

Reflections, March–April 2010

Thursday, March 4, 2010

In 1967 I was 12 and wanted nothing more than to become an Eagle Scout. But I was sure I'd never meet the insect collection requirement for Nature merit badge: 50 different insects preserved, labeled, and mounted in cigar boxes. And without Nature, no Eagle! The Columbus suburb where we lived didn't have that many different insect species, and I was deathly afraid of bugs larger than houseflies. Then my Uncle George and Aunt Anne invited us to their farm in Southern Ohio for a family reunion.

When we got there, I realized we'd found the motherlode. Insects of all kinds, everywhere. My mother took her scaredy-cat son and the jar with formaldehyde-soaked cotton in the bottom into Uncle George and Aunt Anne's field. When she caught one, she'd have me hold the jar until the insect expired, empty it into the storage box we had with us, and give the jar back to her to catch the next one.

I didn't really earn my Nature merit badge. I didn't look very hard for good insect hunting grounds. We just happened to get invited to a farm. My mother did most of the work, and didn't make me face my fear. I don't know if she talked with my Scoutmaster about how the collection was completed. I should have done so myself, but didn't. He accepted my cigar boxes without asking too many questions. I have a feeling he knew I'd gotten some help.

Human self-awareness begins with an acknowledgment of joys we've received but haven't deserved, and griefs we've been spared though our action or inaction, words or silence, might have invited them. I didn't have to catch many insects, and I still became an Eagle Scout. We don't really know ourselves until we see how mercy has, at very important junctures in our lives, trumped justice.

Thursday, March 11, 2010

Most of our activity is right-handed, in the metaphorical sense: straightforward, common-sense responses to commonplace needs. We're hungry, so we grab a fork or a sandwich and eat. We're tense, so we open a bottle of beer or wine and have a drink. We're bored, so we turn on the TV.

Within, though, a metaphorical left hand is at work. It's not sinister or sneaky, but it operates in secret and keeps its own counsel. Probing the spirit, it finds hungers food cannot satisfy, anxieties alcohol cannot quell, emptiness entertainment cannot fill.

The Lenten fast stills a right-handed activity. We give up a certain kind of food, or alcohol, or television. Then, the left hand shows us what it's found. From its revelations we learn anew that we need more than the right hand can give.

It's not so much that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, as that it doesn't care. It works on its own terms, in its own time. Whenever the Lenten fast turns our attention to it, the left hand is ready to show us things the right hand has kept us too busy, or distracted, to notice.

Thursday, March 18, 2010

A member of Malcolm X's family sent him some information about Islam when he was in prison. One tenet caught his attention: "Don't eat pork." He embraced Islam because he liked the idea of taking a pass on the meat many of his fellow-inmates relished. It set him apart.

We make decisions on pretty flimsy grounds sometimes. We should exercise "due diligence," explore our options, before making an important choice, but honestly, sometimes the decision comes first and the weightier reasons emerge only later. Only when he made the "Hajj," the pilgrimage to Mecca, did the universal dimensions of Islam become clear to Malcolm. This revelation of the "Ummah," the community of believers gathered from all races and nations, was the real reason for his embrace of the faith; he just didn't realize it when he decided to pass the plate of pork on to the next inmate.

Self-awareness, a full understanding of the choices that lie before us, is a mark of maturity. We should aspire to it. Still, we don't, and can't, always know what we're getting into when we commit ourselves to something, or somebody. God can, and does. Self-awareness counts for a lot, but God's awareness of who we are and where we're headed counts for more.

Thursday, March 25, 2010

Every temporal action has eternal resonance. Immanuel Kant said we must be able to “universalize our maxim.” Each decision, that is, must come before the bar of eternity and answer its questions: what principle guides you here? Does it apply universally, or just rationalize a whim? Nothing we do has meaning only for the moment.

Still, we try to live, in some measure, precisely for each moment. The left hand—mystical, hidden, seeking eternity—might know what the more practical right hand is doing, but it can’t always be inserting itself in the right hand’s immediate, sometimes pressing business.

Circumstances, though, remove us, sooner or later, abruptly or gradually, from the right-handed rhythm of our lives. A huge snowfall, infirmity, increasing age, marriage, divorce, birth, death; the Lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer and study: each opens a channel for the questions of eternity to engage us anew. What maxims guide your conduct? Once stated, are they persuasive? Do they sound like principles, or pretexts? God has placed us among things that are passing away, in order that we might stake our destiny on things that do not.

Thursday, April 1, 2010

How do we prepare for the time of trial, of testing? Are we ever really prepared?

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus seems to be getting himself ready for the events we’ll commemorate this weekend by speaking and thinking of himself in the third person. He refers often to the Son of Man, and the Son of Man’s destiny, but never says that he is, in fact, this Son of Man. Even at the Last Supper, with the crucifixion looming, he says, “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him.”

We value directness, even bluntness. Why didn’t Jesus say, “Things will go with me as it is written of me”? All the third-person references might irritate us, if we think about them enough. Surely Jesus knew he was himself the Son of Man; why didn’t he just say so?

Deep in our hearts, though, we know that some things must be approached from a distance. Times of trial and testing—our own, those of others, the one

undergone by Jesus—are mysterious. Their meaning lies beyond knowing. We can never be sure we're ready. Preparing for these times requires that we set aside our characteristic preference for bluntness, in favor of reverence, humility, even awe.

Thursday, April 8, 2010

A good friend of mine says becoming aware of a problem gets us about 3% of the way to a solution. The other 97% requires commitment more than insight, and latter does not necessarily engender the former. Far from it.

Never has my friend's observation been more, or more tragically, true than with regard to this week's mine disaster in West Virginia. We could not be more aware of the problem. The Sego explosion of 2006 brought the acute and special dangers of mining into high relief. Laws were passed. Inspections found multiple violations. But men are dead, families bereaved, women widowed, children left fatherless because awareness of safety problems did not solve them.

Thinking of the ancient practice of mining precious metals, Job says: "Men put an end to darkness, and search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness. ... (But) whence then comes wisdom? ... It is hid from the eyes of all living." (Job 28:3, 20–21) The Bible teaches us that wisdom, rooted in the fear of God, includes but transcends awareness. Obedience, more than understanding, makes us wise. We understand the hazards of mining pretty well. But God commands us to exercise special vigilance on behalf of those who put themselves in harm's way for our security, comfort and convenience, be they soldiers, miners or Metro workers. We're aware of this commandment, too. That puts us 3% of the way toward obeying it.

Thursday, April 15, 2010

When Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus had fallen gravely ill, he waited two days before going to see him. By this time Lazarus had died. The apostle Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Jesus was about to raise a human being from the dead, to resurrect the body of Lazarus. Thomas wanted to die with Lazarus, so that Jesus would raise

him too, and he would feel his Master's life-bestowing power in his own flesh.

In this exchange, "doubting Thomas" doubted nothing. Jesus had not yet raised anyone from the dead, but Thomas believed he would. At the same time, he wanted to do more than believe, or even see. He wanted to feel, to be seized by, Jesus' power.

We, too, believe, but our faith feels weak and insubstantial against life's trials. We want to feel something that will take us beyond tepid affirmation to gut-level, heart-felt trust. We might not be willing to die to get this experience, but we know why Thomas says he is.

We'll examine this passage about Thomas, in John, chapter 11, this Sunday as we begin an Easter Season Adult Forum series entitled: "Unless I See and Touch: The Faith of Doubting Thomas."

Thursday, April 22, 2010

You could put what I know about finance in a thimble, with space to spare. Still, I've tried to keep up with developments in the world of investing, especially since the 2008 meltdown.

Among the players in this tragicomedy, practitioners of "shorting" stand out. To the best of my understanding, they wager that certain stocks and other financial instruments will lose value, making money if and when they do. This strikes most of us as kind of a nasty, mean-spirited enterprise, replete with temptations to cause or accelerate declines that harm institutions and individuals. No doubt we're right in this assessment.

Still, they seem to serve a purpose, sometimes more effectively than higher-minded people. Despite their charge to engage in objective analysis, even regulators and prudent investors get caught up in vistas of unending growth, and fail to discern that some promises are hollow. "Shorters," by contrast, seek out hollow promises, because that's how they make their living. Their investment patterns tell us things we need to know.

Jesus associated with tax-collectors. He came, he said, not for the righteous but for sinners. He did so out of compassion, but also, maybe, because tax collectors and sinners see human vulnerability and need with a clarity that eludes the "righteous." If Jesus walked among us today, he'd spend time

with all kinds of outcasts and transgressors. "Shorters" might be among them, for the same reasons tax collectors were two millenia ago. Jesus would surely call them away from their morally questionable work, as he called Matthew, also known as Levi, away from the tax collectors' table. Just as surely, though, he would mine their dark wisdom for his own teaching.

Thursday, April 29, 2010

My brother-in-law Joe was a career Trust Officer at Ohio National Bank. You couldn't find a better candidate to do this kind of work. Besides being prudent and detail-oriented, he's a person of unimpeachable loyalty. I never saw Joe on the job, but I'm sure that he represented the interests of those whose trusts he administered to the very best of his ability and with the utmost integrity.

But by the time Joe retired, about 15 years ago, I think he'd begun to feel a bit like a relic. The younger go-getters at Ohio National likely saw his way of doing business as admirable, but quaint. New possibilities for banking beckoned, requiring new attitudes and new ideas.

Lately we've tasted some of the bitter fruit borne by these new attitudes and ideas. Our dynamic economy may need brokers who, like Goldman Sachs, stake out positions on the up and down side of investments—for and against their own clients—simultaneously. But it's looking like we also need to hold on to some relics and their quaint practices. A few Joes in high places might have saved us a lot of anguish. And we'll need the many Joes still out there to show us the way back to broad-based prosperity.