

15 January 1973

READING 1

We had a refreshing Christmas letter from Betty Terrell in New York in which she wrote: 'I thought perhaps you might enjoy a respite from the "doubting Thomas" quality that somehow manages to make a showing in all of us at times. We only need to laugh at that and send it back stage...' So she enclosed some more children's poems from her school, and then she continues with: 'Also I have enclosed an article from Reader's Digest "re-found" after many years. I think you will agree after you have read the story that the farmer, Riley, knew a great deal about the Eternal Now.'

Well, the few people who, so far, have read it *do* agree, and I would like everyone to hear it. Personally, I feel it gives us an excellent start for new plans in 1973. Now here is the story:

RILEY'S ROUTE TO THE ETERNAL NOW by WAYNE AMOS

What is the secret of those rare moments of ineffable happiness, when all the world is in tune?

After many years in New York and Europe, I was back in the Plains states visiting my cousin Riley on the farm he had never left. We walked through the fields and sat on a log. Alert, amused, Riley whittled on a stick as I told stories of London, Paris, Madrid.

The leaves of the cottonwoods chipped in the summer breeze. A redbird called, its notes so clear they seemed to split the air. I forgot my story and listened to the leaves and the bird and felt the same inexplicable happiness I had felt a lifetime ago on this same farm.

I was 15 then, Riley 20. Riley had wanted to get the ploughing done and was working all night. I had just learned to drive the tractor and was eager to help. We took turns ploughing and sleeping in the haystack. The hired girl would bring us coffee and sandwiches at midnight.

When I awoke at 11.30 the three-quarter moon had risen. The tractor droned powerfully, its light eating into the furrows. At the end of a row Riley would jump down and hold a book in the light for half a minute. He was memorising a poem, something by Walt Whitman about... 'rich, apple-blossom'd earth! Smile, for your lover comes!' He was a great reader; the librarian used to say he checked out more books than anyone else in the county.

As I watched the scene, some strange sort of light seemed to turn on for me. I saw the moon, the tractor, the field, the trees, the house, the haystack, as if from all sides at once. It was so beautiful, so magical, I feared to breathe lest I change something. Time seemed to stop, and I wanted it never to start again. And now, sitting on a log many years later, I felt the same ineffable happiness. I heard the birds, the leaves. I was in the scene, part of it.

I tried to explain it to Riley but knew I couldn't. I recalled the tractor, the moonlight. I was there, I said. The moon was there. Oh, it was hopeless trying to put it into words. But Riley nodded, and suddenly I realised something. Riley knew all about that magic. He had experienced it often.

'You know the secret!' I cried. 'What is it?'

Riley smiled and put aside his whittling.

‘No one can explain it,’ he said. ‘Oh, I’ve found hints in many of the books I’ve read. But first I felt it, just as you did. And so did the men who tried to write about it. They felt it independently, separated by oceans and centuries; yet they all shared the same experience.’

‘But what is it?’

‘If I had to put it in one sentence,’ Riley went on, ‘I would say “Full consciousness brings joy.” Once you fully open your senses to anything – a sunset, a waterfall, a stone, a blade of grass – the joy comes.’

‘But to open the senses, to become really conscious, you have to drop out of the future and the past and remain for a time on what T.S. Eliot in his poem ‘Burnt Norton’, called “the still point of the turning world”, the present. The past is gone, and the future is not yet.’

‘That long-ago night was beautiful to you because of the unusual circumstances. Waking up at midnight in a haystack turned you upside down. You stopped planning into the future and thinking into the past. You were *there* in the now.’

‘Children have these moments frequently. But they grow up and lose the capacity. Yet, with the dim memory of ecstasy and the hope for more, they pursue this hope for the rest of their lives, forever grasping and forever analysing. They’re on a journey which has no destination, except death. For this reason, most men do actually live “lives of quiet desperation”.’

‘Schopenhauer said that most men are “lumbermen”. They walk through a beautiful forest always thinking: “What can this tree do for me? How many board feet of lumber will it produce? Last year I netted such and so: this year I must do better.” They are always in the past or future; they are always *becoming*, they never *are*.’

‘Then through the forest comes the artist, though maybe he never painted a picture. He stops before a tree, and because he asks nothing of the tree he really sees it. He is not planning the future: for the moment he has no concern for himself. The self drops out. Time stops. He is there, in the present. He sees the tree with full consciousness. It is beautiful. Joy steps in, unasked.’

‘It is not important how you explain this; it is the feeling, the experience that counts. Some people believe everything in the universe – a field of wheat swaying in the wind, a mountain, a cloud, the first snowfall of winter – has a being, an intelligence and soul of its own. When we can think of things in this way it is easier to love them, and love is the prime ingredient of these experiences. But our love must not be possessive. William Blake put it perfectly when he said, “He who binds to himself a joy, does the winged life destroy; but he who kisses the joy as it flies, lives in eternity’s sunrise.”’

‘Martin Buber says we can learn to love the world – things, animals, people, stars – as *Thou*. And that when we do love them and address them as *Thous*, they always respond. This is probably the greatest thrill of all – the response of joy to joy.’

‘I believe most men can have their glimpses of the eternal, their timeless moments, almost any time they choose. Many of our little practical tasks – say we are hoeing the garden, picking fruit or trimming a hedge – require only one hundredth part of our consciousness. We use the other 99 daydreaming of tomorrow or remembering yesterday. If we can only watch the movement of our hands, the trembling of a leaf, feel the sun on our skin, the breeze in our hair and eliminate quickly the constant intrusions of thoughts of past and future, if we can successfully do this for even tens of seconds, the joy will come.’

‘The eyes will shine with a new light, and if a stranger passes during one of these moments and you exchange a glance, the chances are,’ said Riley, ‘that he, too, will share in the mystery.’

Driving back to town, alone, I stopped the car and walked down a winding lane. Pulling a leaf from a bush, I tried to ‘see’ it. But I found immediately that I was planning tomorrow’s appointment. I studied the leaf, stared at it – and was remembering some trivial thing from the past.

Suddenly out of the clear sky came a clap of thunder: a plane breaking the sound barrier. In the silence that followed I heard, to the exclusion of all other perceptions, the musical call of a meadowlark. There was strength in the loud, brief song and a flutelike delicacy, peaceful, plaintive; and, over all, there was a joyous acceptance of the eternal now, astride the centuries and millenniums.

[Pause for some silence and memory recall]

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CONCLUSIONS

You will recall that it was such experiences (‘good impulses’) that started most of us searching for Self-realization and a happiness that could be independent of conditions. Questions for 1973 are:

1. Do our meditations, all our talks and our labours bring us more of this ‘ineffable happiness’ and enable us to get it when we remember to want it?
2. If not, why not, and where do we go from here?
3. It is clear that the two men in the story were largely dependent on chance impressions from the outside. Are we content to stay like that?

(short discussion)

The plan we propose (at least till after the lecture on 14th February) is to try to get back to ourSelves and rely less on other people’s words. So we are temporarily giving all teachers and group-takers a rest, to give *them* a bit of happiness too! For those who have been coming to meetings there will now be just a list of addresses at which, we hope, there will be a host and hostess and (we also hope) some silence, a little meditation, and some inspired saying or story for contemplation. What has to be avoided is the old habit of skating over the surface area of associative thoughts, and words, so that we can go deeper to the place from which insights arise:

Errors like straws upon the surface flow:

He who would seek for pearls must dive below.

(John Dryden, *All for Love*)

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