

SNARES OF THE DEVIL

2. DISILLUSIONMENT

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

July 30, 1978

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In 1932 many liberal Protestants were shaken up by a book with the title Moral Man, Immoral Society. One of the objectives of the book was to challenge the naive optimism with which many Protestant leaders seemed to view human affairs. The author aimed at shattering illusions. Yet in one paradoxical passage that became famous he suggested that illusions may serve a useful purpose.

Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. The truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realized by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted.

That is a fair sample of what might be called the quicksand prose style of Reinhold Niebuhr. To put his thought more simply: it's good for people to have a few inspiring illusions because so long as people believe in them there is a chance those illusions may turn into reality.

That is an intriguing idea. But I don't want to play with it today. I want to take my point of departure from the common sense assumption that in general it is better not to try to live by illusions. If that is a correct assumption, then it follows that in general disillusionment is a needful thing. For disillusionment means literally getting rid of our illusions.

Yet, as I observed last week, the devil is very adept at using the good things: disillusionment provides the devil with an opening because it creates a spiritual vacuum. Jesus told a story that may have some bearing here. He spoke of an evil spirit that was cast out of a man only to return later with seven of his friends. The meaning of this parable is obscure. But Jesus may have been observing that the human spirit cannot remain empty. Unless an unhealthy commitment is replaced by a healthy one some worse evil may come along and fill up the vacuum. When we lose some illusion that we have clung to with great passion and conviction, the emptiness that follows will crave some new occupant. And that may turn out to be alcohol or drugs or some crazy and destructive movement.

Disillusionment provides the devil with an opportunity too because it usually results in a pain in the ego. We discover that our trust is violated, our confidence misplaced. We find that we have been foolish. The cardinal sins of pride and unbelief are bound to go into action.

This morning, however, I should like to point up two practical ways in which disillusionment often becomes our moral undoing. The first way is the excuse for inaction; the second, the pretext for wrong action.

Let us look first at the excuse for inaction. Disillusionment always has a paralytic effect. It tends to immobilize us. I think this effect explains in part Hamlet's situation in Shakespeare's play. When he found out

that his mother had conspired with his uncle to murder his father, his faith was shattered, life lost meaning and he could not summon up the motivation to do anything about the situation.

No doubt that does not explain Hamlet's state of mind entirely. When I was a freshmen in college I wrote a paper for an English course in which I said something along these lines. The person grading the paper wrote that I was wrong. "Hamlet must be interpreted," she said - "must" was underlined - "as an intellectual who could not make up his mind." Well, I did not presume at the age of eighteen to be an expert on Hamlet. But that rather narrow interpretation, so dogmatically expressed, disillusioned me somewhat about college professors. I took it as an excuse for inaction and almost flunked the course.

It is natural that serious disillusionment should immobilize us for a time. The trouble is that we often let this immobilization become a habit. Long after the pain of disillusionment is spent, we continue to use our disillusionment in the past as an excuse for our apathy and non-involvement in the present.

Very commonly this pattern of behavior appears in people's church relationships. People have very high expectations of churches and of people who go to churches. When those expectations are not met, people grow disillusioned. Then rather suddenly they may drop out. Twenty years later they still try to base this habit of non-involvement on their experience of disillusionment. "Well, when I was six years old," they tell the inquiring minister, "I had this Sunday School teacher who was so ignorant I never went back." Or, "I was on the Board of Trustees and I knew for a fact that the president wasn't making a pledge, so I quit." There are times when it may be well to shake the dust from your feet at a particular congregation. But to turn your back on the whole church because some of its members turned out to belong to the communion of sinners is a disproportionate reaction. Yet people do that all the time. They remain uninvolved because of some past grievance and often luxuriate in their righteous indignation.

In the larger sense disillusionment may lead to a general apathy about the state of the world. After Vietnam and Watergate and Bert Lance who cares? It is a natural reaction. But as time goes on it becomes a convenient excuse for ignoring the responsibilities of citizenship and letting the world go to the devil. And believe this: if we let it, it will!

Disillusionment becomes an excuse for inaction. It may also turn into a pretext for wrong action.

After World War I feelings of disillusionment were very wide spread. The overly optimistic spirit of a quieter and more stable age gave way to cynicism. In Germany especially a season of moral decadence entered in, but in most other countries of the western world as well the pleasure principle took over and old standards of behavior began to fall. The spirit of disillusionment was not the only factor in this development, but it was a significant contributing factor, I think. The seeds of our present moral chaos were sown in the disillusionment experienced by "the lost generation" of the Nineteen-twenties.

Sometimes disillusionment may inspire a kind of vengeance in people. Let us imagine an idealistic young person entering a profession which he always has looked to with respect and whose representatives he always has

admired. He discovers a great deal of dishonest activity going on in his chosen field. People deal in shoddy merchandise and perform services in an inferior manner. People undercut their colleagues and play dirty tricks on their competitors. Clients or customers are taken advantage of and shady tax practices continually flout the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. Out of his hurt and rage this person who went into his work with so much idealism begins to outdo his associates in dishonesty and ruthlessness. He acts not so much out of a desire for gain as out of revenge upon a system that he feels has misled him and abused his sensibilities.

The time may come, however, when the rage wears off. The emotional force of such professional disillusionment is finally spent. The individual isn't motivated by righteous indignation any more. Still, the habit of dishonest professional conduct has been established and he is profiting by that habit. Now his former disillusionment becomes a pretext for his crookedness. He uses it to justify his behavior. "Everybody does it," he says. "I used to believe otherwise, but I soon learned how things really are."

Even though we do not condone the behavior that may result, we may sympathize with those whose genuine disillusionment induces them to strike out in anger against society and its institutions. It is much harder to sympathize when disillusionment becomes merely a fashionable pretext for immoral behavior. That is what has happened lately with people's attitudes and behavior respecting marriage. Surely there is some reason to feel disillusioned about marriage right now. Every time you turn around you hear of another divorce. Sometimes the disillusionment is felt very deeply by individuals and its emotional impact leads them to reject the possibility of marriage. In many more cases, however, one feels that this disillusionment is but a fashionable pretext for adopting so-called "alternative lifestyles". Disillusionment about marriage right now is a social cliché, an attitudinal fad. As such it deserves no more respect than the various hypocrisies invented by people of earlier generations to justify their licentiousness and irresponsibility.

Perhaps it is true to say that one of the chief failings of society at this hour of history is that people enjoy too much the luxury of living out of their disillusionment. This is a form of escapism equally dangerous as that in which people live entirely out of their illusions. What we need today is a constructive realism in which people work together to rebuild those social institutions which seem to be failing us. This rebuilding process will require the courage to face the fact that very often persons and communities will fall short of our expectations. It also will require that degree of moral discipline which enables people to adhere faithfully to their values even when those values do not appear very popular or very effective.

The pressure toward conformity in modern life may be one factor behind the revival of this gospel of self-fulfillment. It is a negative factor. More positive is the increased opportunity modern life brings for individual expression.

People are freer today to move around. They live longer, and young people are in a world which offers a great variety of options. For most of history people made certain basic decisions when they were very young. As to tell the truth, those decisions were largely made for them. Where you would live, what kind of work you would do, what church you would go to, what you would be married to, these decisions were made almost at the start.