Conversation . . . Evil . . . Emerson . . . Jesus . . . Conversation

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Last night I went out to dinner with three intelligent, highly educated people. We had the usual sort of conversation or conversations—a few bits about our current lives and our pasts, relatives; a few bits based on things, news and ideas that we'd read or heard about via the Internet; a few bits about celebrities. If there is a value in such conversations, and I am not always sure that there is, it connects to what the German sociologist Georg Simmel (or a translator) referred to with the word "sociability." The relaxation and sense of companionship comes from talking about not quite anything. We might say that a feeling of we, of belonging and comfort, comes from no "I" being too prominent or exposed.

One of the diners lived closed enough to my Manhattan apartment building so we could share a "cab" or, rather, a car that she texted for with her cellphone, paid for in advance with her credit card. She insisted this would be cheaper than a traditional taxi. The driver was a middle-aged African-American man who, from what I could see of him, of a side of his face, was lean and neat and ordinary; unremarkable. He dropped her off first, and then he and I had another five minutes or so to get to where I live. It was my first time using such a service, and I asked him if he was able to earn a living in this way, was it better than driving a cab?

His answer, in sum, was "not really." Neither option was good. And this led to him saying that life was horrible and that human beings were horrible.

I note that there is something about me, about the way I speak and respond to strangers, that allows them to feel free to talk to me like this—frankly and not necessarily positively. As I am currently reading a 1939 University of Wisconsin master's thesis about Emerson and Quakerism, I can say that, among other things, somewhat like Emerson and the Quakers, I believe that there can be plenty of insight within any human being, however high or low his station in life and however fancy or limited his or her formal education may have been. In fact, my sense is that "education"—in the sense both of schooling and of training in manners and conventions—hems people in, makes it harder for them to accept—

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to breathe, let's call it—what they know inside. A line from the thesis: George Fox, a founder of the Religious Society of Friends (the institution of Quakerism), held that the fundamental error of all religions was the substitution of form for spirit.

I confess that, because the driver was an African-American, I wondered if his view of life as horrible did not stem from the fact that he, like so many—way too many—African American males, had spent some of his youth in prison. A friend has said that "life is horrible" is the sort of thing that people in her poor neighborhood throw out to one another on the street, bantering, half serious or while wishing they were just joking. I can also imagine that during a time when this man was unemployed, he had been thrown out by a former lover or companion. But these are speculations, and there was neither banter nor bitterness, nor anger or grief in his voice. He was just stating conclusions: life was horrible; human beings were horrible.

That I did not ask him about his personal life, this is hardly surprising, but in retrospect I have wondered that I did not respond with an expression of sympathy such as "I'm sorry you feel that way." Interestingly, such a comment might have, unfortunately, brought the conversation to a halt. The driver might have appreciated my sympathy and yet felt belittled or pushed away by it. (And underneath comments such as "I'm sorry you feel that way" is there some fear, a desire to distance ourselves from some of our own feelings about life, to make the other hold all of these feelings for the both of us?) My sense is, too, that by not using a standard phrase or having a standard reaction, by instead continuing to speak in my own particular however intellectual way, I was as present in the conversation as I could be, and this helped make room for the driver's presence as well.

In any case, as the conversation had begun with a question about earning a living, I next proposed that perhaps this sense of horribleness could be connected to the current high level of economic inequality. He responded that our current economic circumstances had not brought out the best in people. The word "solidarity" came to my mind. Solidarity was missing, he seemed to be saying. Emerson, in one of his journal entries, wrote in praise of "quiet, conversational analysis" of "felt difficulties, discords."

Somehow, effortlessly, on 18th Street between Sixth Avenue and Broadway, we got onto God and good and evil. How could a good God have made such a world, such people? In another journal entry, on March 5, 1838, Emerson wrote: "God is our name for the last generalization to which we can arrive." From that perspective, I would propose that God must comprehend both good and evil and something rather larger than such dichotomizing. A young friend has been going to hear a young Catholic priest, and she had e-mailed me a link to a YouTube clip of one of his sermons. In the wake of the 13 November Paris attacks, he had sought to stress that God was love, God was opposed to violence. But, I responded, if God is indeed about everything, wouldn't God be about violence (as well as peace)?

A few more blocks, and the driver and I had arrived at the destination. But, with his voice, his engagement, he kept me in the car until he had come to his conclusion. He was in no way preaching, nor did his tone suggest that he had spent long hours and years wrestling with the Bible and with his views of life. Perhaps he had, but his tone was that of a simple observation. That if God had made Man in His image, then God Himself could not be good. But Jesus *had* been a good person. And so Jesus could not have been a son of God.

As I was ready to get on with my particular life, or to get inside my particular apartment, I did not tarry to find out whether this man appreciated the contradictions or temptations in his reasoning. If Jesus was a man, then, according to the driver's definition, Jesus, too, could not have been good. And if God is all powerful, Jesus *must* be his son, no? Or do we in fact tend to imagine ourselves living in a Manichean universe in which good and evil are separate, opposing forces locked in eternal battle? (Yes, I think that is what many Americans believe, even if they never articulate their thinking in this way.)

Now, the day after, I am pleased to recall Tertullian's wonderful series of paradoxes involving Jesus. For example, "et mortuus est Dei Filius, prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est. " And the Son of God died: it is wholly credible, because it is unsound. I have also had an opportunity to Google the "God is our name" line from Emerson's *Journals*, and I have found that it followed by this:

> [N]ever compare your generalization with your neighbor's. Speak now, and let him hear you and go his way. Tomorrow, or next year, let him speak, and answer thou not. So shall you both speak truth and be of one mind; but insist on comparing your two thoughts; . . . and instantly you are struck with blindness . . .

This reminds me of how Quaker meetings are conducted. If a person rises and speaks, her or his words are not, subsequently, ever, to be answered. They just have been and find some place or places, however small or large, in the room. This can feel stark, even chilling. And, in closing, I would note that this does not quite describe the driver and my brief conversation, which was indeed a conversation, in which the words, tones and circumstances of the conversants indeed created the space in which certain things could be said and heard (and many other things could not).

The driver's paradox about God and Jesus will remain in my mind—perhaps for the rest of my life and likely long after I recall any words from the evening's dinner party, or even the fact that there had been such a thing. But less than the words and ideas, what I appreciated with the driver was the experience of the conversation. The "recipe"—what made the conversation so easy to appreciate—was not complicated. It involved openness, speaking with open (or somewhat open) hearts and minds. (Did this "recipe"—a question for another time, another piece—did it also include differences in social class? Dining with people of our own station, are we—or am I?—less open, both less receptive and less generous?)

In any case, it was a wonderful five minutes. Heaven sent, I am tempted (a little devilishly) to write.

Credits & Links

The thesis is ***The Quaker Influence on Emerson***, by Charles Daniel Gelatt. Mitchell Santine Gould is to be thanked for transcribing the text.

See **the *Agni* blog** for a **brief discussion of the style of the whistling emperors passage** from Emerson's essay **Montaigne; or, the Skeptic**.

Long time Montaigbakhtinian readers may have noted the extent to which this piece reprises two others: **Of Miracles** and **One Summer Evening**.

Tertullian's paradoxes are also discussed in **Certum est, quia impossibile** and **Prof Ig, Part II**.

Paris, Terrorism, Religion, Justice, *Zeteo*, 14 November 2015.