



CENTER FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES

TO: WBC AND MICAH PARTICIPANTS
FROM: MONSIGNOR RICHARD M. LIDDY
SUBJECT: *TWO LENTEN MEDITATIONS*
DATE: FEBRUARY, 2016

- Welcome and Self-Introductions
- Woodstock Business Conference Mission Statement
 - The Mission of the Woodstock Business Conference is to establish and lead a national and international network of business executives to explore their respective religious traditions in order to assist the individual executives:
 - To integrate faith, family and professional life,
 - To develop a corporate culture that is reflective of their religious faith and values and
 - To exercise a beneficial influence upon society at large
 - The Conference, grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, welcomes believers who are open to and respectful of one another's religious tradition. It is committed to the conviction that ethics and values grow out of one's religious heritage.
- **Scripture Reading: Sirach 14: 11-20 Man's Free Will**
- **Say not: "It was God's doing that I fell away"; for what he hates he does not do. Say not: "It was he who sent me astray"; for he has no need of the wicked man. Abominable wickedness the LORD hates, he does not let it befall those who fear him. When God, in the beginning, created man, he made him the subject to his own free choice. If you choose you can keep the commandments; it is the loyalty to do his will. There are set before you fire and water; to whichever he chooses shall be given to him. Immense is the wisdom of the LORD; he is the mighty power, and all-seeing. The eyes of God**

see all he has made; he understands man's every deed. No man does he command to sin, to none does he give his strength for lies.

REFLECTION: Spend 5 minutes in quiet reflection and if possible share your insights with others.

TOPIC: TWO LENTEN MEDITATIONS

1st Reading: *The New York Times*: **Be Happy: Think About Your Death** By: Arthur C. Brooks, Jan. 9, 2016



St Francis- Francisco Zurbarán

Milwaukee Art Museum

WANT a better 2016? Try thinking more about your impending demise. Years ago on a visit to Thailand, I was surprised to learn that Buddhist monks often contemplate the photos of corpses in various stages of decay. The Buddha himself recommended corpse meditation. “This body, too,” students were taught to say about their own bodies, “such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.”

Paradoxically, this meditation on death is intended as a key to better living. It makes disciples aware of the transitory nature of their own physical lives and stimulates a realignment between momentary desires and existential goals. In other words, it makes one ask, “Am I making the right use of my scarce and precious life?”

In fact, most people suffer grave misalignment. In a 2004 article in the journal *Science*, a team of scholars, including the Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, surveyed a group of women to compare how much satisfaction they derived from their daily activities. Among voluntary activities, we might expect that choices would roughly align with satisfaction. Not so. The women reported deriving more satisfaction from prayer, worship and meditation than from watching television. Yet the average respondent spent more than five times as long watching TV as engaging in spiritual activities.

If anything, this study understates the misalignment problem. The American Time Use Survey from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that, in 2014, the average American adult spent four times longer watching television than “socializing and communicating,” and 20 times longer on TV than on “religious and spiritual activities.” The survey did not ask about hours surfing the web, but we can imagine a similar disparity.

This misalignment leads to ennui and regret. I’m reminded of a friend who was hopelessly addicted to British crossword puzzles (the ones with clues that seem inscrutable to Americans, such as, “The portly gentleman ate his cat, backwards”). A harmless pastime, right? My friend didn’t think so — he was so racked with guilt after wasting hours that he consulted a psychotherapist about how to quit. (The advice: Schedule a reasonable amount of time for crosswords and stop feeling guilty.)

While few people share my friend’s interest, many share his anxiety. Millions have resolved to waste less time in 2016 and have already failed. I imagine some readers of this article are filled with self-loathing because they just wasted 10 minutes on a listicle titled “Celebrities With Terrible Skin.”

Some might say that this reveals our true preferences for TV and clickbait over loved ones and God. But I believe it is an error in decision making. Our days tend to be an exercise in distraction. We think about the past and future more than the present; we are mentally in one place and physically in another. Without consciousness, we mindlessly blow the present moment on low-value activities.

The secret is not simply a resolution to stop wasting time, however. It is to find a systematic way to raise the scarcity of time to our consciousness.

Even if contemplating a corpse is a bit too much, you can still practice some of the Buddha’s wisdom resolving to live as if 2016 were your last year. Then remorselessly root out activities, small and large, that don’t pass the “last-year test.”

There are many creative ways to practice this test. For example, if you plan a summer vacation, consider what would you do for a week or two if this were your last opportunity. With whom

would you reconnect and spend some time? Would you settle your soul on a silent retreat, or instead spend the time drunk in Cancún, Mexico?

If this year were your last, would you spend the next hour mindlessly checking your social media, or would you read something that uplifts you instead? Would you compose a snarky comment on this article, or use the time to call a friend to see how she is doing? Hey, I'm not judging here.

Some might think that the last-year test is impractical. As an acquaintance of mine joked, "If I had one year to live, I'd run up my credit cards." In truth, he probably wouldn't. In a new paper in the science journal PLOS One, two psychologists looked at the present value of money when people contemplated death. One might assume that when reminded of death, people would greatly value current spending over future spending. But that's not how it turned out. Considering death actually made respondents *less* likely to want to blow money now than other scenarios did.

Will cultivating awareness of the scarcity of your time make you grim and serious? Not at all. In fact, there is some evidence that contemplating death makes you funnier. Two scholars in 2013 published an academic paper detailing research in which they subliminally primed people to think about either death or pain, and then asked them to caption cartoons. Outside raters found the death-primed participants' captions to be funnier.

There's still time to rethink your resolutions. Forget losing weight and saving money. Those are New Year's resolutions for amateurs. This year, improve your alignment, and maybe get funnier in the process: Be fully alive now by meditating on your demise. Happy 2016!

2nd Reading: *The Wall Street Journal*: **Virtue as Its Own Reward: Masterpiece 'Discourse of Epictetus' (c. A.D. 108)** By: Joseph Epstein, Jan. 8, 2016

Chief among the schools of ancient philosophy were the Academics led by Plato, the Peripatetics by Aristotle, the Epicureans by Epicurus, and the Stoics founded by Zeno of Citium. Only Stoicism, now nearly entirely eclipsed, gained a strong footing in the Roman Empire, where it was embraced by Marcus Aurelius, best of all emperors, who, in his *Meditations*, produced one of the leading Stoic texts. The major Stoic teachers were Chrysippus, Diogenes of Babylon and, above all, Epictetus (A.D. 55-135). Cicero and Seneca claimed to be Stoics, but the wavering temperament of the first and the expensive tastes of the second did not permit them to live the philosophy in the quotidian matter Stoicism requires.

Epictetus, the slave of a freedom of Nero named Epaphroditus, who eventually freed him, was Phrygian (from Western Anatolia) by birth and lame in one leg. When in A.D. 89 the Emperor Domitian banished all philosophers from Rome, Epictetus took up residence in what is now Albania. Like Socrates, whom he much admired, Epictetus committed none of his teachings to writing. He had the good fortune to have among his pupils Arrian, the chronicler of the campaigns of the "Encheiridion," or "Handbook," but which now carries the overarching title of "Discourses of Epictetus."

In what has come down to us, Epictetus largely ignores the scientific and metaphysical teachings of the Academics and Peripatetics. He concentrates instead on ethics and the ideal of the virtuous life. Virtue, in Epictetus' philosophy, brings tranquility, leading on to happiness. Unlike the Epicureans, who taught that tranquility resided exclusively outside the life of action, the Stoics were not disdainful of the active life, and in Marcus Aurelius the theme of service not only to individuals but to the wider community is part of the human contract. Epictetus' philosophy is grounded in common sense. How best to meet the requirements of life, or how to live one's life "comfortable to nature," is his principal lesson.

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The first step on the way to doing this, according to Epictetus, is the scrupulous observation of appearances to form a right judgment of them. "Either things appear as they are," he notes, "or they are not, and do not even appear to be; or they are not, and yet to appear to be." Misapprehension of appearances sets one on the track of anguish, frustrated desire, sadness, ruin. This advice of Epictetus is a precursor to Henry James's advice to be a person on whom nothing is lost.

"No man is free unless he is master of himself," claims Epictetus, and self-mastery comes through will. We must will what is right for us, and will the avoidance of what is not. Will is strengthened through accurate observation of appearances. Will operates only on those things within our power. "In our power are opinion, movement toward a thing, desire, aversion...; an in a word, whatever are our own acts, not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices..., and in a word, whatever are not our own acts." This distinction anticipates Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer, later adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous: "O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, / The courage to change what can be changed, / and the wisdom to know the one from the other."

Desire, for Epictetus, must be carefully monitored. One must not "require a fig in winter." Freedom is gained, he holds, "not by the full possession of the things which are desired, but by removing the desire." Do not "desire many things, and you will have what you want." (This advice, if followed, would close down the consumer society.) All that you truly have need of is "firmness, of a mind which is conformable to nature, of being free from perturbation."

"From your own thoughts," Epictetus states, "cast away sadness, fear, desire, envy, malevolence, avarice, effeminacy, intemperance." Among the things we must not desire is long life. Behind this desire is the fear of death, which is useless since all things in life are transient. Like Montaigne, Epictetus invokes us never to allow death to be long out of mind. Montaigne hoped

that death would take him while he was cultivating the cabbages in his garden. “May death take me,” Epictetus says, “while I am thinking of these things, while I am thus writing and reading.” We know that Montaigne’s death was a painful one, of quinsy, which rendered him speechless at the end. How Epictetus died is not known.

Virtue is truly its only reward for Epictetus, for, though he frequently cites God and his greater design of the world, no mention in his work is made of an afterlife. Nor is there any talk of the fate of the soul once departed, if depart it does, from the body. What one gains from the philosophy of Epictetus is awareness, a plan for righteous conduct, and self-mastery of the kind available only to those rare philosophers for whom word and deed are indivisible.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Be Attentive: Both articles are secular and philosophical pieces that wrestle with the opening theme of Lent, Memento Mori, and the admonition on Ash Wednesday “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return!” and the importance of virtue for the good life. Francisco Zurbaran’s St. Francis offers us an artistic depiction of the contemplation of death. As you read the Arthur Brooks piece, as you observe the Zurbaran of St. Francis, and as you begin Lent this call to contemplate death, how does it affect you? What does it do to your contemplation?

Be Intelligent: Theologians talk about “the encounter with finitude” having spent a portion of my life working in youth ministry and running youth ski trips, I learned that adolescents do not believe that they will die. As you reflect on your life was there a moment or experience when you had the encounter with finitude when you realized your mortality? Describe the time and its impact on you.

Be Reasonable: How did you read the article from the Wall Street Journal on Virtue? Did it evoke memories of a philosophy, business ethics or classics course? How did the connection with the Serenity Prayer play? Finally the closing line: “What one gains from the philosophy of Epictetus is awareness, a plan for righteous conduct, and self-mastery of the kind available only to those rare philosophers for whom word and deed are indivisible.” Are you such a philosopher? Feelings and thoughts?

Be Responsible: As we recall the life of Ignatius and his encounter with finitude called a cannon ball. This encounter changed his life, it gave him time to contemplate, and it heightened his awareness and his awareness of the desires in others. It set him on a path of self-mastery and righteous conduct. How will this conversation today impact your season of Lent? How will it impact your work life and your family and community life? As you move into Lent consider your understanding and use of time. Keep the experience of Lent connected to work and family!

Closing Prayer: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without end. Amen.

John J. Fontana

Woodstock Business Conference

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