

Ascension Notes



Poignant

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You're insane! That simple sentence began a vicious emotional attack by all the primary authority figures in my life. I had just turned eighteen years old. It was a key moment in my refutation of the world as it exists; that is to say it was ejection by rejection, not choice. Here's how those fateful words came to be uttered.

The summer after high school graduation was my first foray into leaving home. I'd been offered a job as lifeguard at an indoor pool and was allowed to teach swimming lessons on my own time. The sense of liberation was particularly tantalizing as I had detested school. Unfortunately, my situation was within the circle of parental connections and the freedom was not to last. After a couple of months, I was coerced into starting college in the Fall. My parents were determined that their children should share the vision of worldly success they had achieved.

I muddled through the first semester just successfully enough to be enrolled in the brand-new School of International Service at the beginning of the second. That's when it all fell apart. It's peculiar that I don't remember the name of the professor or any of the academic authorities who subsequently tried to browbeat me into submission but I distinctly remember the simple declarative sentence that ended my possibility for a normal life. It was the third sentence in the second paragraph on page seventeen of my first international relations textbook. I can still quote it verbatim, "The ultimate means of diplomatic relations is war."

After chewing on that one for several days I approached the professor. At that time in my life I'd never been seriously injured and so I prefaced my questions with a confession that I was afraid of physical violence. The brief dialogue went more or less as follows:

After my initial remarks clarified an admission to cowardice, I asked, "I understand that we're here being trained to be world leaders."

"That's correct," he responded.

I asked, "Do you wish to go to war?"

"Nobody in their right mind wants to go to war," the professor sententiously replied.

I opened my text to the offending sentence and asked, "Then why are you teaching us to go to war? If we didn't know to do that as a trained reaction, we'd have to find alternative solutions."

The professor who had slightly turned aside snapped his head around and glared at me as he emphatically pronounced, "You're insane!"

I was utterly taken aback. My questions had been simple and logical from my perspective and yet they were met with an instantaneous inflexible rejection. Over the next few days my parents, the professor, the school Dean and a psychiatrist all took turns questioning my sanity. I had never before suffered from such a concentrated psychic assault. It succeeded in sending me into a state of shock, an internalized confusion lasting for weeks during which fear fought with despair for supremacy.

At last, I could stand it no longer and so one weekend when my parents were away at the beach house, I left home with just the clothes on my back and a few dollars in my pocket. There was no planning as I was still in a stupor but I was impelled to escape even if I didn't know quite from what. In a confused daze I stumbled around Washington DC and ended up gravitating to the Greyhound bus station, a locality which seemed to attract lost souls.

I was near starving when I was sort of adopted by the leader of an informal tribe of a hundred or so homeless outcasts who scrounged a bare subsistence in any way possible and tried to blot out the ugliness of their reality with alcohol or drugs. My new acquaintance was fascinated that some kid, who only months before had attended embassy parties, was suddenly on the street without any skills required for survival. It was because of his support that I was accepted by this rag-tag group who began teaching me the lessons necessary for existence at the bottom of society. The curriculum included eating leftovers from garbage cans, small time gambling and hustling, stealing when necessary and trying to alleviate the pain of living with soporifics.

The man who made this all possible was both intelligent and sensitive and yet the circumstances of his life had been harsh and unrelenting so he became an alcoholic. His aspiration had always been to become an opera singer but poverty, lack of education, race and other factors precluded the realization of that dream. I didn't understand the intensity of his desire or the strength of his spirit until one unforgettable night.

The bedraggled crew of derelicts by whom I had been accepted had a friend who was a janitor at the bus station. In the early morning from about 1:00 to 6:00 when no one was around he would open up a back dining area and allow us to sit in the chairs and pass out, slumped over the tables, where at least there was some warmth. It was there, many weeks after walking away from home, that the emotional stasis in which I had been enmeshed was pierced by music.

For the first and only time I heard my new friend's voice raised in song. The tunes were all mournful and it made my heart ache to hear them. They evoked the loss of dreams that could never be. In minutes I found myself with tears streaming from my eyes as my frozen emotions were thawed by the juxtaposition of beauty and pain. I kept my head down, cradled in my arms on the table, because I was afraid to show such vulnerability. And yet the music was so compelling that I had to see the singer. As I raised my dirty, tear-streaked face to

look I saw a sight I'll never forget. Every man who hadn't passed out was blearily looking at my friend with tears streaming down their faces. The poignant moment of that shared agony engendered in me a life-long empathetic bond to those who are destitute.