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Imagining Sisyphus Happy

In the 1950s, Albert Camus, the great French thinker and writer, published an essay called “The Myth of Sisyphus.” It’s a long (and in my view rather tedious) discussion about whether suicide is the only reasonable response to what Camus calls the absurdity of human existence. But the essay ends by focusing on the Greek myth of the “punishment” of Sisyphus. And it ends with a line that has stayed with me for many years – “Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.” One must imagine Sisyphus happy!

We normally think of the story of Sisyphus as an example of perhaps the most horrific punishment ever imposed – a man condemned for eternity to push a huge boulder up a mountain over and over again. And when a task seems truly endless, pointless, and repetitive we call that task “Sisyphean.” So, how can we possibly imagine Sisyphus happy? Hasn’t he been consigned to an eternity of humiliation and pointless labor? Shouldn’t he be eternally miserable?

From the time of Homer onward, Sisyphus was known as a trickster, as the craftiest of men. As king of Corinth, he promoted navigation and commerce, but he was also avaricious and deceitful. He seduced his niece, he took his brother’s throne, and he betrayed Zeus’s secrets. For these violations, Zeus ordered that Sisyphus be chained in the underworld. But when Hades came to arrest him, Sisyphus slyly turned the tables by asking Hades to try on the chains himself to show how they worked. When Hades did so, Sisyphus secured them and locked Hades in a closet. With the lord of the underworld under lock and key, the world’s order was seriously disturbed – no one could die! Ares, the God of war was annoyed that his battles had lost their fun -- there

was no risk of death, and opponents couldn't be killed. Ares freed Hades and sent Sisyphus back to the underworld.

But Sisyphus had another trick up his sleeve. He told his wife not to bury him nor to carry out the other rites of death. Once in the underworld, he persuaded Persephone, queen of the dead, to allow him to return to the upper world so that he could get his wife to perform her duties. Once back in the upper world, of course, Sisyphus promptly forget all about funerals and other such drab affairs, and he lived a life of dissipation for a good stretch of time. Finally, he was captured by Hermes, messenger of the Gods, and dragged back down to the underworld.

This time, Sisyphus received a new punishment – he was condemned to an eternity of hard, and frustrating labor. His assignment was to roll a huge boulder to the top of a high hill. But as soon as he reached the top, the rock would escape and roll to the bottom. And Sisyphus would have to start all over again pushing it up the hill. Albert Camus describes the punishment this way:

. . . One sees the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over;

One sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands.

At the very end of his long effort, measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

Camus uses Sisyphus to epitomize what he sees as the absurdity of human existence, to illustrate his argument that life is absurd. But at the same time, he uses Sisyphus to argue against suicide and despair as responses to this absurdity. Quoting Camus once again:

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He *is*, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.

So how is it that we can imagine that Sisyphus is happy as he works at his futile task through all eternity? We tend to think of the punishment of Sisyphus as being unique, but consider! Isn't the story of Sisyphus really a metaphor for human life? An existence in which we strive to enjoy life and to avoid death? An existence in which things happen to us for no apparent reason, in which we find ourselves engaged in the same struggles over and over again? During the 60s, when I was young, I truly believed that we could "win" any number of struggles to make the world better – we would create a world based on love and compassion; we would create a world without discrimination and hatred; we would create a world without wars and violence and killing; we would create a world in which we would take care of the earth. And now we find ourselves carrying on those struggles all over again in a world that has become, if anything, much scarier. And the same is true of our relationships – with our spouses and lovers, with our parents, with our children. We don't so much resolve all our issues as we revisit them. Similarly in our work lives. In all these things, we never quite succeed in pushing that damned rock all the way to the top of the mountain and having it stay there.

We tend to forget that after having pushed his rock up the mountain, Sisyphus gets to walk back down to level ground before he starts all over again. Camus writes that this is the part of the story that interests him. It is in these interludes that Sisyphus experiences consciousness, that he is able to reflect on his fate, that he is able to experience joy! And so Camus concludes:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates Gods and raises rocks. . .

The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a person's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Although it may not seem so at first glance, the myth of Sisyphus is an appropriate story as we celebrate Thanksgiving. Whether or not we share Camus' view that life is absurd, we know that life constantly confronts us with seemingly random obstacles. We know that life is constantly throwing us another curve ball. And yet, we carry on. We don't give in to despair. Just this last week, my family and I experienced an event that epitomizes this aspect of life – the giant oil spill in San Francisco Bay. Many miles of shoreline are now fouled with nasty-smelling bunker oil, and the spill is spreading both north and south along the coast. Thousands of animals will suffer and die from the oil. Fingers will be pointed; blame will be laid. It's easy to despair over events like to this; to feel helpless; to feel guilty that we humans are capable of creating such destruction.

And yet – and yet – as so often happens in disasters, we see thousands of people acting on their best impulses and trying to help out. At first, people were frustrated that they couldn't do more. Slowly, the powers that be found ways to train people and to equip them properly so that they could go out on the beaches and start the cleanup. Our daughter Anna, who used to laugh at us as a couple of tree-huggers, located the bird rescue facility in Fairfield and signed up to volunteer there. Karen and I decided to tag along, and the three of us spent last weekend helping to care for incoming birds. The scene was heart-breaking – many species of water-birds were there already -- surf scoters and murrelets, most varieties of grebes (Western, eared, horned, and pied-bill), loons, and so on – all of them badly covered with oil. But also

there were lots of good-hearted people from all over Northern California, ready to do what they could. So, on one level, it felt like another uphill struggle to correct problems caused by humans. But on another level, it was an opportunity to experience our fellow humans giving up their time and their effort out of compassion. So it was uplifting even as it was heart-breaking. Even as we push that rock up the hill once more, we find ourselves inspired by the resilience of both nature and human beings.

Not only might we imagine Sisyphus happy, we could also imagine Sisyphus thankful. I'm not sure exactly how Greek mythology worked, but clearly there was life in the underworld as well as in the upper world. So Sisyphus had existence – he had his life, albeit in the underworld. Sisyphus had a fierce desire to live, and it impelled him forward. In the upper world, his desire to live got him into all kinds of trouble. But he didn't care – he enjoyed the water, the sun, the warm stones, the sparkling sea, the closeness of the earth, while he was in the upper world. And in his life in the underworld, his fate belongs to him; the rock is his possession and his task. And although his labor was hard, Sisyphus had those moments when he got to walk down the mountain again. And in those moments, he got to appreciate all that was around him - - the flowers, the birds, the trees; his breathing, the movement of his muscles, all the experiences that his senses could bring him.

So, if we imagine ourselves in those moments that Sisyphus had walking down the mountain, what would make us happy? What would we be thankful for? First of all, we would be thankful for the gift of this precious existence. As the poet Mary Oliver tells us, we have this one wild and precious life to live. We breathe, we see, we observe the world around us. We live in a world of darkness and sorrow, to be sure, but we also live

a world filled with beauty, a world filled with daily miracles! And part of our existence is something that Sisyphus didn't have in the underworld – the ability to love and to be loved. We have our compassion, our ability to open our hearts to others, our ability to care, deeply, for others. Some evenings, as sit down to dinner, I look at Karen across the table, and I am filled to the brim with happiness, with appreciation for the gift of life that we share, for the gift of the hearts that we open - - to each other and to the world around us. We are rich beyond measure.

Even in his torment, Sisyphus has his consciousness! Indeed, his punishment would be no punishment at all if he were unconscious. Without his consciousness, he would be like any other creature of the earth, plunging onward, but unaware of his fate.

As Camus writes:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.

And, like Sisyphus, we have the precious gift of our consciousness. We have the ability to determine the course of our life, to determine our fate. We have the ability to see the world created every morning, to observe the orange sticks of the sun as they fasten themselves to the high branches. And there are those times, as Mary Oliver writes, when we carry within us a thorn that is heavier than lead. There are those times when we are like Sisyphus – when all we can do is to keep on trudging. But even then, within us, within our consciousness, is a mind that can observe and appreciate that each hill, each tree, each creature, each pond with its blazing lilies is a miracle, again, every morning.

But we miss the deepest meaning of the Sisyphus's story, if we focus only on the moments when he gets to stop his labor and walk down the mountain. As Camus noted, there is also joy in the very labor of pushing his rock up the hill. He leaves Sisyphus concluding that all is well, that the universe he inhabits is neither futile nor sterile. Each atom of the rock, each particle of the mountain forms Sisyphus's world, even as struggles at his task. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a person's heart."

And so it is, I believe, with us. We struggle and we persevere, and we think that all will be well if only we can reach our goal. But the real joy, the reward for our labors, is in the doing, not the achieving. So often we do attain some goal, and we're left feeling let down – "is that all there is?" No, it seems to me that we are at our best when we are meeting challenges, when we are engaged in our labors – and especially when the tasks facing us are ones that we do with other people. So much joy is found in working together toward a common goal. But even if we struggle alone, so much of the fulfillment is in the getting there, not in the result. The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill our hearts!

So, as celebrate this Thanksgiving, let's give thanks for those things that give meaning to our existence –

- For the gift of this one wild and precious life;
- For the consciousness that enables us to comprehend and to appreciate all the miracles of our existence;
- For our ability to open our hearts in love and compassion;
- And for the very challenges that impel us to keep on keeping on;

Let us remember, once in while, to appreciate the struggle toward the heights,
and to imagine Sisyphus happy!

May it be so! Blessed be! And amen!