

The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice . . . Wallace Stevens

While guiding my wife from the doctor's office to our car last week, I encountered Nancy, one of our parishioners. She brightly said hello and told me she had just read an essay I had written long ago – dwelling on Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*. It made her want to get the novel. What struck me by this encounter was: I had been struggling with how to comment on today's Gospel and here was the answer: Nancy! This unanticipated encounter with Nancy and her reference to an old essay resolved my frustration. I mean, isn't that the way the Source of our existence, the Creator of Genesis intervenes in our lives – by roundabout, subtle, chance moments that broaden and deepen our consciousness? I had not thought of Dreiser or that novel to unlock my stymied imagination. Now I did.

Carrie's story begins with her moving to Chicago at the beginning of the last century. She had no clear idea of what she wanted except to escape the poverty and boredom of her rural life. She wanted money, of course. She had no qualms about that. As Dreiser puts it, money was to her simply *something everybody else has and I must get*. She wanted nice things to wear. *Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; . . . When she came in earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear*. When a gentleman friend pointed out the stylish women who carried themselves with sophistication and grace, *instinctively she felt a desire to imitate*. She was impressed by the mansions along North Shore Drive, . . . *perfectly certain that here was happiness*.

Now we might pause here to remind Carrie that the objects of her desires are petty things; lecture her upon the lasting value of higher, spiritual things. But we'd be missing Dreiser's point. It's not so much *what* Carrie desires but *the fact that she had desires*, desire being synonymous with life. The novel becomes an account of Carrie's ascent from being a factory girl to making contacts that enhanced her material well being, to her becoming a celebrated actress. She had literally reached the top: a penthouse in New York. Yet still her *desires* remained unfulfilled. There was something else out there she had to have; it seemed her life was ever meant to be *the pursuit of that radiance . . . which tints the distant hilltops of the world*.

Of course, some secular analyst might attribute Carrie's persistence to her healthy ambition, a rugged individualism. But that's not how desire originates. It's not simply "me" that drives my life. We are drawn into life by something or someone who brackets our existence – pushing us while also drawing us out – reviving expectations so much that after a while we have become an accumulation of wake-up calls – even though we may be still asleep.

Which brings me to the woman in our Gospel whose life – metaphorically – is draining away but still has the desire, the energy to reach beyond the madding crowd to touch if only the hem of Christ's garment – to retrieve that response: *Who touched me!* But *that's* my point. Is it *we*, is it *our* desire that reaches out to grasp (as Wallace Stevens says) *what will suffice* – or is somebody reaching out to us in often subtle ways – raising me out of my ego that thinks it is independently in charge!

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