

The Beginning of Blessedness **By Camille Goodison**

In his essay, "Humility Against Despair," from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton says despair comes from great pride: "In every man there is hidden some root of despair because in every man there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds and rank flowers of self-pity as soon as our own resources fail us.... Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves." Merton goes on to say that the truly humble cannot despair as within the humble man there can be no such thing as self-pity.

Shortly after his death in 2008, the novelist David Foster Wallace best known for his essays and oversized novel, *Infinite Jest*, became better known for his commencement speech, "This Is Water," delivered to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College. It was widely circulated on the Internet and then published as a book. I see it is also now studied by students of philosophy, something the former philosophy major and prince of irony, would probably appreciate. In the speech Wallace seemed to agree with Merton that within each person there is some root of despair. Wallace chalked this up to man's self-centeredness and unwillingness to leave his own head and seriously attend to the needs of others. He also mentions the importance of being able to focus. Wallace confesses to the sin (my word, not his) of over-intellectualizing and getting caught up in internal abstract arguments. As I read

both men's essays, Wallace's slacker-era irony contrasts with Merton's more earnest way of speaking. Merton had the easier task after all, writing as he was in a less cynical America that believed world peace and civil rights were things worth fighting for.

Christians should have no problem with Wallace's message, which seemingly comes down to, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. He gets into other areas about coping with what I will call the modern condition, alienation and all that. But his conclusion is simple: people should pay attention to other people's needs. I wonder what Wallace would have thought of Merton's claim, though, that it is the prideful who wrangle with such feelings of despair in the first place.

In "This Is Water" Wallace admits that, "Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship--be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles--is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive." You kind of wish that Wallace would drop his stylized self-consciousness (note those Jesus initials) and tell us more about this. How would God or some "spiritual-type thing" keep us from being eaten alive? I suspect this would have been too embarrassing for one of his generation's greatest intellectuals and writers to tell us how worshipping God could stave off such misery. But, something, yes, something, prevents Wallace from doing this and he continues on the many ways in which society eats at us. He pokes fun at our vanities.

Merton is usually presented as an example of someone who is both Christian and a respected intellectual. Our society has many prejudices against Christians, and the idea that being Christian means your capacity for critical-thinking is underdeveloped, is one such prejudice. I wonder if this accounts for why Merton's reasoning seems more convincing than Wallace's true confessions. I believe Wallace is baring his soul for those students, and I agree that the speech provides some insight into the surprising way in which he chose to end his life.

In his essay, "Humility against Despair," Merton says, everybody would have committed suicide if there were no humility in the world: "[T]he beginning of humility is the beginning of blessedness.... Humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of...life.... It is the only key to faith, with which the spiritual life begins.... In perfect humility all selfishness disappears and your soul no longer lives for itself or in itself for God.... [E]veryone who humbles himself is exalted because, living no longer for himself or on the human level, the spirit is delivered of all the limitations and vicissitudes of creaturehood and of contingency, and swims in the attributes of God, whose power, magnificence, greatness and eternity have, through love, through humanity, become our own." Situations vary, and modern life is complex, but Wallace was on to something when he talked about discipline, focus and paying attention. In this case, not paying obsessive attention to every detail, but, just have faith, and let it be.

P.S. I never met him but from what I've heard DFW was indeed a very humble and sweet person. This meditation is neither criticizing nor judging DFW. Clearly he suffered from a debilitating illness and managed as best as he could.

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