture over doorways and gates, looking both ways. We often use the term 'two-faced' in a less pious and derogatory manner. Perhaps a reminder that, not unlike the ancients, we are also in need of divine intervention to mediate in our disordered perceptions and wayfaring.

Given the pace and nature of change over two centuries or more, the human subject is increasingly the focus of scrutiny across a wide range of disciplines. Contemporary theology, for example, addresses man's relationship with God as much as God's relationship with his creatures. 'Consciousness' is spoken of more frequently in media and social circles than conscience. Given so many angles, we might say the postmodern picture of ourselves is somewhat multifaceted. Some might contend the modern era has ushered in, along with progress, more self-absorption. Values certainly seem more fluid, less sure-footed.

## DISCERNMENT

Something has been hatched, a space has been opened in the contemporary psyche which has expanded both our worldview, and view of ourselves. Yet, we often struggle to assign meaning. Implications for interiority, prayer, the space where love is given and received, are manifold.

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## THE FURROW

Discernment – as in the scrutiny and judgement of different choices, is fraught with anxiety in these strange times, even from long before the pandemic struck. It is difficult at times to know where the eggshells or pieces surrounding whatever is, or has been hatched, are meant to fit. On a more positive note, hope is never exhausted. The impact of pandemic has heightened awareness of our interdependence, solidarity with the environment, and the need to curb excesses. Many describe how, forced to respond to presenting challenges, they have reimagined possibilities and effected change to their circumstances. Might such taking of responsibility reflect the seed of a return to wholesome discernment, a response to an ‘invitation’, in this case mediated by a deadly virus? Or is this just a blip, a digging deep at times of crises, then about-face and back to the everyday when normality returns?

Responding to call, something asked of us rather than the usual wants and wish lists that dominate our horizons, goes to the heart of Christian discernment.<sup>1</sup> We can identify here with St. Paul’s struggle, desiring good but frequently acting against the good,<sup>2</sup> a form of inertia or wavering that is part of the human condition. The wisdom of our Christian, as well as other religious faiths, inform and instruct us in our weaknesses, acting as a go-between; grace the ultimate mediator. Prayer for divine assistance, trust that we are loved by a benevolent God, has been the default mode for generations of the faithful. It also often is for non-believers, not just as cliché (oh my god!), but also when a crisis presents.

## INTERIORITY

Those of us who might bemoan the loss of traditional faith practice need heed that the call to change, and change often, pertains also to the relationship we have with ourselves, as it does our relationship with neighbour or God. Discernment, it might be said, has a wide berth – open, cavernous, a space where mystery has its abode. Naturally drawn to re-imagine and shape our world in ever new ways, we are much more than the synaptic complexes some neuroscientists would have us believe.

There is a sense today that divine presence is being edged out of the fabric of discernment. Materialism increasingly occupies the vacuum, manipulating need and desire, packaged often by anonymous agents; technology facilitates the exponential spread of subliminal messaging across the web, often reflecting our propensity for the dark. Misinformation, greed, are frequently cloaked as a good, to serve profit and other vested interests.

1 Brian O’Leary, *Ignatian Spirituality* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2009).

2 Romans 7: 15-20

The wisdom of tradition, religious codes and associated rites of passage, seem increasingly side-lined as mediums of fulfilment. It is tempting to cry foul ... enough is enough ... return to the faith of your fathers! Yet, whether intuition or providence, we have a sense this is unlikely to happen along such lines. And, we have few answers.

The call by Pope Francis in his recent Christmas message that we become more proactive in attending to *difference*, globally, may be telling. We know how challenged, confused, or entrenched we can become in accommodating, say, different races, cultures, gender identities, new models of family, and so on. But it may also be true that society glosses over less obvious divides in the interest of pluralism, rights, or a tentative peace. Traditional faith has always been to the fore, if not always above board, in teasing out some of the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in society. However, religions now have to compete at the forum, and no longer have anything like a veto on matters spiritual.

#### POTPOURRI

Many today turn to alternative symbolic systems for meaning, away from foundational faith traditions. We increasingly live within an assemblage of different ‘communities’, informed by a variety of sources. Such groupings may be authentic, searching for truth. Or, misguided, mimetically mirroring popular opinion such as social media. Others put their faith in science and technological progress. Meaning making today has a random, relativistic aspect. Younger generations are more inclined to regard traditional religion a poor fit for today’s world, or even incomprehensible.

The historian and political activist Michael Ignatieff contends that the liberal democratic ideal offers the most realistic hope of achieving social justice and harmony. He contends that the “ordinary” virtues, virtues that come naturally such as honesty, respect, politeness, forbearance, trust, – thrive where governance serves the interests of its people first and foremost. He adds that to date, these “ordinary” virtues have been orientated mostly in favour of one’s own, whether that be family, tribe, nation. However, where governance upholds the rule of justice, applied equally to both rulers and those governed, the hope is that “extraordinary” virtues of compassion, generosity and empathy might prevail. Under such conditions, the needs of all may be met.<sup>3</sup>

This accords with faith in secular humanism, ideas which go back over centuries. The vested hope civil authority will somehow transform the moral fibre of society (religion confined to the private

3 Michael Ignatieff, *The Ordinary Virtues* (London: Harvard University Press, 2017).

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sphere), is not unreasonable. It gets us thinking. But this brave new world needs reminding how all idealist projects through history have failed, despite best efforts, to circumvent the notoriously fickle and fallible nature of human intentionality.

Then again, might the part-unravelling we witness today be simply generational, a spring clean of ossified ways to forge new paths? For some, these times are exciting, potent with the unstoppable progress of science and technology. Others are disgruntled, feeling left behind, projecting their dissatisfaction onto government, big corporations, Church, or other agencies perceived as controlling their lives. These contentions have some validity, but concomitantly, the unravelling we witness may also represent dissociation, the polarization or separating out of ideas and opinions from the rest of the personality. Set loose, as it were, ideas or ideology can take on a life of their own, occupying the space of both affective and cognitive deficits.

## DISSOCIATION

The author Umberto Eco suggested that one of the principal functions and attraction of literature, all great stories and narratives we relate to, is to pit our desire to change destiny against the impossibility of doing so; fate being subject to unchanging or “inexorable” laws of life. Narratives address our own stories, things we wish and hope for, but also point to things we repress, or things we feel powerless to change.<sup>4</sup> Eco introduces a more secular view of desire and unreachable depths, wherein little if anything shifts, governing our responses. A theme taken up and explored by psychodynamic theories in general.

Putting aside for a moment the authentic or truth value of what all great religions refract and model in meeting the human need for connectedness, right living, or meaning, Eco makes a valid observation that we return, or are returned, time and again to the *ground* of our human condition. It is a healthy reminder of where motivation is often sourced, at least biologically. Also, we might recognise how the tension of conflict is so often necessary to shift us from complacency, if not stasis.

Richard Rohr also reminds us that deeper lies and illusions are often at base of our crimes and misdemeanours. Religion, he suggests, has overly focused on superficial sin, at the expense of a consciousness that might reveal our complicity with systemic malice and evil. Dutiful religious observance is of little benefit if we are not also transformed at the level of subconscious strata

4 Umberto Eco, *On Literature* (London: Vanguard, 2006) p14.

where, Rohr suggests, divisive and destructive impulses abide.<sup>5</sup> Might there be a connection here with what St. Paul relates of our tendency to about-face? A possible pointer to pay more attention to the ground of our humanity, aspects of which are denied or negated because so damned difficult?

This suggestion is not made any the easier by the real sense of threat that probing depths poses for us. As mentioned, we are moved to do so at times of crises, or when *blocked*, times we have to dig deep. Ordinarily, we are programmed by the fright/flight instinct to flee threat and seek safety. Going against the grain is somewhat counterintuitive. And yet, faith and moral development often depends precisely on going against the grain, holding natural instincts in check, measuring response, squaring with our more destructive inclinations.

Different disciplines may have varied approaches to discerning the inner-outer dynamic of the human dimension. The practice of prayer, grace, and giving glory are at the heart of Christian discernment.<sup>6</sup> The Confessional has served as a gentle go-between, enabling the participant to grow in inner freedom in the knowledge he/she is loved by God. Such feelings can bring self-awareness and self-knowledge, can reveal the direction God leads. However, personal sin, inadequacy, may also become locked within complexes of guilt or premature settlements, factors that may return the person to the same place of repetition and disturbance. Counselling, therapy, mindfulness, spiritual direction are modern adjuncts, if not replacements, for traditional confession. Are commentators like Rohr exaggerating the benefits ‘outing’ more shadowed parts might have? How might we better understand the part played by division within ourselves (the plank in our own eye) in the practice of discernment? These are surely perennial questions, particularly pertinent to our unanchored times.

#### MODERN TRENDS

What the novel, or literature in general, once provided has also been partly supplanted by screenplays, movies. Dystopian milieus often explore existential or spiritual malaise, where good and evil are played out. Apollonian heroism with lots of reciprocal violence is typical of the genre. Anti-heroes are often secondary, sentimental figures – redemptive *agape* or atonement theory are not the stuff of ticket sales. Detective and situational dramas also can draw us into interesting subplots, where we become vicariously involved

5 Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do with Evil* (CAC Publishing: 2000) p 48.

6 Brian O’Leary, *Exploring the Ignatian Tradition - Essays* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020)

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with sticky situations, escapist routes, and even, ‘murderous’ inclinations.

Entertainment aside, what might these, as well as other modern substitutes for traditional faith contribute to the space of discernment. A Christian will seek, maybe see, God’s mysterious ways at work in the pattern of their lives. But, what of those who no longer acknowledge the need for cultivating an inner life, take grace for granted, or whose capacity for reflection is subsumed into modern consumerist trends?

We can say, at least in the West, the move away from faith and religious practice is ongoing, replaced by a mixture of agnosticism, secular humanism, and atheism. Inadequacy seems barely cloaked today within a competitive ethos in thrall to images of perfection. There is an emphasis on independence, personal autonomy and success, side-lining or obscuring the place of vulnerability. Reports of sadomasochistic bullying and hate crime abound. Young men seem most at risk of despair at not fitting into the new order, and all too many take the route of suicide to escape the turmoil of disturbed affect.

Questioning, not knowing, confusion, experimentation, are natural healthy pursuits. However, dissociation from deep, and not so deep affect is quite a different matter. Faith and religion have always been the vanguard in keeping such matters of vital importance to the fore. Leading by example of course helps, is important, but may have little impact on those for whom the religious impulse carries little import in their lives.

It is a tough call to attempt to decree to others what is at stake here. Doing so may come across as judgemental, self-righteous, and yet we are challenged to explore new ways to stem what is eking away through the cracks and splits of human makeup. Apart from example, scripture, parables, we have evolved little, if any, new language. Perhaps a lack of confidence, or have we lost something of the revolutionary countercultural thrust of the early church?

Which of us – whether parent, priest, teacher, leader, or ordinary citizen – feels resourced to challenge, for example, that a medical career is primarily a vocation, not the acquisition of a status or messianic symbol; that unnecessary accumulation of wealth is greed, vice; or that power corrupted, blinds? We understandably shy away from difficult questions, guilty as all are in part. And yet, we also know that there are qualitative aspects to such difficulties we could and should dialogue better.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the need to give glory and worship has shifted outwards in recent times, the result of climate change and Covid19. There is a palpable move to care for the environment, curtail excess and attend more to the needs of our world. Such discernment is encouraging, and one hopes that whatever changes are afoot might rekindle that (prayer) space where outer and inner meet.

When some worshippers do return, back to their own 'channel', in solidarity with their local churches and communities, there is an anxiety on the part of priests and parishes the return may not be quite as before. The experience of channel picking for Sunday services, comfort of remote attendance, may result in greater demands for change. However, should such transpire, this desire for (outer) structural change may also reflect, acknowledged or unacknowledged, a growing need to reconnect with (inner) discerned living. That desire might include the traditional format of ritual, word and sacrament. But it may also point to a change towards more patient attention to the world we live, our actions therein, and impact on interiority.

We may never overcome *différence*, in ourselves and the world. But that struggle is what renders boundaries more permeable, disempowering the hold of shadow elements that split and divide. We have the promise that despite our shortcomings, misrepresentations and failures, the Spirit of Wisdom is with us always.

**God Talk.** God is no more dead than He is absent or elusive. Today it is humankind that no longer has a ready trust in those – whether people or institutions – who make mention of Him. In order to restore it, it is necessary to take the risk of conversation among thinking human creatures.

– BRUNO CADORÉ, *With Him: Listening to the Underside of the World* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 188.