

Pinnacle Moments

Most great men, at some point in their careers, have been driven almost to distraction by their enemies. They get involved in answering shotgun charges against them, and precious energy that should have gone for better things is used up in self- defense. And sometimes, in making that defense, they say things they would have preferred not saying. It happened that way to the Apostle Paul once. He was having trouble with some men who doubted his credentials as an apostle, since he had not been one of the original group and never claimed to have seen Jesus in the flesh. But he had seen him in the radiant face of a dying Christian martyr, he had heard his voice in his own troubled conscience, and he had had an experience once so vivid that he wasn't sure himself whether it was a vision or a physical happening. Now, under attack, he decides to use that experience in his defense.

“I don't think it's really a good thing for me to boast at all,” he says, “but I shall just mention visions and revelations granted by the Lord.” And then, speaking of himself in the third person — for modesty's sake — he begins: “I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago, had the experience of being caught up into the third Heaven.” Ancient Jewish writings had speculated on how many heavens there were, and as you might guess, the sacred number 3 was one of the favorites. Paul probably means simply that he was caught up into the “highest” heaven — in other words, that he had had the most intense spiritual experience imaginable. And he

was so thrilled by it that he lost all sense of physical existence and could not tell whether his body had been caught up, too, or left behind.

“I don’t know whether it was an actual physical experience,” he writes. “Only God knows that. All I know is that this man was caught up into paradise. I repeat, I do not know whether this was a physical happening or not. But anyway....I heard things so astounding they are beyond a man’s power to describe.....” In Greek, Paul makes a little play on words. He speaks of *arreta remata* , which in a corresponding English translation might be “unutterable utterances.” “That experience,” he says, “is something worth bragging about, but I am not going to do it.” He already has, of course, but at least he stopped short of giving details and boasting even more. He has eaten his cake, and he still has it, and he hopes his church in Corinth will realize that he really does have impressive credentials as a Christian minister.

Experiences like the one Paul describes are unusual, but he certainly is not the only person ever to claim such a vivid dream or vision. Alfred Tennyson, the English poet, describes a kind of trance in which he felt he had left his body for a whole hour. I’m not much of a mystic, and have never known anything like that, but I can believe that some of them have intense and extraordinary experiences at times. What I’m really interested in is the use Paul made of what happened to him. At the time he chooses to reveal this event, he is despondent. He has just spoken to his friends about his hard work and anxiety, about cold and hunger, about being beaten

and stoned and shipwrecked — and how, on top of all that, he feels a huge burden of responsibility for the churches he has planted.

“There are quarrels all around me,” he says. “Jealousy, temper, slanders, gossip, arrogance.....and rivalry” from people who want to pull him down because they have no other way to rise themselves — which, of course, is why most people drag others down by ugly gossip. It’s enough to drive Paul to despair, except that right in the middle of it he remembers a high moment of inspiration 14 years before, and decides very deliberately to believe the witness of his best hours against the witness of his worst ones. The English poet Robert Browning felt the same, and liked to write about what he called “pinnacle moments” — those brief, incandescent moments of insight and beauty that sustain us in times of doubt and depression.

It seems to me that this touches on a crucial decision in anybody’s life. Do we construct a prevailing outlook based on the memory of our best times, or our worst? Most of us are not mystics, but we still have moments when life seems good, when the way seems clear, and when we can echo Wordsworth’s delighted discovery: “I have felt/ A presence that disturbs me with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts” — one of those pinnacle moments when “with an eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,/ We see into the life of things.” But, as most of us have learned, life is a sequence of ups and downs, and other realities set in: chronic illness, the sudden tragic loss of someone we love deeply, and human stupidity and cruelty so unbearable that we are tempted to become total cynics. I have to be careful, for example, not to hear much

from that crude braggart whom I consider the most dangerously divisive talk-show host in America, a man who sneers at humanitarian aid for Rwandan refugees as an example of “Meals-on-Wheels” — an ugly insult, first of all, to our belief in compassion, and a nasty, mocking insult, in the second place, to a program that has brought happiness into thousands of lonely lives. This man is a wretched stain on the fabric of American decency, and when I hear him occasionally out of morbid curiosity it only takes a few minutes before he has me so deep in the pit of despair that I have to call up better moments in a hurry before I lose hope in humanity. Life really does have that rhythm expressed in the old Negro spiritual: “Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down,” and the crucial issue, once we admit that, is whether we base our lives on the testimony of the pits or the peaks.

But even if we decide to believe most in the high moments, how do we make them vivid when we are down in the dumps? I suppose, first, that by a deliberate act of will we simply recall them: the times when life seemed full of purpose, when we felt challenged to do good things, when we were at our best and knew it. I heard this week of a man who often recalled how his father used to deal with him when he was a child and in a bad mood. “Where’s Tommy?” the father would say to his sulking son, and the boy would answer, “He’s right here!” And the father would say, “No, you’re not Tommy. Tommy is lost. Please go find him. I want Tommy.” And the boy, understanding his father’s meaning, would wander off through the house, getting himself under control, until coming back he could say to his father, “I’ve found him. Here he is.” The father was saying to

his child what modern psychology says: that we are not just one self but many — high and low, good and bad — and that the art of life is to identify with one's best self and be what that self demands.

Fortunately, we almost always seem to know how to tell the difference between our best hours and our worst ones. English composer Sir Edward Elgar wrote a lot of music, more or less good, but once, in "The Dream of Gerontius," he composed something with a special passion. "This is the best of me," he wrote a friend. "For the rest, I ate and drank and slept and loved and hated, like anyone else..... but this I saw and knew; this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory." We know what that means because every one of us can look back and remember when we were at our best. For Paul it was what he saw on the road to Damascus, what he felt when he wrote the section on love in the Corinthian letter, what he heard in his heart when he was caught up in that strange, mystic vision no words could describe. Those were his pinnacle moments, and no matter what despairing moods came later he would take those for his reading of life. That decision, it strikes me, may be a large part of the secret of greatness.

What it means is that we never really master ourselves until we get some control over our moods — *some* control even while they happen, but more control in terms of what we allow to linger on from them. If life is to be interpreted by the hours when we are crushed, or our behavior has been shabby, we will find it hard to believe in much of anything. In a literature course I used to teach I sometimes had occasion to speak of a great 19th century physicist named John Tyndall. Christians of the time thought of him as their mortal enemy

because he believed in a purely materialistic philosophy. But he said an interesting thing once: “I have noticed during years of self-observation that not is *not* in [the] hours of clearness and vigor that this doctrine commends itself to my mind.” In other words, in his low hours he was most convinced that nothing is real except the physical. But when the great hours came, when he felt good and his heart sang, then it seemed possible even to him that life had a meaning beyond what can be weighed and measured.

Our old friend Paul had worked out a way of coping with bad times — and by his own vivid testimony he had a ton of them. When he was down he simply began remembering: “Fourteen years ago I had a vision. And I trust that hour, not this one.” I would guess that his reassuring vision may have grown out of some crisis or challenge. Most of us never even come close to our full potential until we are up against something we can’t conquer easily. One of my fondest and most poignant memories of my father comes from a day when something hit him so hard I thought he would surely have to lie down and quit. I found out that day that children may not even dream of the heroism which may lie hidden in quite ordinary parents.

Sidney Lanier, the southern poet, sick with tuberculosis, had an unforgettable experience which he made immortal in some lines of poetry. He spoke of an hour when “belief overmasters doubt, and I know that I know,/ And my spirit is grown to a lordly great compass within.” He made a deliberate choice to see life in terms of what that hour had taught him. Not a single day comes to an end but that somewhere, somebody decides to confront a personal challenge by saying, “I shall start to live again by the best and highest visions I

have had, by an idealism I misplaced somewhere on these carnival grounds — lost on the whirling rides, lost in the blaze and glitter of the false lights.”

There were some terrible disappointments in the brief life of that young Jewish rabbi named Jesus, but he must have remembered often that high moment, on top of a literal mountain, when he was transfigured until his face shone. It’s a strange story of symbolisms, and I am not able to believe literally that Moses materialized up there, out of thin air, to represent the Law, or that Elijah suddenly stood on earth again to represent the Prophets, but I do believe that Jesus opened the door of his mind into a room blazing with unimaginable light — an experience that made his face glow and his eyes shine clear and steady until his disciples were awed and shaken by what they saw. Only once, this particular pinnacle moment, but it was enough. For the rest of his life, whenever the road dipped into shadow, he could remember how it had once curved upward to a peak of light. For him, it was a saving memory. The question for this morning is: Do you remember yours?

We give thanks, Almighty God, for all the times when we can
believe that no matter what happens, life has high purpose
and that we have important roles to play in it, through our
devotion to Christ our Lord. Amen.