

Ghost Story

We think that first we're breathing, pulsating, living beings and that only later may we become ghosts. But really a good argument could be made that we start out as ghosts and only later do we become truly living beings. If at my present age, with my already ghostly hair, I were to confront the person I was at twenty one, I might feel more "alive" than he. Despite that fellow's youth, I would be looking at a "ghost" of my current self, because the intervening years have taught me so much more than I knew back then. In the late 1940's my mind was filled with the biases of my environment. I mean, it never occurred to me as a student in Washington D.C. why African-Americans always sat in the back of the bus. And when that did dawn on me, I had no real idea of how that must have felt.

Back then, taken up as I was with myself, with that blank canvas upon which I was to paint the masterpiece of "my" future, I had little peripheral vision. I could be blissfully blind to the problems my mother was having in another city with my father. I could barely sense the grief my faraway sister was feeling over the stillborn arrival of her first child and two subsequent miscarriages. Because I was simply not aware of them, I had no interest in the plight of people in what is called the Third World nor any qualms of conscience whenever I followed a birdbath-sized Manhattan with a nice cut of Prime Rib. Nor did I know what it really meant to love somebody in other than a Hollywood way.

I don't mean to say that to be young is to be necessarily immature. There's plenty of evidence of people in their twenties who are way ahead of their generation and of their elders, for example those geniuses like Fitzgerald and Joyce who write classic novels before they're thirty or an Emily Dickinson from whom I still have a lot to learn. But in my case, maturing took much longer. It only began to happen when I became responsible for the lives and happiness of others and had to seek jobs and father children and learn my limitations and care about the hurt I unconsciously caused. It only began to happen after I knew pain; after my ego began to be laid to rest – requiring still a long funeral.

The Easter Gospels tell of how, when the disciples saw the Risen Jesus, they thought "they were seeing a ghost." But Jesus said to them (in effect): "How can I be a ghost? A ghost is numb, immune to pain. But look at me: look at my hands and feet. See! I have wounds, I have known anguish; I know what it means to care. And THEREFORE I am real! - more alive and sensitive to reality and therefore more human than you can imagine! It's you, hiding here in this upper room, insulating yourself from grief, hoarding all your love self protectively - it's you who are ghosts of the selves you could be."

According to the Gospels we human beings are destined to lead a phantom existence until such time as we heed Jesus's simple maxim: "Take up your cross daily and follow me." Only then will we be able to exit (with him) the tomb we've been in. Only then, looking with wonder at our own stigmata, will we be able to say: "Gee! I'm bleeding! I'm caring! I must be alive!"

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