

I discovered a poem a couple months ago, and it struck me very powerfully. It was written by Matthew Arnold who lived in the mid 1800's, from 1822-1888, in England, so the language sounds a bit strange to the modern American ear. But the subject is one you have heard me talk about on occasion before as you might guess from the title. It is called The Buried Life, and the basic theme is the idea that we have lost part of ourselves, something vital, so that we have had to forget who we really are and live in this world as an ego, a "false self" as Thomas Keating might say. It also deals with the way, or a way at least, that we might break out of our pitiable state and rediscover the real person, the "true self." I'm going to read the poem and add a few comments. (In most cases here the word "men" means "people")

Light flows our war of mocking words, and yet,
Behold, with tears mine eyes are wet!
I feel a nameless sadness o'er me roll.
Yes, yes, we know that we can jest,
We know, we know that we can smile!
But there's a something in this breast,
To which thy light words bring no rest,
And thy gay smiles no anodyne.
Give me thy hand, and hush awhile,
And turn those limpid eyes on mine,
And let me read there, love! thy inmost soul.

It appears that the superficial bantering that passes between these two lovers offers no real feeling of connection, and the writer needs to be reassured that real, meaningful interaction between them is actually possible. That "something" within him could refer to previous failures to achieve the kind of very necessary mutual bond that we typically recognize, and now his memory of a sense of isolation is painful and needs the "anodyne" (pain relief) of real loving connection.

Alas! Is even love too weak
To unlock the heart, and let it speak?
Are even lovers powerless to reveal
To one another what indeed they feel?
I knew the mass of men conceal'd
Their thoughts, for fear that if reveal'd
They would by other men be met
With blank indifference, or with blame reprov'd;
I knew they lived and moved
Trick'd in disguises, alien to the rest
Of men, and alien to themselves-and yet
The same heart beats in every human breast!

(2)

The author's reaction to the situation seems to be deepening and now is bordering on panic. He now begins to recount the reasons we separate ourselves, how we hide who we really are, from other people and end up becoming strangers even to ourselves. I feel like the author wants to say, "What are we so afraid of? What is the terror that blinds us and cuts us off not only from each other but even from ourselves?" Yet, when we are honest, we have to admit that we all have the same basic needs, we have to admit our undeniable connection and our need to recognize and live that connection.

But we, my love-doth a like spell benumb
Our hearts, our voices?-must we too be dumb?

Is this state really so perverse, so pervasive, and so powerful that it controls the interaction of two people who are concerned with, and dedicated to, each other's well being. It seems that the unstated meaning here is that if it is so powerful then something must be done to understand and correct the problem.

Ah! well for us, if even we,
Even for a moment, can get free
Our heart, and have our lips unchain'd;
For that which seals them hath been deep-ordained.

The poet continues his evaluation of their situation, and his real fear of what it is that they are facing begins to reveal itself. The barrier that blocks the expression of true feelings is deep within them. It is almost as if it has been laid down by some ruler or some legislative body. This seems to be getting more difficult the more he examines it.

Fate, which foresaw
How frivolous a baby man would be--
By what distractions he would be possess'd,
How he would pour himself in every strife,
And well-nigh change his own identity--
That it might keep from his capricious play
His genuine self, and force him to obey
Even in his own despite his being's law,
Bade through the deep recesses of our breast
The unregarded river of our life
Pursue with indiscernible flow its way;
And that we should not see
The buried stream, and seem to be
Eddying at large in blind uncertainty,
Though driving on with it eternally.

(3)

Arnold goes on to describe how determined we are to fool ourselves, to direct our attention to the frivolous, the superficial, and, seemingly, at all cost, away from the reality of our deep feelings. Even when this self delusion becomes self destructive we follow the dictates of our fear and do our best to remain unconscious of the real person within. However, it is those feelings which are really controlling the flow of our lives, while the conscious mind is keeping us occupied, as we float along seemingly without any real direction.

But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us--to know
Whence our lives come and where they go.
And many a man in his own breast then delves,
But deep enough, alas! none ever mines.
And we have been on many thousand lines,
And we have shown, on each, spirit and power;
But hardly have we, for one little hour,
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves--
Hardly had skill to utter one of all
The nameless feelings that course through our breast,
But they course on forever unexpress'd.
And long we try in vain to speak and act
Our hidden self, and what we say and do
Is eloquent, is well--but 'tis not true!
And then we will no more be rack'd
With inward striving, and demand
Of all the thousand nothings of the hour
Their stupefying power;
Ah yes, and they benumb us at our call!
Yet still, from time to time, vague and forlorn,
From the soul's subterranean depth upborne
As from an infinitely distant land,
Come airs, and floating echoes, and convey
A melancholy into all our day.

(4)

The author tells us that there is something like a pressure within us, an ache or an anxiousness, that pushes us, from time to time, to look within. But we are unable to pass, or even approach, that barrier which separates us from the true self. We wander down lots of superfluous paths, many "lines" as he says, until we exhaust our energy and our interest, and finally return to the distractions, the delusions, that we have always mistaken for life, for being truly alive. And even yet, that pressure never really goes away. Some part of us is always longing for wholeness, for connection, for life to make sense.

Only--but this is rare--
When a beloved hand is laid in ours,
When, jaded with the rush and glare
Of the interminable hours,
Our eyes can in another's eyes read clear,
When our world-deafen'd ear
Is by the tones of a loved voice caress'd--
A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.
The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain,
And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know.
A man becomes aware of his life's flow,
And hears its winding murmur; and he sees
The meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze.

And here we have it, after having been beaten down by a world that demands everything and gives back very little, something makes sense. Finally, our needs seem to correspond with the gifts, with the energy, that someone else has to give. And our giving in return is a joy and simply the expression of a relaxed and natural congeniality. Who we really are, and what we feel and know, are not merely perceivable and acceptable, they are relevant, they are even important.

And there arrives a lull in the hot race
Wherein he doth for ever chase
That flying and elusive shadow, rest.
An air of coolness plays upon his face,
And then he thinks he knows
The hills where his life rose,
And the sea where it goes.

So, at long last, we reach a place of peace. We get to relax within, and to relish, a feeling of belonging, of rightness. It may be temporary. There may be a lot more work to do. But we are on the path, and we have realized that the pain-permeated, fear-fragmented creatures that this

(5)

world seems to produce so consistently, can be healed, can be renewed, reborn as beings which are representative of that loving, creative energy we call God, the ocean of life in which we swim.

I think it's reasonably obvious that this poem is related pretty strongly to the teachings of Jesus. The passage that comes to my mind more than any other is the only one I know of that appears in the gospels 6 times. The wording that I prefer is Matthew 16: 24-25 from the International Children's Bible (the one we read previously): 24. Then Jesus said to his followers, "If anyone wants to follow me he must say no to the things he wants. He must be willing even to die on a cross, and he must follow me. 25. Whoever wants to save his life will give up (never achieve) true life. And whoever gives up his life for me will have (achieve) true life.