

Like St. Paul: henceforth I die daily

To those of you who did not know our parishioner Jean Simons it would be difficult for me to describe her – for she was an absolute saint. A former nun, later married, she taught philosophy at Santa Rosa Junior College for many years. I think she actually had a halo; she was so close to canonization even prior to her death – although too modest to be noticed from the heights of the Roman Curia. I had coffee with her one day shortly after my twenty three year old son Philip died and she gave me a poem written by Rainer Maria Rilke titled *Death Experienced*. It literally opened up a world – the real world that we are too busy to recognize, being “alive” as we are in so hectic a way. Here it is:

The world is full of roles we act, / But when you went, a streak of reality / broke in upon this stage through that fissure / where you left: green of real green, / real sunshine, real forest. // We go on acting. Fearful and reciting / things difficult to learn and now and then / raising gestures; but your existence, / withdrawn from us and taken from our play, // Can sometimes come over us, like a knowledge / of that reality settling in, / so that for a while we act life / transported, not thinking of applause.

When I first read it I could only think of Philip transferred to that world of *green of real green / real sunshine, real forest* beyond the stage upon which we live our everyday lives. The poem’s only reference to this everyday world was to a kind of movie set, a theatrical production within whose script we act our various roles, recite prescribed lines, prescribed prayers, engage in dialogues that grow tempestuous . . . and then Philip dies and all the action on this stage comes to a pause. One realizes it is almost puppetry; that it is *we* who have been left *behind* – while it is Philip who has somehow *arrived!*

But as time has gone by since Jean presented me with that poem applied to Phil, I have begun to read it differently. I have become convinced that we need not wait for death to see our “theater” and its theatrics dissolve. I have come to hope, to trust that the carpentry, the partitions (as St. Paul somewhere suggests) will fall one after another as the inexhaustible Grace that wells up from within and beyond all things un-conceals, reveals, unveils that actual *green of real green / real sunshine, real forest*. I begin to renew my trust that within such a graceful and gracious world – even now - we might cease to be always seeking “applause” and live our lives thinking of and thanking for what Cleopas and his friend once experienced in a roadside tavern by Emmaus.

It also makes for a new reading of those sayings of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel: *For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will save it (Matt. 10:39)* or *Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life . . . will find it (Matt. 16:25)* – as if to say if you cling to an ever unauthentic way of life – to playing a “part”, wearing a mask – you will never quite *live* the life that has been given you – making the *most* of your time and your world.

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