

LIVES OF QUIET DESPERATION

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We today are giving orations, obviously. Perhaps we mean what we say; perhaps we don't. But for eight or ten minutes we will stand here and talk. Our talks will be judged, the ratings handed out. It will be done. Maybe these words, these minutes, will have meaning in the total context of our lives--they should. But possibly they won't. It's very rarely that we meet anyone whose life is so disciplined to a purpose that each and every action, each ten minute endeavor, has meaning as part of the overall pattern of his life.

I of course can't say for sure what you want, but I think that a lot of us at least want that kind of purpose--the kind of purpose that makes everything in our life fit into a whole. As we begin to listen to the people around us we begin to understand why Thoreau would say that "most men live lives of quiet desperation." There are so many people who are empty inside, and so many who fill their lives full of the small pleasures, so that they need not think about the total meaning of their lives.

Part of this problem of purposelessness is the problem of apathy. We hear so much about it--student apathy, voter apathy, public apathy. You've probably heard some excellent orations on the topic. But at its roots, isn't apathy actually a problem of purposelessness? If I had a purpose so overwhelming, so total that every minute of my life had to be directed towards the fulfillment of that purpose could I possibly be apathetic? Depending on my purpose I might possibly be very much against voting and consider it a waste of time, or I might be very conscientious about it knowing that I had a reason to care about the progress of the state, but I wouldn't be apathetic.

And do you see apathy in the student who knows what he is working for? No matter how short-sighted, or just plain silly, his goal may seem, when a student knows what he wants and sets out to get it, apathy is gone--almost by definition.

The problem of purposelessness manifests itself in other ways, particularly in the despair felt by many people as they grow old. Psychologists have noted that as people grow old they often come to a sense of futility, thinking that all of their life has in the end counted for nothing. If you and I want to avoid the same sense of despair when we approach death, we are going to have to do some hard thinking now. Otherwise we are only too likely to find ourselves echoing the words of the cartoonist Ralph Barton, who, taking his own life, said, "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up twenty four hours of the day."

This all may evidence that man is happier if he has a purpose, but as has been hinted, it matters what that purpose is. You could dedicate yourself to a goal and pursue it vigorously for years, only to discover eventually that it was shallow and passing, unsatisfying in the end. That seems to be the experience of many people as they grow close to death. What we want is a purpose so inclusive that not only will each activity of life fit into that purpose, but the total life will itself fit into some ultimate pattern.

Jean Paul Sartre and Karl Barth, both among the leading thinkers of the twentieth century, suggest two approaches to this problem. Sartre says that although we desire purpose, life is essentially meaningless, absurd. His philosophy is based on the naturalistic assumption that man is a passing phenomenon in an impersonal universe, an accident of evolution. It makes no difference which way a man directs his life--since all will end with death. But though it ultimately makes no difference what a man does, in his fleeting moments of consciousness man must act, for it is by action that he creates a temporary meaning and makes his life his own. In creating his own meaning man operates in complete freedom. He is free from any predetermining essence, free from any moral order in the universe, free

from any obligation to other people. Both the natural universe and other human beings are alien and they are to be treated as objects to be possessed since nothing has any essential, intrinsic meaning.

Karl Barth presents another view of life. As a leading theologian of our century he deals with belief in God, but to understand his thoughts you have to recognize first that he rejects what is commonly called "churchianity," as many of us do. He wants to talk to us not about "religion," but about the basic questions of purpose, meaning, commitment. He suggests that the very fact that we spend our time wondering about meaning shows something about the nature of the universe. One of his images is to me very relevant. He says that we stand on a ridge between Yes and No, and part of our being cries out--No, there is no God, no meaning to the universe. Yet part of our being continues to press at the question of meaning. We cannot rest easy in the knowledge of our own purposeless existence. After discussing and finding inadequate other explanations of this quest for meaning, which is actually a quest for God, Barth comes to the conclusion that "we are caught and taken captive by a presupposed and original Yes which we would not attempt to deny if it did not cause us such unrest." We search because we belong to the Yes.

Barth recognizes that there is a part of us that says No and goes on to analyse the ideas that keep us from belief. We don't have time here to discuss them, but he begins to find answers in the textual records of the Judeo-Christian heritage. He approaches the Bible, as you should, not with an unquestioning acceptance of a claimed divine inspiration, but rather with an eye to discovering what kind of men these were, stripping them of all qualities that could be mythological or culturally conditioned. What was different about these men who believed God and how did they affect the world? Is there any evidence that what changed their lives could change mine?

I challenge you, as honest, thinking individuals, to make just such a serious study of the claims of Christian thought. As a college student you've undoubtedly studied Sartre and existentialism--both in the original documents and in commentaries. But I've met so many students whose only study of Christian thought was done in gradeschool church classes taught from picture books. We need more serious thought.

Just as after these orations are over and judged there will not be a chance to do them again and correct our mistakes, so we, as we approach death, will not be given a chance to relive our lives with new values and new commitments. Now we are young, and if we wish to avoid the despair which affects so many as they grow old, if we wish our lives to count, under any value system, we've got to do some hard thinking now. Perhaps Sartre is right and we cannot know purpose for our lives. But it is also possible that Barth comprehended something essential to human existence. Perhaps man can know meaning as he approaches God.

I challenge you to make an honest study of that possibility.