

From Desire to Necessity

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I recently re-watched one of the most eye-opening programs on the 20th century, *The Century of the Self* (BBC 2002). It looks at the development of advertising, particularly the theories and work of Edward Bernays. You've seen his work, but you didn't know it. He was one of the pioneers of modern advertising as well as modern government propaganda. Particularly in the 1920's, he played a key role in moving America from a need-based economy to desire-based consumerism. One result was a flourishing and growing wealth across the land (except for the collapse in the Great Depression). America moved past the Depression through the efforts of the war economy of the 40's. However, our desires were unleashed again in the post-war world and have never looked back. It was a simple formula: create desire and then fulfill it. The result is "happy people."

Of course, happy people have a difficult time when their desires are thwarted. It's a hard habit to break. I recall my childhood visits to my mother's family home. Her parents were farmers. They had 12 children, my mother being the 5th in line. All of them grew up doing work on the farm, my mother was among those who picked cotton in the field. Her stories remind me of scenes from *Places in the Heart*. In the Great Depression, flour sacks were intentionally printed with pleasant floral designs, making them excellent material for home-made dresses. Listening to my mother describing flour-sack dresses sounded exotic (as did a Christmas that consisted of a single orange). My grandparents' home was a haven of necessities. I really cannot recall anything superfluous.

The house had five rooms and no indoor plumbing until the mid-60's. It was heated with a single coal-burning stove in the front room. It was peopled, during my visits, with a

crowd of happy people (my generation, being the offspring of 12 children, became a large, rowdy crowd of boys and girls). Sunday afternoons seemed to be a time when the larger part of the family would descend on the homestead, food in hand and conversations at the ready. My grandfather sat largely silent, chewing his tobacco, and occasionally entertaining the children with wild stories from his imagination (most involving my grandmother).

The farm was just over 100 acres, with a creek along the back that provided hours of entertainment. At some point after dinner, the men all seemed to gather on the porch to smoke and talk, the women remained inside where laughter constantly interrupted their conversations. Strangely, these people-of-necessity were happy.

Desires, in our modern parlance, were known by the ancients as the “passions.” Interestingly, the word for “passion” comes from a root that means to “suffer.” These universal experiences of longing, imagination, craving, and the like, were seen as alien to our well-being and afflictions to be moderated and even silenced. In Orthodox tradition, there is a goal, expressed in Greek as “apatheia” (“passionlessness”). Yes, that’s our word “apathy.” It does not mean “not caring,” but being free from the bondage of the ever-nagging sound of desires hounding our lives.

Our consumerist culture is, as is well described in the video referenced above, *intentionally* designed to nurture the passions. Indeed, it is structured in such a way that the failure of the passions would result in financial ruin. We live in a world that *cannot exist unless we are all governed by our passions*. To be an Orthodox Christian inevitably sets you on a collision course with the culture. Everything within our daily lives, indeed, a major portion of our opinions and thoughts are all the result of the reign of our passions. This has become such a dominant force in our lives that it is accurate to say that we imagine our passions to actually constitute our identity. That is a lie.

The popular meme runs, “Follow your passion!” as if we were ever doing anything else. In many cases, this is a mantra that will do little more than offer justification for immoral choices. The successful actress who confessed (with pride) that she had an abortion in order to obtain a particular part in a production has “followed her passion.” Our passions justify nothing. We become like those whose sad excuse for their actions was, “I was just following orders.”

True necessity is not passion, nor is it driven by the passions. We *need* to eat. We *need* to be clothed. We *need* shelter. We *need* family and friendship. We *need* work. We *need* meaning. We *need* love. We *need* beauty and transcendence. None of these things are passions, though the passions can easily distort them. The monastic life is, in many ways, a life reduced to necessity. It seems that living within the range of necessity makes it possible to discover the “one thing needful.” It deeply assists, as well, in discovering the truth of our identity. The soul is not the product of passions, but the image of God. To see the soul clearly, without distortion, is to see the face of God, or, at least, its reflection.

This understanding undergirds all of the Church’s disciplines. We fast, we pray, we give alms, we subdue the “flesh” (meaning the passions) that we might know God. We do not know God simply by being hungry, or tired from prayers, or poor, but we will not know God if we constantly obey our passions and shape our lives by their unnecessary demands. This does not bode well for the faith in our modern context.

Jesus said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

And those who heard it said, “Who then can be saved?”

But He said, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” (Lk 18:24-27)

This, strangely, is good news. What feels like necessity in our lives might very well be little more than a passion. And, if it is a passion, we can be free of it. If God sets us free from such things – then we will be free, indeed.

Start slow. Be generous. Share your stuff. Take joy in the satisfaction of a true need and make it possible for others to do the same. Christ said, “God knows that you have need of these things.” (Matt. 6:32) There is a happiness born from the simplicity of our needs. The happiness demanded by the passions is always fleeting, never satisfied. Those who have created the culture of passionate desire need and intend for the objects of desire to always be just beyond our reach. They have erected a level of hell and call it paradise.

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