

Giving Despair its Due

by William Willeford

I was recently with analyst-colleagues discussing a dream that seemed to me about despair. This impression needs to be more fully spelled out, however, since, while despair seemed central, other ingredients were important in its overall effect.

In the dream, the dreamer, who had recently suffered the death of a close family member, went to visit a woman acquaintance who turned out to be markedly despondent. As the dreamer first looked around the house for the woman, the woman's son was unhelpful. When the women did get together, the despondent acquaintance was preparing to lie on the floor on an arrangement of white plastic rods. The dreamer proposed joining her, understanding that their activity would benefit both of them. They then lay moving side to side on the rods. Hardly comfortable or comforting, the rods were apparently intended to stimulate and rechannel energy. This stretching and moving on them seemed the turning point in the action. The despondency of the acquaintance did not seem allayed, but at the close of the dream there were signs of new life and movement—for example, someone cashed a check, and arts and crafts projects were underway.

I understood the dream to be not so much about either acquiescing to despair or countermanding or curing it as about making a place for it and honoring it.

I thought of an article I read years ago about Christopher Marlowe's play "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus," in which the author claimed that Faustus was guilty of all seven mortal sins including despair. And I remembered trying to puzzle out how despair could be a mortal sin, as calling it that seemed a kind of Catch 22 whereby you blame someone for choosing to be a victim and prove your accusation by kicking him.

Of course, despair may entail finding your situation meaningless, which may in turn result in your dropping out of the prevailing system of meaning, which authorities invested in it forbid you to do. But if meaning can be lost and found, despair must be part of what it comes from, and so part of its continuing background.

I then thought of two other literary works that seemed to me even more directly germane to the dream.

In Ernest Hemingway's short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," an older and a younger Spanish waiter are almost ready to close a bar in the early hours of the morning, when

a slightly drunk old man comes in to drink brandy. One of the waiters notes that last week the old man tried to kill himself. "Why?" the other waiter asks. "He was in despair." "What about?" "Nothing." The story presents the colloquy between the waiters, with the younger one wanting to get rid of the old man so that the waiter can get home to bed with his wife, and with the older waiter sympathetically wanting the old man to have a clean, well-lighted place in which to drink his brandy. The older waiter is finally alone, pondering the meaning of nothing, and then praying to himself, "Our nada [nothing] who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada." For the waiter this nothing must be fully acknowledged if one is to see the world well enough to live in it.

In Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot," as little happens as in Hemingway's story. Two clown-like tramps wait for a mysterious figure (God?), who sends ambiguous messages by an unreliable intermediary but does not come in the course of the play and presumably never will. Though the larger meaning of things is thus declared to be a joke—one of Beckett's artistic models is the silent-film comedian Buster Keaton—there is vigor and tenderness in the relationship between the tramps. Despair is part of their emotional lives, and the play contains a bungled suicide as does Hemingway's story, but despair is not the dominant ingredient.

Keaton perfected an exhilaratingly deft and graceful art of surviving. His (unsmiling) performance of it reminds us that we have surprising resources for dealing with perils such as those that beset him. And in a related spirit, this dream, this story, and this play ask us to give despair its due, and wish us the patience, courage and detachment to edge our way past it.

Shades of "nothing" may distressingly insist on being known, but intimations of them may also further the process of our becoming more adequately conscious. And that is worth a lot ■



Babette Adrian—Faustus

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