Do Not Damage the Oil or the Wine

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In two weeks, when you have packed up your student apartment or Old Mill hovel, put your car in gear and indulged sweet-sorrow in one bleeding, rear-view-mirror glance at the UD tower, you will see something unsettling. Over the course of the next two weeks—after being squeezed one final time by exams—galas and graduation cards will continue to push you along. Fatherly biceps, our metaphorical forceps, expedite the process by loading your personal affects, and all at once, it seems, drama peters out in desolation and you are out. Your eyes are adjusting to a light on the world that is unflattering, unmerciful—the glare of knowledge.

You see the world differently now, but reflected in this new world—staring back at you—you now perceive the two eyes that look into the world and these eyes have a disconcerting foreignness about them. The world does not seem the same because you do not see the same. You have eaten of the fruit of Augustine and Nietzsche, and the world before you has been rendered naked. As you are driving away, somewhere soon—probably in Oklahoma—you will see yourself reflected in the reality that you now perceive as if for the first time, and you will see yourself as you now are, and you will realize that you are different.

A different mind now looks out at the world through the same two eyes that you had in high-school. You experience the discomfiture of a knowledge that pierces to what lies under the veil. Everything is the same... but in a Heraclitean slight-of-hand, the passing of your years at UD has taken away sameness—and with it security. You seem to see the world for what it is now—in the amber-lit dusk splendor of its promise and in the Oklahoma-grey plainness of its banality; in its proximity to and in its distance from
God. Your wide-eyed, unquestioning affirmation of your surroundings is gone—instead you approach the world with diffidence and distinctions.

A well intentioned wariness is now easily discernable in your closest relations. You don’t see the world in the same way, but neither do those around you see you in the same way. Perhaps you’ll overhear your mother, unsure of what to make of the change in her child, confide to her friends that you are “into philosophy”. Your old friends at home will have nearly given up on you if they haven’t already. Your father may try with belied casualness to explain to you the difference between intellectual hobbies on the one hand and paying bills on the other. In short, everyone still likes you, but no one is exactly sure of what to make of you now—you seem different and, not to put too fine a point on it, a little strange.

You will come to understand that you are not quite at home in a world that was once your own. When you go home or go on from UD, you are going into a world that is foreign, but you go in good company. The Prologue to John’s Gospel tells us that Christ “came among his own and his own received him not”.

You are coming into a world that is a bit foreign, there is no question about that; how you should come into that world is a question. In this connection, I would like to rehearse a well known parable from Lk 10:

*A lawyer stood up and put [Jesus] to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"*
And he said to him, "what is written in the law? How does it read to you?"
And he answered, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."
And he said to him, "you have answered correctly; do this and you will live."
But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "and who is my neighbor?"

This question provides the occasion for Jesus’ telling a parable that only Luke records. Continuing,

Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead."

Having been overlooked by a priest and a Levite, the half-dead man is assisted by a Samaritan, someone who would have been held in contempt by Jesus’ Jewish audience. The parable goes on,

"But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. "On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers'
hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

Now, it is unadvisable—not to mention impossible—to interpret the Bible more allegorically than does Origen. However, since I am much inclined to go on mixing metaphors and since Christ tells the young lawyer at the end of the parable, "go and do likewise", meaning the command also for us, I must ask how this is in any way a lesson for us.

Origen points out to us, in his interpretation, something that we should have already noticed in the story. That is, that the Samaritan seems already to have on his own person the necessary supplies for healing. Origen says:

You should know that, according to God’s providence, this Samaritan was going down to care for the man who had fallen among thieves. You learn that clearly from the fact that he had bandages, oil, and wine with him. I do not think that the Samaritan carried these things with him only on behalf of that one, half-dead man, but also on behalf of others who, for various reason, had been wounded and needed bandages, oil and wine.

No one carries these things around except for a purpose. Like the Samaritan, perhaps even providentially, you have been equipped with certain supplies for a given purpose. Origen sums up matters in one terse sentence, "He had oil." You too carry oil.
Oil. It is difficult to understand today that oil is something very good. For example, today it is not considered good manners to be oily. Yet, calorie-dense oil is a valid metaphor for the rich liberal-arts education that you now have ‘under your belts’. It provides a helpful counter-image to the jejune learning—etymologically, the fasted or not-full-of-food learning—that characterizes much of today’s academic curiosity that ever eats but is never filled. The oil that you have, an understanding of the liberal arts, is fuel for that highest of all natural human activities that is thinking. From the University of Dallas you have not principally learned facts, however cleverly arranged. You have acquired, first and foremost, an ability; you have learned not what to think about but how to think. The ability to think, to be an ‘independent thinker’ as the UD byword goes, is based squarely the enterprise of thinking as it has been carried out through the centuries. The great minds of history have petitioned the cosmos, the soul and being itself; the truth they have extracted from oleiferous being, you have collected. Mendicant before these minds you have received oil in alms, as fuel for your own thinking. Unless you eat from this wisdom that you cannot exhaust, you will not have the strength to engage the enterprise of thinking yourself. Independent thinking is, however paradoxically, rooted in the oil of tradition.

But oil is not only to be eaten; it must be consumed in still another way—oil burns. Like the wise virgins from a different parable, you put your oil in lamps that burn in vigil, expecting the advent of Christ the groom. Your oil, the liberal arts, burns ardently, but not for the sake of its own glow. The liberal arts are the crystallization of man’s desire. The classics of our tradition are the product of desperate passion, of an élan to which we cannot
put a name until it is named; the great minds offer us the same oil, which, when burnt, leaves us suffused in the same flames of anticipation. The liberal arts pine in their poetry and grope in their philosophy toward consummation; they burn in the anticipation of an encounter, not with other ideas, but with the person of Jesus Christ.

You also have wine. This, unlike the oil, is not something that we have given to you, but something that you have given to each other, for the wine can be likened to charity, and charity is more lived than learned. You gave it to each other at 3 A.M., when you were still up talking about Plato and still arguing civilly. You gave it to each other as many times as you rejoiced with the rejoicing and wept with the sorrowing. The friendships that you have formed here have formed you; you are different people for them.

Charity is a beautiful, blissful thing, as is wine; but we must not overlook the fact that, as with wine, the first drinks in life are rarely pleasurable. As John of the Cross tells us that the presence in the soul of the God-who-is-Love is at first painful—to the point of death—so Origen tells us that the Samaritan, when he cleans the wound of the beaten man, “add[s] in something that stings.” Love stings; love’s pain is felt not only by the lover whose affections are unrequited by the beloved, but also by the beloved who fails to return love to its source. We are the beloved of Love Itself, yet how often do we answer with cold indifference alone. It should not surprise us, then, if the process of our being pulled out of self-destructive self-enclosure is a painful one. Love stings, because it purges man of everything that is not itself. If John of the Cross is correct, the presence of love to us is only painful because of our own lack of love.
Cheap love has its addicts as does cheap wine. You will find that the wine of love that you possess is of a vastly different quality than that of the world. The world is filled with cheap wine—many are the Mogen-David 20/20s, the Boone’s Farms, the Gallos of love. They are the loves of confusion and unmoored sentiment. Your love is different, yours must be different. Yours is the wine of clarity, effecting a “sober drunkenness”; yours is the wine that changes your neighbor into brother, from ‘he’ into ‘you’.

You have oil and wine—fine. But if this is really a lesson for us, you have to have the half-dead in your path—where are they? So we must come back to the question that occasioned Jesus’ parable—the lawyer says, “and who is my neighbor?” It is easy enough for us to pass by the implications of this question for ourselves. If you are like me, you have a tendency to see biblical stories as stories that stay in the past—if I were in their historical circumstances, I would do exactly what they did. “Oh yes, if I were on trial for my faith by the Jews or Romans and on the point of being stoned and even the heavens themselves were about to open up as they did for Stephen, I too would volunteer to be a martyr”; or “Oh yes, if Jesus looked me straight in the eye as he did to the rich young man and said, ‘Go and sell all that you have, and give [it] to the poor’ what would I say? My first thought to this one would be, honestly, ‘what do the poor want with $37?’; but then, I hope, I would say ‘yes’. I also think that if I ever happened to pass a half-dead person, I would pick him up, etc. Good thing for me that none of those things has happened, so I am more or less off the hook—or am I? We fancifully look back to apostolic times as the when-we-would-do-everything-well and in so doing we successfully overlook the here-and-now.
Even supposing such people exist, people half-dead for lack of the liberal arts, street urchins selling match-sticks to buy *Moby Dick*, how do you find these people and what do you say to them? Isn’t anything that we say of the liberal arts to people of the wider world bound to fall on deaf ears, unless of course we have such people under some external control, such as that of quiz grades and Greece trips? How do we get people who have not already paid their tuitions to listen? And once you do have their ears, you can exactly launch into Dante’s Third Canto. Finally, and more to the point, who wants to receive from us a love that stings?

The beginning of an answer seems to lie in a correct relationship with the world. If you have the right disposition toward the world, you will seek out opportunities for changing it, when these do not outright present themselves to you. It seems to me that all of this talk about having a different perspective on the world now and looking for the half-dead can lead us toward some condescending, disdainful elitism. “I am going to fix the world that I hate.” In a certain way, to hate the world is really to fall into the same trap that catches someone all too in love with the world. Hatred and cheap, worldly love are two sides of the same coin; sympathy and antipathy are both, literally, pathetic—one suffers them as passions. In overly attentive revulsion from the world I am very much of the world. The person who hates the world is affected by it no less than the person who has thrown himself headlong into it. Hatred and cheap love are be two, albeit opposed, reactions to the same attractiveness of the world—with either emotion, I am defining myself over/against the world, I am letting the world define me. Where this is tolerated, where this is true, Nietzsche is right about
Your liberal-arts wisdom and hard-won love defy selfishness. A voice in the Book of the Revelation tells the Third Horseman of the Apocalypse to cause great famine, but—the voice warns—'do not damage the oil or the wine'. Your wine and oil will only be exhausted in not being spent. This is now your obligation, to give what you’ve got. Your UD education is not for yourselves alone, but for the world that now thinks you’re a little strange.

Nobody thinks that the world is just fine as it is. Perhaps you see a little deeper into the world’s problems, and are carrying part of the solution—oil
and wine—on your own person. As Origen says finally, identifying the Samaritan with Christ,

[I]t is possible for us to imitate Christ and to pity those who ‘have fallen among thieves.’ We can go to them, bind their wounds, pour in oil and wine, put them on our own beasts, and bear their burdens.

In this address, on behalf of the faculty and staff of the University of Dallas, I begin the intensely unpleasant task of saying good-bye, in the stinging spirit of Christian wine; but I say good-bye only with the hope that I will see you again, in a few years, at some reunion, either in Haggar or in Heaven.