

A homily by Mark Twain, applicable for all time – even today

Tom Sawyer, like many a boy, not having any adult responsibilities, lived in a fantasy world. *I ain't doing my duty by that boy*, said his Aunt Polly. *He's full of the Old Scratch. He'll play hooky this afternoon and he hates work more than he hates anything else.* What Tom preferred to do was take off for the woods or row out to an island in the river to create a world of his own. [I remember doing things like that at around age 10, except that we found excitement after dark in prowling through old, empty, neighborhood breweries closed since Prohibition.]

In his fantastic world Tom could become so many exciting things: a steamboat captain, a pirate, an Indian on the warpath. He could be Robin Hood, a lovable outlaw. Of course, all the dangers were custom-made to insure he experienced no pain. No smidgin of real fear or heroism was required.

That is, until one night Tom pushed the envelope too far. He and Huck Finn had decided to test the theory that you could cure a wart by going to a cemetery after midnight and throwing a dead cat at the devil when he came to carry off the soul of a recently buried sinner. But once there, they witnessed an argument among actual grave robbers during which one (Muff Potter) was knocked unconscious and another slain by a mean third party named Joe.

In other words, a heavy dose of reality intruded upon Tom's fantasy world. Did Tom then measure up to this sudden challenge? Not by a long sight. He and Huck quickly hightailed it back to the now cherished safety of that ordinary world they both despised and kept a low profile for weeks!

It was only after Tom learned that Joe had blamed Muff Potter for the murder and that Muff was to be tried and probably hung, that something began to grow within Tom's soul. Call it shame; call it compassion; call it courage or a blend of all three. In other words the seedling of *true* heroism had begun to emerge at long last from within the mere chaff of his fantasy world.

Well, you know what happened. Tom overcame his fear of Joe. He showed up as the surprise witness at Muff's trial and by telling the truth saved Muff's life. He did something heroic, self-sacrificial, something really imaginative instead of merely imaginary. He performed a virtuous deed. He became a legend after all: capable of nurturing the courage of other boys (and even grown men?) for ages to come.

Where do we stand at such a crossroads? Are we ready to emancipate our imaginations from such sterile use and apply it to the wants, the pain, the injustices of the real world around us earnestly? John the Baptist tells us Christ has come among us to awaken our imaginations to ethical concerns, to enjoy fantasy yet love the truth – and testify to it when the powers-that-be would encourage us to smoke dope.

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