

continuous conversion

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Self-realization is an empty street

Being a child of the '60's in America, I've tried to figure out who I am and what makes me unique among others. Especially in my 20's, I set about to strip away all the sociological, physical, economic, political and historic influences that had shaped my life to that point, in an effort to see who I really was—to reach self-realization.

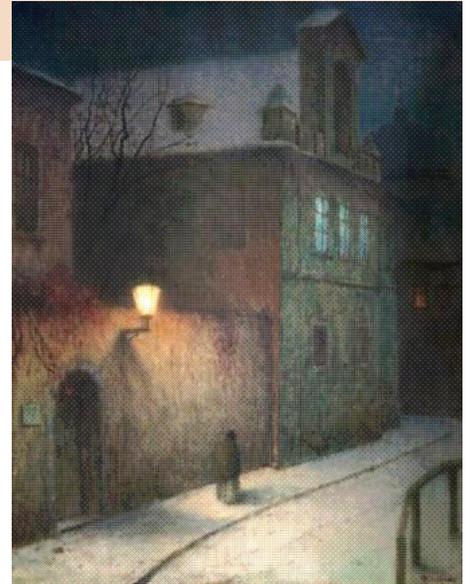
Stripping away the inessential

For me, getting to the bottom of my own self-hood meant getting away from society and its dictates. I moved to a remote part of the country, near the Canadian border, in a place that hadn't seen much change in the past 60 years or so.

Rossie, New York, is a tiny village in a small township (also called Rossie). My first husband and I lived there for 7 years, started our family (Noah and Melissa), built two little cabins, had a garden, burned wood for heat, and lived as simply and cheaply as we could.

Those years were fun, but not enlightening, except to make me realize that I can't cut myself off from society. We gratefully accepted medical care when we needed it; we wanted our children to have an education in public schools; we had auto insurance, a telephone and enough modern conveniences to make our voluntary sacrifices of electricity and plumbing seem like a foolish martyrdom rather than a philosophical statement. We were never out of sight of other people's property; the fire department would have protected us if we'd needed them. The local people thought we were strange, but were friendly and neighborly; at no time were we in the least independent of American culture in some manifestation.

So my experiment of stripping away the social cocoon that enveloped me from birth showed me this: the cocoon WAS me. I could not separate myself from it at all. I was no closer to being able to define myself than when I moved to Rossie.



Jumping into society headfirst

The next thirty years of my life were spent catching up. I finished my education, established myself in three different careers, raised my children (sometimes with their dad, other times alone after our divorce), and made a life that was in harmony with the culture around me.

These decades were productive and rewarding on many levels, but the most important lesson I learned was this:

The more I looked inward in an effort to understand myself, the more unhappy I was. The more I forgot myself and helped the people around me, the happier I was.

Self-realization

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Sounds suspiciously pious

When I simply lived this way, focusing on what I could do to help or encourage the person in front of me, I felt useful and fulfilled. Unfortunately, when I tried to put this revelation into words, it didn't sound profound; instead, it sounded as routinely pious as any Sunday School lesson on the Golden Rule. I hadn't exactly come up with some great original insight as a result of my quest for self-realization!

Was it really true, then? Was it, as the Church taught, better to give than to receive? Is a life spent in service to others the best possible life, full of satisfaction and meaning?

I had become suspicious of those ideas, thinking that they were too often used to justify the subjugation of one person to another in an unhealthy, exploitative way. It was not easy for me to reconcile my modern theories of self-realization with the "old-fashioned" ideal of self-sacrifice as the means to happiness.

However, in those 30 years, I rarely had the time to ponder these questions or to make sure my values and beliefs were in line with the reality of living my life every day. I only knew that the easiest cure for self-absorption (which usually led to self-pity) was to resolutely turn my head forward, scanning the horizon for somewhere I could be of use and thus feel at ease with myself.

A second pass at the golden ring

Then my life changed again. I remarried and found I had some time again to contemplate what it means to be your own true self. I was, I will admit, somewhat burned out after three decades of intensive study, work and postponing my own desires in order to fulfill my responsibilities as I saw them. Let's say I was just a bit resentful that I'd given "the best years of my life" to helping other people achieve their goals, without concentrating on making my own dreams come true.

So I took a second shot at self-realization, trying to get to the bottom of myself so that I could spend my "sunset years" doing what I should have been doing all along: putting my own talents to work, organizing my time around my own dreams and cutting out the inessential parts of my life so that I could focus on locating and developing my own authentic self.

Down an empty street

But, fortunately, this time I didn't need a decade to figure out that pursuing myself is a trip down an empty street. In just a few weeks, I've been brought up short by my own need to be connected to the people around me. A funeral, a hailstorm and floods, and a rotten tooth have shown me that my place in the world is not determined solely by my own desires and goals.

As much as I'd like to fling off the constraints of society's expectations and become the free spirit that I know is lurking in my heart, I've come to realize that the free spirit is also the lonely one. The more I delve into myself and my own

preoccupations, the less happy I am. There just doesn't seem to be any "there" there when I look deep into myself. It's an empty, sad and lonely street inside me.

"Do unto others"

Jesus really had a good idea when He suggested that we need to do two things: love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. He didn't make any mention of self-realization, but He did offer a special kind of peace to people who'll go with Him down the path of helping others: *the peace that passes all understanding.*

I guess accepting this special peace is a better choice than walking down an empty street by myself!

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