

Let It Flow
(an old essay revised)

The young Irishman, Stephen Dedalus, (in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*) felt called to be an artist - a writer who would deal with the deeper issues of life and somehow improve the world. As he put it, his ambition was *to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race*. But back in the Dublin of 1904 he could find little support. His mother just wanted him to be a low profile, pious young man. His father resented the boy's talents. Only his companion, Buck Mulligan, a medical intern, understood him. But being a cynic, Mulligan simply ridiculed Stephen: why should anyone want to ponder and articulate the meaning of life when life had no meaning at all.

And everywhere Stephen looked he saw a world caught up in the hot air of politics, materialism, consumerism, blind nationalism - or hooked on one kind of narcotic or another, be it money or "routine" religion or sports or a mindless job. He felt overwhelmed to the point where he lost hope. Bitterness, anger usurped the place of inspiration in his heart until one night he smashed a chandelier (symbolic of society) and staggered intoxicated into the Dublin night to end up in a gutter.

Then along came Leopold Bloom, a middle-aged Irish Jew, who had been following Stephen out of concern. Bloom was a gentle, caring figure, curious about everything as though everything and every experience in life were an epiphany of some kind. He brushes the dirt off Stephen and takes him home. He nourishes him (eucharistically) with cocoa (called *theobroma* or god-food by botanists). Slowly, under the influence of this ordinary, compassionate man, Stephen's confidence revives. Soberly he exits Bloom's house at dawn to pursue his calling, to awaken the still dormant world around him with his inspired writing.

Joyce uses several images to convey the effect Bloom had on Stephen. One is especially amusing but powerful. Just before making the cocoa Bloom goes to the sink to turn on the faucet and let the water flow. *Did it flow?* asks the text. *Yes.* replies the text: *From Roundwood Reservoir in County Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage by way of Rathdown, Glen of the Downs and Callowhill to the 26 acre reservoir at Stillorgan, a distance of 22 statute miles, and thence, through a system of relieving tanks" until it issued from the tap!*

What a wonderful way of describing what Bloom did for Stephen! His simple charity helped release that vast reservoir of love and vision that was dammed up in Stephen (even as it is in each of us). And isn't that what Christ does for us? Didn't he say, *If anyone thirsts, let him come to me: out of his heart shall flow living water?* Isn't that what's symbolized in that great vision of the prophet Ezekiel who saw an ever deepening river flowing out of the temple of Jerusalem right into the Dead Sea to turn its salty waters sweet? And doesn't St. Paul say we ourselves are temples of the Holy Spirit, reservoirs of sweet water, of inspired words and deeds that can sweeten our whole environment - if we but turn the tap and let it flow?

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