Transcending Contempt
Session Three
January 20th, 2024
The Rev. Christopher H. Martin
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, San Rafael, California

Separating from the Crowd

Agenda

9:00 Gather in both Duncan Hall and Zoom
9:05 Break into groups of three
9:20 Gather back into two larger groups, in Duncan Hall and Zoom
9:30 Zoom feed switches to Duncan Hall; Tanner and Christopher report back
9:35 Teaching
9:55 Q & A

Teaching

I. Introduction

  A. Practicing WAG, Nurturing Magnanimity, now a third practice

  B. Words: Leveling, Single Individual, Aware, Temporal Halo, Stewardship (Custodian?)

  C. Introduction to Soren Kierkegaard

II. The Present Age - A Popular Essay

  A. Leveling: society's way to pull down individuals who challenge common sense

  B. Single Individual: It was Regine, now it's each of us

C. Aware: "The 'crowd' is really what I have made my polemical target, and it was Socrates who taught me. I want to make people aware so that they don't waste their lives and fritter them away."

III. Temporal Halo

A. Woolf: human consciousness as we actually experience it

B. Smith: each of our Temporal Halos is as unique as our fingerprint

C. Smith: our family histories give both nourishment and poison

IV. Stewarding Your Halo

A. A Morning Practice: attend to your halo like a pilot checking all her instruments before flying her plane

B. Past, Family, Friends, Future. Future as Hope. Hope is:
1. a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul (Heb. 6:19)
2. akin to love because it's a desire
3. akin to wonder because we can't know or describe what we hope for
4. akin to attention because it's unhurried
5. akin to gratitude because it's labor toward a gift.

C. Like a Steward (I Cor. 4:1) or like a Custodian because you're dealing with the crap.

Questions for Groups of Three at the Beginning of Session Four

1. Did you reflect this week on your four grandparents (behind you)? What were the names of the nourishment and the poison you received from them?
2. How did you reflect on family (to your right) and friends (to your left)?
3. Has your sense of hope been enriched as you've identified it as akin to love, wonder attention and gratitude?

Supplemental Material

1. Summary of The Present Age from Stephen Backhouse's Kierkegaard: A Single Life.
2. Description of a person's halo from Virginia Woolf's essay Modern Fiction.
3. Description of our temporal halo from James K. A. Smith's How To Inhabit Time

The Five Practices

1. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ ING _ _ _

2. _ _ _ _ _ _ ING _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

3. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ ING _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

where it is recognised that if anyone is to know the truth of the incarnate God, they will have to do so as Subjects. This relation is not only highly personal, it is also highly challenging to the forms of religion and identity usually found in Christendom. "The immorality of our age is perhaps not lust and pleasure and sensuality, but rather a pantheistic, debauched contempt for individual human beings. . . . Just as in the desert individuals must travel in large caravans out of fear of robbers and wild animals, so individuals today have a horror of existence because it is godforsaken; they dare to live only in great herds and cling together *en masse* in order to be at least something" (355–56).

Postscript calls the common-sense religion of cultures and groups "Religiousness A," and differentiates this with "Religiousness B," which recognises the inner and personally reflective nature of Christianity that cannot be had simply by being part of a Christianised culture. The clash between most forms of Christianity and authentic Christianity will become explicit in the latter stages of Kierkegaard's life, yet it is implicit here too. "Now, if someone thinks that this is not quite right, that he is not a Christian, he is considered an eccentric. His wife says to him: 'How can you not be a Christian? You are Danish aren't you? Doesn't the geography book say that the predominant religion in Denmark is Lutheran-Christian? . . . Don't you tend to your work in the office as a good civil servant; aren't you a good subject in a Christian nation, in a Lutheran Christian state? So of course you are a Christian'" (50–51).

Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review

March 30, 1846

Søren Kierkegaard

"The public is all and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless" (93).

A month after concluding his authorship, Søren published *Two Ages*. However, much like the wily author of *Prefaces*, Søren had a loophole. *Two Ages* is not a book. It is a review of one. Thomasine Gyllembourg was a celebrated author, and Søren was an admirer of her novels, which he thought brilliantly captured the tensions of contemporary life. His *Two Ages* is an extended review of her novel of the same name. The first two sections pertain to the novel, while the final section consists of an essay on the theme of the spirits of the age. This last section sometimes appears separately under the title *The Present Age*.

Søren identifies two competing spirits that put their stamp on any given era, an ethos of revolution and decision, and an ethos of reflection, deliberation, and talk. Both spirits have their place, but the contemporary age has gone too far in one direction. "In contrast to the age of revolution, which took action, the present age is an age of publicity, the age of miscellaneous announcements: nothing happens but still there is endless publicity" (70).

In an age overtaken by reflection, talking about doing something important replaces actually doing it. The crowd likes the appearance of decisiveness more than it tolerates the reality of it. Indeed, the crowd works to halt the individual who ventures out on his own. "Entrapped air always becomes noxious, and the entrapment of reflection with no ventilating action or event develops censorious envy" (82). Kierkegaard's name for the way societies work to pull down any member who acts in a way that challenges its common sense is "levelling." Levelling is the process of abstraction, whereby decisive choices are stripped of their power by being morphed into "ideas" or "worldviews," and persons are subsumed into groups. Levelling happens wherever tribes, generations, churches, or countries lay claim to individual allegiance, but Søren has a catch-all term: "For levelling to take place, a phantom must first be raised . . . a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage—and this phantom is the public" (90). One of the public's most potent weapons in the war to defend itself against individuals

taking their existence seriously is an endless stream of celebrity gossip, manufactured ideological conflict, and opinion presented as facts no one owns but everyone has. Søren takes aim especially at the popular press as an agent for levelling. Using the press, the public is preserved through chatter. "What is it to chatter? It is the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking. Only the person who can remain essentially silent can speak essentially, can act essentially. Silence is inwardness. [. . .] But chattering dreads the moment of silence, which would reveal the emptiness" (97–98). It's not all bad however. Although the envious public inevitably opposes anyone who challenges its power, the result is the individual will be, finally, exactly where they need to be if they are to meet God. Stripped of any illusion that "the public" holds any truth, love, or authenticity, the person who has been levelled might find himself catapulted "into the embrace of the Eternal" (89). If any of this seems an unlikely scenario, it is worth noting that in the months leading up to the publication of *Two Ages* Søren himself had been subject to ceaseless mockery by the popular press and had himself experienced a profound realisation of where he stood in relation to the public, his vocation, and his God.

Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits

March 13, 1847

Søren Kierkegaard

Søren did not stop writing in 1846, but this was all in his private journals, and it was almost a full year after *Postscript* and *Two Ages* that the public was presented with another publication. *Various Spirits* dispenses with much of the satire and ambiguity of the previous authorship and is more seriously Christian than even the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* of a few years previous. The whole is divided into three distinct parts: purity of heart, the lilies of the field, and the gospel of

suffering. The discourses have since developed a reputation as spiritual classics of discipleship and devotion; however, judging by the lack of reviews, they did not make much of an impact on Kierkegaard's first intended audience.

Purity concerns integrity and wholeness of purpose. Part one's constant theme is "purity of heart is to will one thing." The reader is continually reminded they are responsible for the condition of their own souls. It is well-known men are judged at the eleventh hour, but in the eyes of Eternity, "it is always at the eleventh hour" (14). The essay spends less time on "purity" than many people might expect who are used to calls to repentance in the face of judgement. Instead the piece focuses on what it might mean to will one thing. Only one thing is Good, and that is the will of God. There are many barriers to willing the will of God, all of which Søren dubs double-mindedness. The double-minded one might will to be good for men's approval or for godly rewards or out of fear of punishment. No matter what the good intention might be, the self is conflicted because it is not desiring the Good in itself. The self is in rebellion against itself and against God. It needs reconciliation, an act of grace that comes every time an individual repents. What is more, repentance is not a one-off event. The multifarious nature of life means the individual needs to always be on guard: true repentance is accompanied by constant anxiety (in the Kierkegaardian sense), whereby God continually renews the self in wholeness.

Lilies celebrate what it is to be a flourishing, human life. A controlling theme is of contentment and of the solid self in the face of the anxiety of the crowd. Consider the lilies. Once upon a time there was a lily who stood alone in a dell, with only some small flowers and nettles for company. He was happy until one day a malicious bird flitted by, filling the lily's head with tales of more beautiful lilies, growing in masses beyond the dell. The lily grew troubled. Why was it secluded, all alone, with only weeds for company? The lily wished to be magnificent too, so he asked the bird to carry him to the yonder hill. The bird plucked the

or forgetting to think important, the crudity and coarseness of his human beings. Yet what more damaging criticism can there be both of his earth and of his Heaven than that they are to be inhabited here and hereafter by his Joans and his Peters?* Does not the inferiority of their natures tarnish whatever institutions and ideals may be provided for them by the generosity of their creator? Nor, profoundly though we respect the integrity and humanity of Mr Galsworthy, shall we find what we seek in his pages.

If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.

We have to admit that we are exacting, and, further, that we find it difficult to justify our discontent by explaining what it is that we exact. We frame our question differently at different times. But it reappears most persistently as we drop the finished novel on the crest of a sigh—Is it worth while? What is the point of it all? Can it be that, owing to one of those little deviations which the human spirit seems to make from time to time, Mr Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worth while. It is a confession of vagueness to have to make use of such a figure as this, but we scarcely better the matter by speaking, as critics are prone to do, of reality. Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccably that if all his figures were to

come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday,* the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.

It is, at any rate, in some such fashion as this that we seek to define the quality which distinguishes the work of several young writers, among whom Mr James Joyce is the most notable, from that of their predecessors. They attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. Any one who has read

I was absorbed by the (sadly overlooked) novel *Ash before Oak*, by a British writer named Jeremy Cooper. The novel takes the form of a fictional journal. The diary, we realize, is an act of survival by a middle-aged man fighting the demons of a suicidal depression on a secluded estate in Somerset. He chronicles the seasons, the rhythms of fauna and flora, with Dillardesque attention to the natural world that feels so near. The entry dated "4 May" contains a simple but moving observation:

> Four rabbits munch on the grass in the old orchard, the setting sun angled so low that its rays shine through their ears. The fallen apple tree bears blossom, I'm astonished to see.[1]

The fallen tree promising fruit. Spring's resurrection among the dead. A loss that produces. This is the arc of temporality.

* * *

From the vantage point of my window seat, descending from thirty thousand feet, I can see a wending river carved through a verdant plain. From this height it is a muddy snake, a liquid road, an ancient path. But then I note something that jars a memory from a high school geography class: what looks like an orphaned bend, as if a liquid amoeba hived off a portion of itself, leaving a horseshoe of water alongside. It's an oxbow lake formed by the persistent erosion of the banks where the river turns. Over years and years, the steadfast current of the river chomps at the banks until, eventually, the S curve leaves a C when the river breaks through, forging a new, straighter channel. The old path that was alive with running water is amputated, sequestered, left behind. The oxbow lake is a geological legacy: set alongside the incessant flow of the hungry river, the oxbow is embanked by sedimentary deposits of the passing

water. Without a source, it is now at the mercy of evaporation. Its days are numbered, a reminder of what was visible from the river that is now passing by.

* * *

God's creative word, "Let there be . . . ," started the clock. For everything created, to be is to be temporal, and to be temporal is to be indebted to a past and oriented toward a future. It is to move in a world where things come to be and pass away: events, words, attention, activities all have the characteristic of a kind of passing. As Augustine observes in his reflection on time, language is like an audible clock: communication is possible only if words emerge then fade, making way for the next word in the sentence.[2] We ride the cusp of a wave we call the present, driven by the past and headed for the shore of the future.

11.31.41

But what I'm calling "temporality" is more than just the tick-tock of time's passing. Unlike a shoreline or a statue, human beings are not merely subject to time's passage, the ebb and flow of coming to be and passing away, creation and erosion. Time is not just an environmental condition that impinges upon us like weather. Human beings dwell temporally. Time doesn't just wash over us like rain, because our very being is temporally porous. To be temporal is to be the sort of creature who absorbs time and its effects. A rolling stone might carry no moss, but a temporal human being picks up and carries an entire history as they roll through a lifetime. This is a persistent theme, for instance, in Tim O'Brien's landmark novel *The Things They Carried*. While on one level it is a novel about the Vietnam War, the story compels almost universal interest because it tells us something about the human condition. What he says about these soldiers' experiences is portable in a way: "They carried

all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried."[3]

Time is like another oxygen of creaturehood. The border between body and environment is incessantly open. There is a constant exchange of inside and outside. In the same way that air is inhaled and lives within us, enabling us to live, so time is absorbed as history—not in the sense of past events but as the way time lives on. Forgetting is the exhale of a temporal being, but with every breath, something has been kept.

There is a school of thought in philosophy that has been especially attuned to the dynamics of temporality and the way we are shaped by history. It is called "phenomenology" and traces its roots to a German philosopher named Edmund Husserl. Perhaps the most succinct way to describe phenomenology is to say that it is a philosophy of experience—a philosophical project that tries to understand *how* we experience the world.[4]

Husserl spent a lifetime trying to understand this temporal character of selfhood and identity, and I've no doubt absorbed more from him than I realize. Indeed, this illustrates one of Husserl's key insights: to be is to have been, and to have been is to have bumped up against others who rub off on us. They leave marks we might not always see. More than marks: they leave dents and deposits. Or they drill wells that become underground reservoirs from which we drink even if we don't realize it.

Husserl often invoked the metaphor of horizons—the edges of our world we see when we look in the distance. We are surrounded by horizons that function like a frame for our experience. Our horizons are always indexed to some location. If I am down in the valley, or walking the chasm between midtown skyscrapers, my horizon is limited, constrained. If I climb to the top of the bluff, or drive through the western plains, my horizons swell and expand. But even on that plain, my horizons shift with my location: new sights emerge, others disappear in

my wake. Yet even what disappears behind me is carried in me in some way. What I *have* encountered, now in the rearview mirror, primes me for what I *will* encounter.

In the same way that my horizons shift with my body, so I move through time with what Husserl describes as a "temporal halo" formed by the horizons of past and future. Consciousness, he says, is both "retentional" and "apprehensive": we retain a past and we anticipate a future, which is precisely why my own consciousness eludes me.[5] I don't always know what I remember and hope. I am not always aware of what I carry and what I anticipate. The measure of my "I" is always broader than this now of which I am conscious. Every human, as a temporal being, is something like an icon whose possibilities are illuminated by the halo of past and future. Every self has a history. Phenomenology—the method of philosophy founded and practiced by Husserl—is an investigation of this buried history, a philosophical archaeology of the concealed, unconscious life that attends us as creatures in time.

This is probably why there is a natural resonance between phenomenology and psychotherapy. It might also explain why my own experience in therapy opened up new vistas of philosophical curiosity. Eventually I came to realize: my therapist was inviting me, in a sense, to turn my phenomenological tools on myself. That map exercise was prompting me to see the temporal halo of my own selfhood. Husserl offers a technical concept that is illuminating here. My "I," he says, is not just given, a thing of nature; I am *generated*: I am put together, "come about," over time. My self (what philosophers like to call an *ego*, "I am" in Latin) has a history, and at the bottom of the "I" is what Husserl calls a "substrate of habitualities."[6] This "substrate" can be understood as a base layer of experiences that become habits for me and make further experience possible. The history of my own experiences becomes a seedbed

cultivated by time so that future experiences have possibilities to grow.

These habits of being ("habitualities") are my ways of being in the world that slowly build up over a lifetime, little deposits and accretions that constitute what I carry.[7] These are not hard-wired instincts; they are dispositions that I've acquired and learned from experience. Opening up the world for me, these past experiences make it possible for me to experience. In that sense, it is my history with the world that propels me into the future. My history makes me "me." The nexus of habitualities that is "me" is utterly distinct, even if I've shared a world alongside a million others. Like my fingerprint or my gait or my retinal map, my temporal halo is a distinct signature of my existence.

On the one hand, these habits of being make my life possible; on the other hand, these habits and dispositions and learned ways of being in the world also come with their limits. Some of my habitualities mean I walk through this world with a limp. I carry them like a burden. Wounds shut down possibility. Some of my formative experiences have disposed me to ignore and exclude, willfully indulging the blind spots I've inherited. Racism, for example, is not just an attitude but a bodily schema of habitualities that I absorb over time.[8] But compassion can become the same sort of dispositional habit, a bodily disposition woven into my very being because I have learned what it means to be vulnerable and to be cared for. Over time, someone has both showed me compassion and showed me how to be compassionate, and my history has been an opportunity to practice my way into being compassionate. Or at least that's my hope!

I love it that Husserl, the fusty German phenomenologist, says that my unique "substrate of habitualities" is the "abiding style" of my identity. Our selves are fashioned; we are adorned with histories that incline us to saunter, swagger, or shuffle.

Given our histories, some of us move through the world with a cape; some of us don baggy sweaters we hide behind; some of us still experience the world as if exposed. The question isn't whether we have a style but which style we've (unconsciously) adopted given our histories. We wear time.

And this is true not just for me or you. It's true for every *us*. These same dynamics are communally and collectively true. As Anthony Steinbock puts it, *who* we are is *how* we are.[9] We share horizons; each collective has its own temporal halo.

System

Our temporality is sticky: we pick up things along the way—things we need, things we cherish, things that weigh us down. We move through time not just ticking along from moment to moment but with a temporal halo of retention and anticipation. So what does it mean to be faithful amid such flux? What does it mean to be steadfast when, as a creature, I am ever unfolding? Spiritual timekeeping is the way we attempt to reckon with our temporality.

* * *

A feature of temporality that we either downplay or resist is the profound *contingency* of our existence.[10] When we say something is "contingent," we simply mean that it *might not have been*, doesn't *have* to be, and could have been otherwise. And that is true of the entirety of the created cosmos, brought into existence by the free act of a bountiful, loving God. All of creation might not have been. That doesn't make creation random or arbitrary, only contingent.

The contingency at the origin of the cosmos courses through it still. History is the zig and zag of choices and events that both open and close possibilities. Each zig sets a course, each zag charts a trajectory, each choice forges new possibilities and leaves some impossibilities in its wake.