

THE POINT OF PAIN
by Michael Pearson

The Allegory of the Cave

Plato's allegory of the cave is one of the most instructive and perennially sound stories ever told. It pictures a group of slaves herded together in an underground cave. They are bound in chains so that they can only contemplate the back wall of their prison. A fire is burning behind them casting shadows on the wall they face. These dancing shadows they take to be reality for they know nothing else. In time, one of the prisoners becomes free of his fetters, and with difficulty, crawls through the cave. He sees the objects whose shadows have been cast on the wall; he is dazzled by the fire but makes his way to the mouth of the cave. He is at first confused and pained by the light. Ultimately he becomes acclimatized to his new environment where he sees unfamiliar objects. He marvels at the moon and the stars and at last is able to look at the sun. He determines to return to the cave resolved to tell his fellow prisoners of the splendid world which exists beyond the cave. But they are hostile to him. They resent his having left them, and they have no wish to endure the pain he experienced in order to be able to see this new world. They ultimately threaten his life for they resent the disturbance he has created in the cave.

Plato wants his allegory to teach us two things. First, that the world of the spirit awaiting us beyond death far exceeds in value our present fleshly existence. Secondly, he tells us that we can begin even now to make progress towards that better existence by exposing

ourselves to a process of philosophic education. In the annals of secular philosophy, it is the classic story of enlightenment.

Pain as a Condition of Learning

The feature of the story which I wish to insist upon is the pain experienced by the prisoner in the progress towards enlightenment. I intend to argue that pain is a necessary condition for the learning of those lessons of life which make us truly wise. We can be confronted in an academic sort of way with all kinds of ideas and theories which notionally we accept. But it is pain which drives a way through to our hearts and minds, and makes us truly teachable. It is pain which enables us to internalize the theory of life. I am not trying to be sadistic, nor am I for one moment suggesting that we should seek out pain, but when it comes, as it surely will, we should not refuse or avoid it. Until the moment we experience pain we tend to be complacent and self-sufficient. The onset of pain, either physical or psychological, reveals to us our limits, our inadequacies, our vulnerabilities. Pain creates an urgent desire for a resolution of the problem. Pain draws our attention to the existence of a problem and as such is a catalyst to healing. Pain is opportunity.

Now I am not saying that pain necessarily yields a harvest of wisdom. Clearly the cancer patient or the deserted wife may yield to deep bitterness and become a contorted human being. All I am saying is that pain provides, to use a metaphor from the space programme, a window on healing, on wholeness, on wisdom. Wit's end is wisdom's beginning, or to put it in Christian terms, man's extremity is God's opportunity.

Perhaps I can be a little clearer about what I mean by pain by giving some examples. I mean the pain of bereavement, of gnawing

loneliness, of personal public failure. I mean the pain of identifying within yourself serious shortcomings over which, to quote the hymn, "one weeps with loathing". I mean the pain of coming to realize that you have passed on to a son or a daughter some legacy of personality with which they may have to struggle for the rest of their lives. I mean the pain of unrequited love, of depression, of self-doubt, of serious illness. I mean the pain of having started out on some venture, knowing that there is now way back and feeling the lack of the wherewithal to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion. I mean the pain of being treated unjustly or insensitively because of your race or sex. And so on.

A Biblical View

I believe the view I have represented is not neurotic but Biblical. Revelation 3:18 speaks of "gold tried in the fire". David's craving for a clean heart comes after the profound selfishness of his adultery with Bathsheba has dawned upon him. Jesus tells the rich young ruler that the gaining of eternal life is only to be had by him at the pain of renouncing his favoured social position. Mary is called the most favoured of women but her heart must be pierced by the sword of grief. And, of course, the cross and the empty tomb are the ultimate symbols of what I am talking about. More of that later.

Adventists and Predictability

You may well be wondering at this stage what the foregoing has to do with the issue of faith and learning in an Adventist context. Let me try to explain.

Adventists like to live in an orderly and predictable universe. We know precisely when and how life began on this earth. We know how, if not precisely when, the human drama will reach its great denouement.

Harvest theologians even seem to believe that we, in a way, control the time when the final curtain will fall. Our prophetic structure fills in many of the intervening details. The 'great controversy' model even provides us with detailed knowledge of our cosmic past and our eternal destiny. Our elaborate behavioral code, based on the Scripture and Ellen White's writings, provides detailed guidance for moral action and a tariff of sanctions for infractions of the code. For many people this large-scale map of human existence is the great attraction of Adventism. And we must not decry it. We all have reasons enough to be grateful for the stability and hope with which Adventism has provided us.

But I see a danger in it. It is that we as a believing community lapse into complacency; that believing that we have got the measure of the human predicament, we become slack in our quest for spiritual, theological, ethical, liturgical and organizational advance. Our tradition becomes an obstacle to growth rather than a vehicle for it. In other words, it becomes an idol and must be dismantled just as Hezekiah ordered the destruction of the very bronze serpent which had once saved the Israelites from the snake's venom in the wilderness (2 Kings 18:4).

Complacency

The integration of faith and learning movement at its best is an attempt to keep us from this kind of complacency. It is an attempt to confront our tradition with new ideas, new thinking in order to ensure that it remains a living faith able to hold its own in the market place of ideas, able to respond to changing social realities, able to provide its adherents with a sense of integrity. At its worst, the integration of faith and learning movement becomes an attempt to put up our sleeves

a few more plausible arguments for believing what we have always believed should anyone dare to question the integrity of our position. It is not so much concerned with pursuing the truth as defending vested interest.

My perception of the integrationist impulse at work in this seminar has encouraged me. I have sensed among you a willingness to bring new ideas to bear on the received wisdom of our tradition, and I am grateful for that encouragement.

But there must be no mistaking the fact that there will be a price to pay. True integration is not a mere tinkering with the facade. The edifice itself may require an overhaul. It may be costly and we cannot know beforehand exactly what the cost will be. We shall inevitably have to face a measure of cognitive dissonance. The new evidence may sometimes sit very uncomfortably with our individual or corporate position. They may not, at least at first sight, integrate at all well. And dissonance is painful, we like to resolve it as soon as we can.

Anyone therefore who is committed to the business of integrating faith and learning must recognize in themselves the liberated prisoner or at least the prisoner who is crawling towards the mouth of the cave. They experience pain as they are confronted by an unknown and sometimes confusing world away from the shadowy back of the cave. The light outside the cave dazzles and disorients them. They know the exhilaration of seeing the sun, moon and stars for the first time, only then to be confronted by the hostility of those inside the cave who have no wish to swap their shadows for the sharp relief of the world of light. They have to be prepare to enter and minister to those huddled in their own preferred religious cave. There are those who, having

gone back into the cave, have been set upon and, metaphorically, killed, or who at least have been so wounded that they have been obliged to leave the cave for good, find another cave, or sit sadly in the half-light at the mouth of the cave wondering whether to come or go.

Cognitive Dissonance in the Bible

The pain of cognitive dissonance is very evident in the Bible. There are many examples in the Scriptures of those who painfully confront a disjunction between their present and past experience. Job was sure of the universe in which he lived and of his place within it. He was clear in his own mind about how God administered justice and about his own innocence. It took a devastating series of misfortunes and a barrage of probing, rhetorical questions to shatter all his facile certainties and to extract from him the confession, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:3).

Saul also had his certainties and zealously sought to proclaim and actualize them. The drama on the road to Damascus, the three days spent in blindness, the sudden loss of social status, the death threats, the exile in Arabia, were only the beginning of sorrows. But paradoxically they were also the beginning of joys. "Scales falling from the eyes" has become in our language a common way of describing the enlightenment which comes with a paradigm-shift. Saul left the cave of Pharisaism in a very abrupt and painful manner.

Peter, Thomas, and the other disciples only integrated their new learning about the kingdom of God with their traditional faith, with the greatest of difficulty and not a little pain. For Judas the effort of integration was too much. Again on the Areopagus in Athens, only a

few were able to integrate the new teaching about the resurrection of the dead with the received wisdom. It was foolishness to the Greeks who believed in the superiority of the mind over the body. The rich young ruler refused the chance to learn about eternal values which financial insecurity would have brought. And so we could go on multiplying examples. The greatest example of how cognitive dissonance and its attendant pains have brought liberating faith is the Incarnation itself.

Dissonance and Adventist History

Perhaps a few examples from Adventist history would also be instructive before we move on. We can scarcely imagine the confusion and pain of the committed Millerites on October 23, 1844. We must never forget the fact that Adventism was born out of the pain of dissonance, of disappointment, of the disjunction between expectation and reality. The faith had to be refined through the learning of some painful lessons. The events whose centenary we celebrate this year teach us the same thing. The revisionism of the last decade or so has, in my opinion, been enormously valuable in producing a healthier Adventist view of the world but the cost has been high and the wounds are by no means fully healed. In the west, or at least in Europe, we have to face the fact that few find an Adventist view of the world attractive enough to make them undertake a new set of moral and practical commitments. Similarly, rising generations of Adventists, whom I find disarmingly honest, are telling us that we have not integrated Adventism sufficiently with the realities of life in the late 20th century to tempt them to believe. And lastly, the apparent reluctance of the advent to materialize is a dissonance with which we all have to come to terms in our own way.

I should now like to cast the net a little more widely and proceed to examine some of the ways in which we deal with dissonance at the philosophical, psychological and sociological levels.

Philosophy and Dissonance

Perhaps the major dissonance to confront western man in the modern era has been the so-called death of God in the 19th century. It was not that the deity had somehow expired—he had never existed. Rather it was that the central organizing principle in western thought and morality had been removed, and we had to find some new way of organizing our world. Dostoevsky, in The Brothers Karamazov, could therefore announce that "everything is permitted". But he did not toss his hat in the air as he did so. It was no cause for celebration. Jean-Paul Sartre, taking up this theme, feels that it is a matter of profound regret that God does not exist. Life might be a great deal more comfortable and coherent if there were some directing intelligence presiding over all. Rather we are "condemned to be free". We are autonomous human beings who must make our own personal decisions, who must accept responsibility for the consequences thereof, and learn to live with the guilt and remorse attaching to unwise choices. The only goal available for Sartre is authentic selfhood, which may express itself, on the one hand in a life of compassionate service, or in a life of tyranny on the other. There is no specific content to authenticity. One simply comes, by a leap of the imagination, realised by an act of will, to a subjective truth. Failure to do this, by falling back into thoughtless or craven conformity is called, interestingly enough for our purposes, 'bad faith'. It is faith where the believer has failed to integrate what he knows with what he is, and so in some measure, he lives a lie.

Probably the most famous expression of the existentialist impulse in modern Christian literature is the work of Soren Kierkegaard. He believed that there was an almost complete disjunction between Christianity and culture. The only way to realize one's faith was to take a complete leap in the dark, not knowing where one was going to land. It was to embrace the Unknown. Any attempt to negotiate between one's learning and one's faith was a lie and a deception. First, one always began by assuming what one wanted, by adducing evidence, to confirm. Secondly, such a procedure always manifested the very caution which was alien to commitment. A dominant theme in his work was the Abraham-Isaac motif. Abraham was, for him, the one called by God to do that which was against all norms of morality and all canons of logic.

For the existentialists, then, one comes to faith by a radical act of commitment. It is born of pain and anxiety and is always accompanied by uncertainty. The first act of commitment must be followed by a series of others. For the existentialists, broadly speaking, there is no neat integration of faith and rationality. They do not always fly in the face of rationality, they simply believe that rationality does not constrain you to come to any particular conclusion.

Somewhat along the same lines is the work of the American pragmatists, particularly William James. He believed one could will something to be true in the following sense. There is little in the way of certainty in our world; it is an ambiguous place. Nonetheless we have the right to believe any hypothesis or world view which seems strong enough to bear the weight of our lives. If a belief works in our lives then it is true. Thus a young man who is trying to win the affections of a young woman, or to convince an employer to give him a

job, can will the desire into existence by behaving as if her were a suitable candidate. By an act of will you create your truth. Though similar to the existentialist endeavour, the pragmatists' search is accompanied by less anxiety, though they realize that what they are doing is of a momentous nature.

Linked in some ways with the foregoing is the notion of 'language games' put forward by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. We use the linguistic and conceptual apparatus of our community, he says, in order to place a construction on the raw data of reality. No language game is right or wrong, it is simply the one played in a particular community. No significant interpenetration between these communities is possible just as it would be impossible to place a soccer team and an American football team on a field and expect something meaningful to happen. Players within a particular language game may seek coherence within their own frame of reference but no communication is possible. Under this particular system, a Christian may largely avoid the pain of dissonance by operating entirely within his own language game community but the price to be paid for such peace is too high.

One last philosophical strategy for dealing with dissonance must suffice here. It is that adopted by the mystics. It is not a strategy which is consciously adopted. Broadly speaking, the mystics would claim to have been overtaken by some experience of God, which more often than not is exhausting, overwhelming, traumatic. The experience is direct and unmediated. It does not fit rational categories. Reason is an unfit instrument to adjudicate such an experience. The direct, mystical experience of God imposes itself on the individual and is its own authority. If claims about God based on mystical experience appear to contradict each other, one may only invoke the divine mystery.

All these approaches differ in their own way from the view of so-called Christian Realism, which holds that an objective view of the world is possible, a position which I believe to be flawed. While it is important to seek an objective skeleton to support the flesh of faith, it is also vital to acknowledge that the search must remain incomplete.

Psychology and Dissonance

On a psychological level, we also find many strategies for dealing with dissonance. When confronted by an idea which we find threatening to our own corpus of beliefs, we may respond by denial. By vehemently and unreservedly rejecting an idea, we try to refuse the pain and the opportunity for growing that is presenting itself. Denial may of course result in all kinds of distortions and obsessions. Fanaticism is certainly sometimes a crude attempt to silence the disquieting voice within. A healthier alternative is the acknowledgement of doubt. "Doubt", derived probably from the same root as the word "double", connotes a faith looking in two directions. It is not to be confused with unbelief. Doubt is the mountainous area between belief and unbelief. It offers no permanent resting place but it does offer a valuable vantage point for judging between options. Zeffereilli, in his film "Jesus of Nazareth", has Jesus saying to Thomas, "You have so many doubts, you must want to believe very much". Genuine doubt has behind it the desire not to be misled, and is not to be despised. It is a very different creature from artificial doubt which is a smoke screen designed to keep the individual from attachment and commitment or any associated cost.

Play provides another way of coping with dissonance. We play all kinds of games and mistake them for life itself. It is characteristic

of such games that they have rigidly-defined rules and that we treat them very seriously. In religion we play liturgical, behavioral, theological games and are sometimes prepared to treat roughly those who play the game somewhat differently from ourselves. The games however tend to deny the rough texture of life. It is far better to cultivate a healthy sense of humour which is prepared to mock self gently when it makes extravagant claims about knowing the secrets of the universe. It must not be thought however that this humour denies the importance of such sorts of claims. Humour is an important antidote to self-absorption, on the one hand, and cynicism on the other. The clown and the prophet are not so very different from each other.

Eriksson has described well the way in which we resolve dissonances which produce the crises of identity that are a part of normal human development. Failure to cope with such dissonances results in some form of maladjustment.

Sociology and Dissonance

On the sociological level, the main way of guarding against dissonance is through institutionalization. We all fear the anarchy which a social vacuum can produce, so we create structures which discipline the vacuum. Some of us may have tasted something of the problem on a family holiday, where just four or five people of diverse tastes, and perhaps limited acquaintance, have jointly to make a three-week period meaningful and enjoyable; it is not as easy as it looks. Many people, I suspect, long for the escape from shapelessness which the routine of work provides.

In society, dissidents, the creators of dissonance, find themselves criticized and sometimes victimised for daring to call attention to injustice, hypocrisy and incongruity. The normal

institutional response is a call for unity which is taken to be a higher value than the one the dissident has drawn attention to. It is thought better that one man, one woman, or indeed, many women, should "die for the sake of the nation".

Between societies the problem manifests itself in the form of ethnocentrism—the belief that the particular social group to which we belong is superior in its values and achievements to all others. The catalogue of man's inhumanity to man arising from this view is painful to contemplate. We at least must be grateful that we have made a little progress on this matter, though too frequently our practice does not conform to our preaching. We, as Christians however, are left with the apparently slightly embarrassing task of wanting to discriminate between religions and make exclusive claims for ours in the belief that there is "no other name given under heaven whereby men might be saved".

Currently of course the same battle is being fought between the sexes. The male sex has long dictated the roles and rules which obtain in society. The subordinate sex, simply in order to survive, has had to become highly attuned to the dominant, and able to predict its reactions of pleasure and displeasure. Subordinates come to know much more about the dominants than vice-versa. Here is why women, or at least pro-feminists, feel that it is high time that males begin to listen very seriously to the insights into the nature of society, values, and relationships, which women have long been cultivating.

Conclusion

And so what are we to make of all of this? I have argued that it is the painful experiences of life which produce in us a paradigm-shift. The learning we do on ordinary days provides us with the building blocks but the discomfoting experiences knit those blocks

together into a sound edifice. Man's extremity is God's opportunity. Now it is not moral deliberately to inflict pain on others, on our students. We can help them to learn from the misfortunes of life. And we may well do them a service by being critical of their work and assigning C, D, and F grades where appropriate. But I am asserting that cognitive dissonance is the main source of pain in the advanced academic context. We should not shrink from it. We should be wary of distributing too many pain-killers, intellectual analgesics, even for the best of pastoral reasons. An Adventist friend of mine, a church employee, says that he bears one resentment towards the church. Some of his teachers, he claims, did not tell him the best they knew; he feels that they were unduly protective and in some measure misled him. We need not fear rigorous investigation. To many of our students, it is more important that we know the questions than that we know the answers. We must provide them with a conceptual and spiritual map showing the best routes and the blind alleys. In the end, it is they who must make their way through the land.

Of course, the critical judgement to be made by the teacher concerns the extent to which a student or a class is able to cope with dissonance. At what stage should the disturbing question be posed? At what point should the critical methodology be employed? That will vary with the situation but investigation must be accompanied by affirmation lest the pain of dissonance become intolerable. Christian teachers will regularly affirm that they "believe in order to understand" and not vice-versa; they will offer persuasive reasons for believing while acknowledging the existence of disturbing counter-evidence.

In their choice of materials to be studied and their conduct of classroom activities they will not shrink from difficult questions.

Nor will they be reluctant to acknowledge that theirs is a finely-tuned strategy designed to tempt sophisticated young people to become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian who teaches ideas and philosophy is engaged in a subversive activity calculated to erode the secularized values and views of young people, even young Christians, whose minds so easily become impregnated with the spirit of the age. Anyone who does such work has to be sensitive enough to recognize whether the present moment demands a question or an affirmation.

As examples of the kind of modern thinking which one might use to achieve this end, one could cite the works of Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Peter Berger. All write in such a way as to undermine our easy confidence in a rationalistic view of the world.

"The integration of faith and learning" is a neat phrase for a messy process. We must avoid glibness. We should not fear to "see through a glass darkly". But some will object that my account is too tentative, that one who holds it will lack commitment and enthusiasm. Not so. People die for things they believe, not things they know. And some will object that this account is too pessimistic, that it lacks joy. Not so. We always delight in that for which we have laboured the hardest. The greatest joys always follow the greatest pains—ask any mother.

Let me leave you with some slightly painful questions. Could it be that those who are raised on the notion of separation from the world, should anticipate some difficulty with integration of the wisdom of that world into their own faith? Could it be that a "peculiar people", sensing that they have a faith which is strange, should strain too much after learning which is unimpeachable? Could it be that as we

strive to possess our integrated knowledge of the world we fail to hear the voice of God saying, "My daughter, my son, it is I who must possess you, not you who must possess me?" Could the integration impulse degenerate into a desire to retain control over our lives and as much become an idol?

Our Lord demands that we live with paradox and joyfully so. He who said that the last would be first, and the least greatest, knows that we must leave some of the loose ends untied. My words are not therefore a plea for obscurantism or extreme subjectivism. They are a plea for humility, epistemological humility driven by passion, for it is these two which bring integration but, more importantly, integrity.

". . . he humbled himself
and became obedient to
death, even death on a
cross. Therefore God
exalted him . . ."

Philippians 2:8-9, NIV

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