

SNARES OF THE DEVIL

3. SELF-FULFILLMENT

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I have a feeling that there is another gospel in the air today. It might be called the gospel of self-fulfillment. I suspect that there are a good many books that preach it. I have not read those books. But I feel this message coming through to me by a kind of osmosis. It is all around us.

Since I have received the gospel of self-fulfillment in this indirect way, my knowledge of it is vague. Perhaps this gospel itself is vague as most gospels are these days. However, I think I do grasp what this gospel is saying. It tells us that we should take with the utmost seriousness the wise saying that Shakespeare put into the mouth of silly old Polonius - "This above all, to thine own self be true." What matters in the life of any person is that the person develop his or her own potentiality, let his or her own self flower according to his or her own needs and inclinations. Every person is like a seed with its own unique character and destiny. That seed should be permitted to grow and develop into its own kind of plant and not be grafted on to something else.

This is an old doctrine. People repeat it again today as if it were something new. That must have something to do with the times in which we live. I suspect one source of this renewed emphasis on self-fulfillment is the protest against an homogenized humanity.

The tendency of modern society seems to make everyone alike. So people try to assert their independence and individuality. Paradoxically this effort becomes a crowd affair; it leads to fads. Thus in the early fifties we had "Do it yourself." People who never had a screwdriver in their hands before were assembling spaceships in their backyards.

The late fifties brought us "Think for yourself." People got wise to the virtue of filter cigarettes.

With the sixties came "Do your own thing." Now people switched from filters to pot.

The current hour is freer of slogans. But we are the heirs of all these earlier movements toward individual identity. In quieter ways people go around with chins extended declaring that they will do what's right for them and nobody else.

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, stay young longer. They share in a world which offers a great variety of options. For most of history people made certain basic decisions when they were very young, - or 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, who you would be married to, those decisions were made almost at the start

and they were considered quite final. Nowadays people see less reason to lock themselves in to such finalities. They feel that as they grow and develop as persons new decisions may be in order.

More positive too is the feminist movement. Here we meet the concern that women live as persons in their own right. They are not simply the adjunct to some male person. The notion that a woman can only fulfill herself through her husband or her children is challenged and rightly so. Sometimes the rhetoric goes too far when it is stated that no person should ever define herself in relation to any other person. But human experience shows that often overstatement is the only way you can get a point across against stubborn resistance.

So much for my thumbnail analysis of some of the factors active in the current concern about self-fulfillment. If I have hinted that sometimes these factors lead to odd results, I do not deny the surpassing importance of the concern itself. I would be the last person to deny that each individual not only should be afforded the freedom to work out his own personhood, but that he has as well the sacred calling to become that person God intended him to be.

Who would quarrel with the principle that self-fulfillment is the goal of every self's existence? The gospel of self-fulfillment, as I have called it, is a true gospel in its aim. Yet it can lead to disastrous consequences. No doubt it was on the grounds of self-fulfillment that Satan appealed to Jesus out in the wilderness. "The kingdoms of the world and the glory of them." What more fulfilling goal for a talented leader? But there is always a snare in the devil's shining words.

Perhaps there are two basic ways in which the shining gospel of self-fulfillment becomes a snare to catch us.

The first way is by tempting us to forsake our own true self.

That happened to the prodigal son. Had he been around today he probably would have given his father some spiel about self-fulfillment. He would have said, "I have to lead my own life and do what's right for me." His father could not argue with the principle; he had reason to be worried though about the practice. As matters turned out this son who went out to fulfill himself lost contact with himself. That "far country," was remote not only geographically, but spiritually, from his true destiny. His swinging lifestyle deposited him on the mounting pile of human rubble. Finally he realized that his frantic quest for self-fulfillment only led to self-betrayal.

"But when he came to himself, he said...."

That's the turning point of his story. It is the turning point in many stories.

A practical truth about human beings is that people tend to confuse self-fulfillment with self-indulgence.

Their talk about expressing themselves and realizing their potential is only a sophisticated way of saying that they want to do what they want to do. "I did it my way", the song says. It is a stirring tune. But it is odd how many of these "my ways" turn out to be very much the same in the end and how demeaning they are both to the people who walk in them and the people who get walked over.

Thomas Merton wrote that true sanctity lies in being yourself, but that "every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person, a false self." That false self, he says, is the one that lives only out of its egocentric desires. It fails to see that its true identity lies "hidden in the love of God."

The first temptation is to use self-fulfillment as a screen for self-indulgence.

The second temptation is to think we can find ourselves by forsaking other selves.

The stories of the prodigal son and of Ruth may seem to present us with two unhealthy extremes. The prodigal son was inconsiderate of other people and indifferent to family ties. But perhaps Ruth erred in the other direction. Wasn't Naomi right? Should not Ruth have followed her sister's example, stayed in her own country and found another husband among her own people? We are suspicious of people who cling slavishly to others, who have no personality except that which is reflected off someone else. There is a kind of reverse egotism about such self-sacrificing souls that probably does as much harm as the open egotism of the person who only looks out for number one.

We might fault Ruth on the grounds that she should pursue a more independent destiny. But the author of her story does not see her in that light. He pictures her as finding herself through commitments beyond herself. In the modern world we tend to see Ruth's commitment in very individualistic terms. She was devoted to Naomi. But it is quite likely that the author wanted to feature loyalty to family ties and to the customs that in that culture served to strengthen those ties. Thus Ruth seeks out her dead husband's kinsman, Boaz, rather than some younger and richer man. And Boaz, who is wholly honorable throughout, goes beyond the letter of custom in accepting his family obligation to marry Ruth. The story ends with everybody living happily fulfilled through relationships that sustain the ongoing life of the family.

Customs change, but Ruth's story may continue to teach us that self-fulfillment takes place in the context of human relationships. If we try to fulfill ourselves without reference to other people: their needs, their rights, their investment in our lives, we not only act selfishly, but we destroy those relationships we need to be ourselves.

Here we arrive at one of life's supreme challenges. In any human relationship there needs to be some balance between each person's individuality and the relationship itself. This is not simply a trade-off situation in which you give up so much individuality in order to accommodate the other person. The matter is more complicated than that. For unless the other person is fully expressing his or her own personality there is less of a person there to relate to and the relationship is less rich. Perhaps the best way to put this matter is to say that the aim is for people to fulfill themselves through the relationship rather than in spite of it.

Marriage is the most demanding human relationship, so it is natural that this challenge should be most demanding there. Today, however, this challenge to marriage takes on new dimensions. So many wives are concluding, quite rightly, that they cannot become wholly themselves just by being wives. So they seek other outlets for their creativity. That can prove threatening to the husband who tends to feel that the privilege of living with him ought to be sufficiently fulfilling for any woman.

On the other hand, a man may come home in the evening and say, "I am resigning from the bank. All my life I've wanted to work with growing things and now I am going to fulfill my destiny as a landscape gardener. Now that you are fulfilling yourself through such a high-paying job, there is no reason why I should not do my thing." That can prove threatening to a wife who feels that she bargained for a banker, not a weed-puller, and no matter how liberated she claims to be, deep down she still derives her status and security from her husband.

Every day in every home such challenges arise, though usually in milder form. They are unavoidable. It is essential that each person be true to himself or herself and not feel imprisoned by the other person's expectations. Yet one must also consider the other person's need for fulfillment. What infinite sensitivity that requires! How to fulfill self through the relationship rather than in spite of it is the aim. Once we decide fulfillment can only come in spite of the relationship that relationship is doomed.

The great temptation is to believe that if we just pursue our own happiness relentlessly we and everybody else will be better off. This is the devil's snare hidden within the gospel of self-fulfillment. It leads us through self-indulgence to forsaking both ourselves and others.

You see, there is something fundamentally wrong with self-fulfillment taken as a gospel or comprehensive way of life. Any gospel that takes its point of departure from self will lead us right back where it began - to our own selfishness. There is only one way to fulfill the self and that is through a commitment beyond the self. Here is where the gospel of Christ confronts that ancient pagan philosophy of self-fulfillment.

"He who loses his self will find it." *

Which means in practice, that if we were less frantic about fulfilling ourselves and more urgent about carrying forward the commandment of love to God and neighbor, we would get a lot closer to that self we are meant to be.

* The word in Jesus' language had a double meaning. It meant both "life" and "self."