



INTRODUCTION

Five full days I lay incapacitated, unable to move, except to periodically pace around like a teetering lummoX without any discernable direction of travel or purpose of movement. Several times I lay flat on the floor wincing, praying for an early death, while uttering a steady stream of barely audible nonsense statements. This was terror. But it cannot be described, looking back, as merely an experience of terror. It was something else entirely. It was to be fully in the terror.

What was going on? Only an omniscient mind knows for sure. What I can say is something of what happened before and what came afterwards. I had had several painful foot surgeries which made walking arduous to say the least (I assumed a highly awkward, dorky gait in my efforts to redistribute foot pressure), I'd been traveling a lot, was short on finances, had innumerable deadlines to meet for writing projects and, in short, was burning the candle at both ends. But the rub, to be sure, was that I actually felt fine. Peachy even.

One night, however, I took some of the pain medication prescribed to me by my doctor for the post-op recovery process—a fairly strong narcotic. I took one. No effect. One more. Still no effect. Incensed, I took two more. Well now, yes. They took effect. Too much effect. An utterly stupid mistake. I wound up dialing an ambulance as I'd become convinced my heart was going to stop while fantastically over-dramatic visions of my funeral whirled around in my mind. There wasn't much they could do for me at the hospital except to keep me hydrated and calm and, after just a few hours, I was on my way again.



But that's that. It was the five days afterward, even though I was now perfectly healthy and chemically free that put me in a place I pray I never enter into again. Something took hold of me and wouldn't let go. My physical strength completely vanished. I lumbered around stopping only now and then to give vent to the most awful flow of tears I'd ever had. I wonder now whether those tears had been sitting in some deep reservoir somewhere which had finally reached its capacity and could simply no longer hold back the pressure. The floodgate broke open.

And then came the terror. Or, I somehow languidly and unsuspectingly wandered into its chambers. And now I couldn't get out. Terror of something. Some-thing terrible. But what? Being versus nothingness? The unstoppable passage of time and change? Perhaps. Something purely physiological? Maybe. But I assure you, that's of profoundly little consolation. Even if the mind and soul are in the grip of something purely physio-biochemical, it is of little consolation to the recipient since it is precisely the mind and soul which are being attacked. Any such material explanations of the etiological possibilities have as much utility in yielding comfort—for grounding oneself against the perfectly groundless—as ropes of sand holding anchor for a ship.

This cycle continued the full five days. I held on for as long as I could until finally I phoned my wife at work and pleaded with her to come get me and bring me to a hospital. Five minutes later she was there. I stumbled out of the house with a raincoat draped over my head to keep the neighbors or any passersby from catching a glimpse of my expression—an expression I imagine was one of unalloyed horror, lined over with layers of dried tears, and puffed-up flesh. As my darling wife drove me to the ER, she asked me over and over again, 'What's happening?!' I simply screamed, 'I don't know!' Worse, despite all intentions to the contrary, her line of questioning seemed only to throw me deeper into the new private hell I'd discovered.

When we finally pulled up to the emergency room, I nearly fell to the pavement when I opened the car door, but managed to amble my way up to the reception desk when, kerplow, I just fell to the floor. I was soon admitted, gowned and slippers, given a powerful anxiolytic hypnotic, fed, and released about six hours later. They classed the incident medically as an acute anxiety attack. The

incident has never reoccurred, though I cannot, of course, say it never will. That too is the business of an omniscient mind.

But the incident has changed me rather considerably. I've always had a penchant for melancholy. For the most part, I've simply learned to live with it as many others have. Plus, there is such an ample supply of true glimpses of beauty and, more importantly, radiant glimpses of Hope which is the true subject of this book and is precisely that which impels me to plod forward. No doubt, I think about God all the more since this happened. That, along with frequent aide memoires of my own appalling frailty. St. James reminds us that 'You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes' (James 4:14), while John Calvin remarks that when our thoughts are turned away from God we're 'most easily disturbed, trembling at the sound of a falling leaf.'¹ This is apt as any description I can bring to mind about those awful five days.

Now, at this point the reader may be wondering why he or she should want to read on in a book written by a guy who apparently has strange breakdowns and all manner of bizarre idiosyncratic snares. The best reply to that protestation, however sentient it is, is that this book might also be construed as a way to avoid such things. If you're walking through the woods with a lumberjack and he says to you quite plainly, 'Don't walk down that path,' you might feel impelled to ask him why. The prudent soul would not, however, perhaps simply by first noting the upper scars on the man's face which bespeak his firsthand experience. But, if caught in a moment of curiosity-fueled weakness, you might ask anyway. His answer, however, will be terse—something broadly akin to, 'Trust me.'

Well then, let's think about the 'mist' of our lives for a moment—the whole physio-biochemical, fleshy, soulish, constituent mass which lives and moves and has its being in this time, in this place. But let us be sure not to curtail the portrait of our lives just there. Remember that when we say 'my life,' we must include not merely the past up until now, but the total constitutive frame of our essence and existence, including our future. Your life is also you in all times to come. The entire panoply and meaningful

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 1.3.2. Trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 44.

content of human life includes at least four enduring summary phases: origin, meaning, morality, and destiny.

Now, on a little reflection, consider what we see in us and around us. One philosopher, describing the writings of still another philosopher, made his attempt at such a reflection:

It is never our senses that teach us that the world is good, but simply our wills that will our existence and its fulfillments, which then seem good for that reason alone. Almost without exception we find that things are lovely, throughout nature, only in proportion to their rarity. Ugliness is the norm, toward which all things tend, almost as though it were a law of nature. Flowers appear briefly and wither quickly, the more quickly as they are more lovely; but the dirt and manure from which they spring endure almost indestructibly. Precious gems are often of exquisite beauty, but they must be sought out from the obscure corners of the earth, whereas the bleak and colorless rocks and sands are everywhere at our feet. Hideous caterpillars transform themselves at last into nocturnal moths whose loveliness fills us with awe, but so ephemeral is their tenure of life that nature does not even give them mouths and they starve in hardly a few hours. Here and there one occasionally sees a rare act of pure sweetness and kindness, without ulterior motive, on the part of some man; but it is never what was expected, and one can count on his fingers the clear instances of it seen in his lifetime. Cruelty and malice, on the other hand, are always at hand, and ulterior or self-regarding motives are taken for granted. Genius appears here and there, accidentally, among men, but it is forever engulfed in the ocean of stupidity that gives no hint of being accidental or illusory. Indeed, a man of genius can be rendered an idiot by the slightest physiological disturbance—a slight unbalance of salts in his blood or the malfunction of a small gland; but a dolt cannot be made a genius by all the powers of heaven and earth, so durable is that state. Men otherwise destined for art, science, or philosophy are made hopelessly moronic by a momentary shortage of oxygen to their brains at birth or by the infections of insignificant viruses in infancy. One never hears of an opposite fate from similar causes. Thus do virtually all men arise and live through their lives with the uniformity of clockwork, their routine existence accompanied by a few trivial thoughts and insipid emotions, while only here and there, on a continent of millions, appears a fleeting sample of original power and genius.

The same rule, the same tendency to what is worse, is found in the lives of individuals. Thus, health and the joy of life are best exhibited in small children and morons, who know so little and who are in every sense protected from the world that philosophers of optimism assure us is an unadulterated goodness. If a man in the fullness of years and experience were to exhibit the joyousness of a child he would appear to everyone as an utter fool, as one who by that time should have learned better. Pain, anxiety, and suffering are what are positive, what are actually felt, while pleasure and happiness are the negative, illusory states. Indeed, the mere absence of the former is everywhere recognized as sufficient for the latter. We can easily form the clearest mental image of a man suffering, in a numberless variety of ways. No novelist needs to strain to fill an entire volume with the elaboration of such states, carrying us chapter by chapter through one trial and ordeal after another. Thus it is the Biblical story of Job that has the flavor of reality, and not the story of the paradise in which our race was begun, short-lived as that was. No clear image of positive and enduring pleasure and happiness can even be concocted except only insofar as it expresses mere absence of pain and suffering, nor can any extensive description of it possibly be given without soon becoming insipid. We are satisfied to call a man happy simply upon learning that he is emancipated from suffering and pain. One test of this is to conjure in the mind an image of a man enduring violent pain, which is a simple task, and then to try placing beside it the image of a man receiving pleasure of similar magnitude and duration, which is something that cannot be done. Our experience furnishes abundant materials for the former but almost none for the latter. Thus did Dante describe hell most vividly, in a manner immediately comprehensible by anyone, but turning to the task of describing heaven he found almost nothing to say and was obliged to rest content with a description of utter boredom and nothingness. This is, in fact, the popular conception of heaven in the minds of those who trust in God to supply the details of that abode, their imaginations failing. Buddhist literature is filled with the most graphic descriptions of suffering, but can find only one word with which to describe the salvation from it, namely, 'Nirvana,' which means, literally, nothingness. Every engrossing drama carries its hero through trials, heartbreak, and defeat. These are no sooner conquered, however, than the curtain is hurriedly lowered, there being simply nothing

to portray of the happiness that is then supposed to ensue. Youth, health, and vigor are good, but no one feels them, or attaches any positive qualities to them, nor are they in any way sensed until they are lost in sickness and age—and these are felt most acutely. Similarly, in the realm of desire, it is our wants and cravings that we feel. The satisfaction of them is felt only indirectly, as the quiescence of those wants, which were positive and real.

Such considerations as these, which anyone can easily multiply, confirm the thesis that it is our nature simply as living beings to will, blindly and without ultimate purpose, and thus to be made miserable by trifling frustrations, but to be made entirely happy by nothing at all, not even the gratifications provided by a lifetime...²

Like so many great poems, proses, paintings, novels, and songs, this philosopher does a masterful job of elucidating and unpacking, blow by painful blow, our existential dilemma. Admittedly, and quite frankly, if you do not sense this dilemma in some selfsame way, this truly isn't the book for you. Stop reading. Ask for a refund and preemptively hurl invective against it with scathing remarks on your favorite book seller's website. Or, you might just hang in there awhile and see if the book perhaps does something else—something I've always deeply wished some of my favorite artists would do for me, whether its James Taylor, Pink Floyd, Beethoven, or Handel; Dali, O'Keeffe, Monet, or Matisse. Don't just let the terror be your art. Point us also toward that true Hope which shines with a luster all the brighter for our terrors, transforming even terror itself into Delightful Terror.

I'm no artist, but I will try to do this 'artfully' with words. What flummoxes me, however, is simply acknowledging that the span of my own life on this earth will easily reach its terminus far before I'll ever actually be able to finish this book. There are far too many subjects I ache to see illumined beneath the Light of Hope. What you hold in your hands then, is the preliminary installment of a one-ended stick, manifested in a compendium of interlinked themes related to this unending endeavor.

Each of the topics addressed in the chapters that follow are a contemporary attempt to provide at least a partial answer

² Richard Taylor, "Schopenhauer" in *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. D.J. O'Connor (ed.) (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 376–7.

to some enduring questions. How can I know God exists? Why is God ‘hidden’? Where is God in my life? How can God and evil coexist? What about all the different religions? What gives meaning and identity to each person? How should we live in this world? My goal in providing a Christian response of Hope to these pivotal questions is to be calculatedly both informative and practical. Providing a philosophic critique of the contemporary cultural milieu or of the growing tide of secularist thinking with its attendant (and often militant) philosophical materialism can only go so far. We must also be able to integrate certain timeless insights into our daily lives that will help us navigate through the increasingly stormy cultural sea on which we’re set (and, in the meantime, perhaps keep ourselves from groveling on the floors of our local emergency rooms).

We do well to cultivate in ourselves a fully lived-out triad of wisdom, integrity, and truth. Throughout the course of this book, I have drawn upon the insights of some of the finest thinkers God has condescended to bless us with as we search for meaningful answers to difficult questions. These thinkers hail from both past and present and from around the world, and—though they’re certainly not the only sources of great wisdom—they form here a unified phalanx of shining lights making clearer our paths toward the triadic paradigm with Hope as its center and telos. Subsumed along this path is an eye to better understanding ourselves, our world, and the purpose for which we were created—to know and love God, to glorify Him, to celebrate His overflowing blessings with gladness (however easily this is missed amid a morass of cultural kitsch and sordid gimcrack, ready-packaged for public consumption in distracting, pretty boxes). As the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, would say, *Fie on that!* There is *Hope* to be had. It is not the easy road. But it is the only one that provides a room with an exit.

As you may have sensed already, some of the things you’ll read in this book can be numbered among the most awfully depressing thoughts ever captured on the printed page. I promise you, however, that furthest from my mind is the intention to create depression in others or to self-indulge ourselves in tepid baths of self pity. Rather, I want to provide ample contrast between what Christian philosopher, Blaise Pascal, called, ‘the glory

and scum of the universe.³ Pascal's referent here is us. We are glorious when we seek the true light of Hope, and wretched at every instance we show that Hope our defiant backsides. There is a unified front on which the greatest of Christian thinkers throughout history have agreed. We first come to know Glory only by reckoning plainly with our own pitiable misery. From Augustine, to Calvin, to Pascal and beyond, these are those that see a certain knowledge manifested in a twofold root. One, the root of despair and death, the other the root of Hope and life. God helping, each must choose.

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 434.