

October 2011

## The Infinity of Now

*There is a divine horizon and vision around our most menial chores*

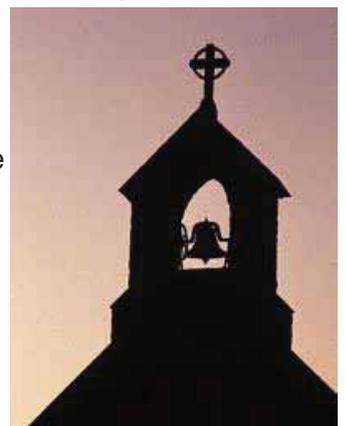
At eighty-four Samuel Beckett was asked about the possibility of his retirement. 'What!' he exclaimed, 'Me? Retire? 'Never – not with the fire in me now!' Not all of us are that lucky. In my travels I meet teachers and priests for whom the original vision of their vocation has all but disappeared. There seems to be a universal kind of ennui, a deep-seated sense of pressure that is driving people to retire as soon as possible. Equally worrying, whether it has to do with increasing bureaucracy, target-setting or appraisals, the very soul seems to have dropped out of the world of work for many.

How do we restore a new energy to our lives by finding a lost balance and poise? Is there a way of building into our days a ground, a centre, and a reminder of what is at the heart of all our endeavours, something that would provide a context and a balance against which to measure and nurture our energies? An extraordinary thing is that it isn't really the amount of work we do that wears us out. Burn-out has more to do with the absence of enthusiasm and dedication. When we work with a passion, everything changes. When our heart is in our work, the work itself becomes a kind of extension of our hearts. Taking pride in what we do transforms the weariness.

*'Empty Monday faces behind wet windscreens  
inching their grim way along the A64 into Leeds.  
The work that awaited was already destroying them.  
And then I saw him, as I see him almost every day.  
On the verge of the soulless carriageway, his face is beautiful  
with attention.  
He is holding the details of his day against an infinite horizon.  
Like a mother to her baby or a cellist to her instrument,  
like a painter to his canvas or a priest to his altar,  
the litter picker, with meticulous dedication, stoops carefully  
to renew the face of the earth'.*

When I go back to Ireland I'm always struck by the Angelus broadcast on television. It is a valiant effort to recover a kind of timing and fine-tuning of the way we are present to whatever we are doing at that moment. At twelve and at six, the bells are tolled. During the pealing, workers from a variety of professions are depicted as lifting their heads and pausing for the length of a few breaths. You sense they have shifted their awareness to place. They have moved, for a moment, inside themselves, drawn to a horizon deep within their own soul. It does not seem to be so much a distraction as a way of living more fully in the present moment, of being more present and devoted to the immediate work of their hands and eyes.

I had a similar awareness when I joined the Benedictine monks at Pluscarden near Aberdeen for six weeks some years ago. The regularity of the relentless bells calling them from working to praying and back again was such a grounding habit. It felt as though both exercises were being connected; that their sources, in the deep centre of each monk's being, were now revealed as equal aspects of the same transcending presence. Thus graced and graceful, this 'physical mindfulness' would dissolve the edges between their work and their meditation, as they repeatedly recovered the rhythm and the seasons of their days and nights, their bodies and souls.



There is a story that I love which illustrates the grace of this awareness:

Two men were building a wall – long and high, one at each end. When asked what he was doing, the first brickie replied that, for a start, he had no interest whatever in his work. A wall is a wall is a wall. He was bored and listless. Brick after brick, day after day, month after month. He longed for Fridays; he hated Mondays. With no interest or involvement, his work was slowly killing him.

'I'm creating a cathedral', murmured the other man. 'This is the South Wall of it. I've seen the plans. It will be such a beautiful building. I can't believe I'm part of it. When I watch the young children playing around here, I can see them and their own children, worshipping in this holy and lovely place for the decades of their lives.'

When talking to parents, teachers and priests, I often tell this story. It transforms the way we see things. It is what the Incarnation has revealed. It is what the sacraments are for. It is why God created the world – so that we would one day tumble to the amazing reality that lies beneath what we too often term as 'ordinary'. That is why the story about the two workmen is called 'The Infinite Horizon'. There is an infinite horizon to every single, routine, menial task we perform. The heavens reverberate to the least of our whispers or acts of love.

The men in the monasteries lay down their tools and obediently and beautifully walk away from their fields, desks and benches, only so as to return to them filled with more reverence and wonder. St Benedict, for instance, kept reminding his cellarer to hold his pots and pans in the kitchen with the same respect and reverence as the chalices and ciboria are held at the altar.



The Angelus rings out over the countryside of Ireland, not to distract the people from their daily labour into a more heavenly reality. It rings out only so that the forgetful eyes of their souls can be reminded of the treasures of grace at their fingertips. As the Prophet said, beyond the boredom and pain, work has a divine dignity around it. It is love made visible. This is what the Eucharist accomplishes for us each Sunday. It parts the veils and reveals to us that the liturgy of the church serves only the liturgy of Life, that all work is holy work; that the sacred place we search for is the very round on which we stand. That every bush is a burning bush.

In his book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, David Whyte suggests that what opened the heart of Moses was not hearing God's voice from the bush saying 'You are standing on holy ground', but the moment he looked down and realised not only that he stood in God's presence, but that he had been standing in that presence all his life. Every step of his life had been on holy ground.

*It is Moses in the desert, fallen to his knees before the lit bush.  
It is the man throwing away his shoes,  
as if to enter heaven and finding himself astonished,  
opened at last, fallen in love with solid ground.*

Whyte goes on to observe that the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest. The antidote, he claims, is wholeheartedness. We often get so tired because of the gap between our true powers and the work we do, between the possibilities we sense and the opportunities we have. In other words we are not really present to what we are doing. 'You are only half here', he writes, 'and half here will kill you after a while.' He offers a delightful metaphor when he comments on a Rilke poem about the awkward way a swan walks until it is transformed once it sinks down into its element, allowing the flowing water to reveal the true harmony it always carried.

