

Busy but Bored...and Mad as a Hornet:

The Spritual Crisis of our Time

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When I was a teenager back in the early 1970s, it was all the rage to try to “find yourself” and endlessly wonder, “Who am I?” Sad to say, despite all the angst-filled conversations my friends and I used to have, I never had any idea. Eventually, though, I graduated from high school, dropped the question and just got on with life.

I went to college. I got married. I went to work. We bought a house. I changed jobs. I started a business. We bought a different house and life went on.

Every once in a while, though, that teenage question would come back to unsettle me and I’d wonder once again, “What is the meaning of it all?” To try to scratch the itch, I’d pick up a book or go to a lecture or go on vacation. But as soon as I got back home, the tidal wave of everyday life would flood over me and I’d be back just trying to keep my head above water. And so I pushed those unanswered questions aside once again.

Don’t get me wrong. Life was good. I had a happy marriage (still do) was making progress in my career, had a nice house and car and got to explore something of the world in my travels for work and for fun. Like everybody else, I was frazzled and stressed sometimes—and this was in the days before there were computers, the internet and smartphones! And, I had all the usual problems with my family, colleagues and clients. Still, if you’d asked me during any of those long years of my life: Are you successful? I would have said, yes. If you’d asked me: Are you happy? I would have said, yes, more or less. But if you’d asked me: Are you satisfied? I would have said no. And if you asked why, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you. It was just something—a restlessness, a weariness, an odd feeling of wandering aimlessly through life in spite of having so much to do that I barely managed to get enough sleep.

The chaplain at the Sheil Center has been hearing about something similar from our students at Northwestern University. One day, he told me he’d been preoccupied with the declining participation of the students at Mass and in the activities of the Center. He said, “When I ask them why they don’t participate more, they say they’re too busy, but when we have a chance for deeper conversation, they tell me how bored they are with their lives.”

Busy but bored. He was confused by the apparent contradiction and sad to hear such things from young, vital people at the cusp of adult life. But, I know what they mean. They’re trying to

express something I felt, perhaps something you've felt, indeed, what people since time immemorial have been feeling—a sluggish weariness in the midst of a life of churning activity.

Thus said Quothelah:

“Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities! All things are vanity! What profit have we from all the toil which we toil at under the sun? All things are wearisome, too wearisome for words.”

But I don't feel that way anymore. I've changed a lot in the last ten years, but I don't think I realized quite how much until just a few weeks ago when a young seminarian asked me to tell him what difference my conversion had made in my life. The words seemed to come out of my mouth of their own accord, “I'm satisfied. And I'm ready for God to take me whenever he sees fit.”

Now let me be quick to say that I'm not looking to go anywhere and I'm sure that if I were to get a terrible diagnosis tomorrow I would feel a sense of panic, but underneath it all, I have to say that I have a sense of contentment I did not have in the first 50 years of my life. To be sure, I'm as busy as I've always been. I still don't get all the sleep I need. But, I am no longer weary or restless or aimless because I've finally started to understand what Jesus meant when he said, *“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”*

Those of us here tonight live in safety and security, and in material comfort and well-being. We have family and friends and good futures to look forward to, and yet, if you're at all like me, something doesn't feel quite right. Whether we call it by any of its obvious symptoms: loneliness, technology addiction, social disconnection, or as Pope Francis calls it, the globalization of indifference, the problem cannot be solved with better time management, smartphone-free days or solidarity hashtags. That's because I think what we are really experiencing is an aching of the heart, or perhaps it would be better to call it what Jesus called it, a spiritual hunger longing to be fed. Happily for us, the food is free. “Come and eat without money,” Isaiah said, the food's available everywhere to anyone who wants it anytime. Just lose your life and then you'll save it!

I say this very easily now, but I learned this lesson a very hard way. Tonight, I'd like to take you back nine years, to 2008, and tell you what happened.

Do you have a favorite Gospel passage? I imagine you do and may even be hard pressed to pick just one among the many you love. On the other hand, do you also have one you really don't like? One that raises your hackles every time it comes up in the liturgy? If you do, you wouldn't be alone. In his day, Jesus pushed many people over their limits with his so-called “hard sayings” and sometimes they literally turned and walked away. Think of the Rich Young Man who was obeying all of the Commandments. Jesus told him that the only other thing he needed to do to be perfect was sell everything he had, give to the poor and follow Him. But the young man turned away, disheartened because he couldn't bear to part with his many possessions. Is

there a passage that disheartens you? Maybe it's the story of the Prodigal Son, if you particularly identify with the older boy who was disgusted that his profligate brother and his friends got to feast on the fatted calf when his father had never celebrated his own obedience. Or perhaps it's the story of the Vineyard workers who were paid exactly the same whether they started work at sunrise or just before sunset.

For me, it was the story of the separation of the sheep and the goats in the last ten verses of Matthew 25.

I heard those verses in an RCIA class I'd joined in 2008 so that I could finally be what I was sure God wanted me to be—a Roman Catholic. The Holy Spirit had already been getting me ready for this step in my conversion by working on my icy heart with his special his little blowtorch and lately he had been concentrating on a particularly cold area called financial stinginess.

As my heart had begun to melt, I found myself happy to do lots of little things, all new for me: to shop for extra food at Costco to leave at the Shrine of St. Vincent de Paul at my church, to give booklets of McDonald's gift certificates to people asking for money on the exit ramps of the highways, to fill baby bottles with quarters for the church drive to support unwed mothers, and to make a special point of giving at every second collection and to answering every request for money for the school. And I was feeling pretty proud of this little opening of my heart, like a snowdrop blooming in the first heat of spring.

But all that changed in class that November night. Our teacher covered a variety of topics that evening, but she spent a particularly long time on the last 10 verses of Matthew 25, a "hard gospel," she said. In it, Jesus does something he rarely does; he talks about Heaven and Hell and who's going where—separating the sheep from the goats—depending whether they personally minister to the needy or not.

Christ asks us: Do we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick and comfort the imprisoned? And, not in the complacent way a lot of Catholics are content to do by donating money and food at our churches. Those things, she said, simply give us a convenient excuse to avoid personal contact with our suffering fellow man. No, it doesn't count unless we get out there, in person and serve—spooning soup, holding a hand, or taking a homeless person into our own house. Those things, she said, are what Our Lord said we need to do, and he meant it literally. A failure to do them meant The End—for good.

Now you may disagree with what she said, and to be honest, I think she was too narrow and too stern and I wouldn't suggest talking this way to a person at the fragile beginning of her conversion, but that's not what's important about this story.

What's important is that listening to her, I thought I was going to be sick.

I didn't actually get sick, but I did spend the whole night after class crying. I felt like such a failure for being proud of my little donations and I didn't see why I had to do any more. I was (and still am) an introvert and I don't like being out with strangers. And even more, I was (and

still am) too busy to do those things. I don't see my own family and friends enough, and I barely get enough sleep, so where would I find the time to personally serve one of the "poor?"

But with every bit of resistance I put up, the Holy Spirit just turned up the butane and hit me with the blowtorch again. I responded by crying harder.

When morning finally came, I went into the kitchen to make some coffee to try to chase away that achy feeling you have when you've been crying too much, and while I waited for it to brew, I stood looking out the window at the red Japanese maple tree in our back yard. The tree wasn't symmetrical and its branches needed some pruning, but at that moment it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. The early November sunlight was hitting it in such a way that the leaves glowed, fiery red and bright, making it look—the only word for it—absolutely astonishing.

Overwhelmingly sad and desperate, I thought to myself, "I wonder if God could ever, ever think I'm as beautiful as that tree?"

The tears started again because the answer came, not in words but in an impression.

Yes.

The second thing I did that morning was take a good hard look at myself. Whether the teacher was right about how to interpret it or not, Matthew had me up against the wall. I felt like his face was an inch from mine, spitting as he screamed like a drill sergeant at a flabby recruit.

Of course, that wasn't it at all. That feeling was all about me—defending my own hardness of heart by whining, hoping that if I could do it in just a perfectly pathetic way, he would feel sorry for me and let up. It is a "hard" gospel, just as she said. It may be strict, but it's not trying to be mean. Like every one of Jesus' teachings, its aim is to help us learn love—not our kind of love, compartmentalized into pretty but small parts, but his kind—expansive and lavish. It was attempting to get me into shape to be one of his true disciples, and here I was, a buck private feeling scolded and very, very sorry for herself.

And, still feeling sorry for myself, I suddenly remembered an article I'd read in a Southwest Airlines magazine a year or so before, about a person who organized volunteers to sit with the dying in their final hours. As I read it, way back then, I thought I might like to do that myself someday, and I tore the article out. When I got home, I briefly searched the web to see if I could find a program like that nearby, but couldn't. So, I forgot all about it.

Jesus' hand pressing on my shoulder, gentle eyes looking at mine, I looked up the number of the local hospice and called to ask if they wanted me. They did. Now I spend time each week ministering to the dying—with my own two hands.

Jesus said, That wasn't so bad, was it? I knew you could do that.

To save your life you have to lose it. So, yes, every week, I give up time and fight shyness and introversion and push other demands to a lower priority and frankly, don't get some things done at all. And believe me, it's not always easy. There are plenty of weeks I get in the car wishing I hadn't promised to go. But I never fail to come home contented because I know that I've made a difference to someone in need, if only for an hour. And I know Jesus is pretty happy with just an hour. He said, *"Whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward."* At least that's how I see it now, and I say a little prayer for that RCIA teacher.

My life has meaning because I know I matter. I am satisfied because I know I make a difference. In hindsight, I realize my restlessness, my weariness and my aimlessness were symptoms of a spiritual hunger and thirst, but I didn't know it, like the Woman at the Well. So, oblivious to the root cause, I filled my life with more and more activity thinking that it would make me feel a satisfying sense of accomplishment. But it never worked. I had to learn by doing it myself what Jesus taught over and over—the only way to satisfy our hungry hearts is to feed someone else's.

"Love one another!" "Give and it will be given to you." "There is no greater love than this, to give up one's life for one's friends." He taught the same thing, over and over, in parables and stories, in gentle lessons and urgent corrections, trying to get his message through the thick heads and stiff necks of his listeners.

Finally, he showed them exactly what he meant. It was the night before the Passover and Jesus knew time was running out. There were few opportunities left to teach and each one had to count, so he tied up his tunic, picked up a basin and washed the disciples' feet to demonstrate that love is as love does.

Then he said to them, *"Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.... If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it."*

Just do it.

So, if it's that easy and obvious, why don't we just do it? I don't know about you, but I can tell you the real reason why I didn't want to do it. It's because reaching out to real people, needy people, is a huge amount of work—physical, mental, emotional—and frankly, I didn't want to put myself out that far into someone else's needs, so I just told myself I was too busy.

People are work. I'm sure you know what I mean. In just a few weeks, the holidays will begin and the family get-togethers. Great as they are, haven't there been sometimes when you've dreaded them? Who hasn't had it up to the eyeballs with Uncle Fred's rants about politics or Cousin Susan's constant complaining about her boss, or with your sister's endless romantic troubles or with trying to converse with your nephew whose entire vocabulary is, "Whatever,"

or with trying to draw your mother out in conversation while she seems intent on setting up permanent housekeeping in the Land of Depression. Who hasn't sat at that table and thought, "I'm so tired. I just want to be by myself and not have to do all this work!"

And now, bless our smart phones, we can! We can retreat into our private little worlds at the touch of a button! But, disconnection from the real people around us and retreat into the solitary self is to enter a vicious circle, each retreat causing a more complete disconnection and each disconnection pulling us deeper into retreat. The promise is rest, blissful rest, but that kind of rest never leaves us satisfied or refreshed.

So we have to wake ourselves up! The wedding banquet is prepared and we are the invited guests. We just have to accept the Bridegroom's invitation, let go of our smallness, reach into His greatness, and eat.

That's what Lisi, the widow of my first hospice patient, did, except in her case, the invitation came from a total stranger.

"What are you doing these days, Lisi?" I asked her one day when I telephoned. Lisi is 93 now and crippled with rheumatoid arthritis. She navigates around with her walker, but has to be extra careful because she's almost completely blind from macular degeneration. When her husband of 53 years died seven years ago, the focus and purpose of her life evaporated and she began to drift into depression. No matter how much her family tried to cheer her up, nothing would rouse her, until one day, a chance conversation with a stranger at dinner woke her back up.

"This woman told me she regretted never taking the time to learn a foreign language when she was younger and now, at 90, it was too late. If only she had learned Spanish so she could be more friendly and conversational with all the Spanish speaking people on the staff here. So, I thought, why should it be too late? I told her I could teach her Spanish if she wanted to learn." (Lisi, you see, lived in South America for many years when her husband worked at the World Bank and so she spoke Spanish and Portuguese as well as English and her native German). "She took me up on it and now I'm teaching Spanish to my new friend, Sylvia. We have a lesson twice a week and sit together at dinner on Fridays and speak only Spanish. She talks to the waiters and waitresses and is coming along quite well!"

Purpose and meaning, contentment and satisfaction, and even joy have come back into Lisi's life because she reached out of her isolation and her loneliness to serve an "impoverished" person by teaching her Spanish, even though they both live in rather posh assisted living home in New Jersey.

Of course, Sylvia may die without ever becoming fluent, but it doesn't matter. In the end, it isn't Spanish that matters at all. It's love. Sylvia will die knowing Lisi loved her in the way Christ loves us all—by having given herself in service to her friend. And Lisi will die satisfied knowing that she could make someone's life better than it would have been otherwise even at the age of 93.

It is a contentment I wish my own father had been able to know before he died.

He died in January at 93, the same age Lisi is now. In many respects he was in better shape than she is because he was mobile and could see. But he was in far worse shape because he was incontrovertibly convinced his life had no meaning now that he couldn't work as an engineer any more. He called the feeling "lonely." But he wasn't lonely, not in the conventional sense of the word. His assisted living center was full of people. The staff took good care of him, friends wrote and phoned and family visited. Every day there were games and movies and ice cream socials. Still, he couldn't shake a listless feeling of discontent. As the months went by, his outlook got worse.

One day on the phone he complained about being lonely and having no reason to be alive and so my husband, Alan, said, "Tony, your assisted living center is full of people just like you. Why don't you make it your job to make the whole place less lonely? Why don't you take the first step and reach out to them? Start a conversation at meals. Visit them in their rooms. Ask about the story of their lives. Play cards or keep them company watching a movie?"

"Why should I bother?" he said. "They're only going to die."

Theresa of Avila said that Hell is the place where there is no love. I'm sad to say that's the place where Dad lived—not because he didn't receive it, but because he couldn't give it.

You and I, however, are not going to go like that. We can be satisfied, we will be satisfied, God has promised us, if only we will feed the hungry hearts all around us. And we can start on this grand project without adding a single new activity to our already over-full lives.

All we have to do make even just one of the things we already do for someone else a more conscious act of loving service. Mother Theresa urged us to "Do small things with great love." Ella Fitzgerald sang about the same idea back in the '40s, "'Tain't what you do but the way that you do it. That's what gets results."

We all know what we mean when we say someone cooks with love. It doesn't mean they make fancy French dinners. It just means that whenever they cook, even when it's only meatloaf and mashed potatoes, they do it keeping the people they're cooking for in their hearts. They've taken care to make the food the best it could be. They've presented it like a gift, and they've relished watching the people they love eat. An ordinary task of daily life like cooking becomes an act of love when it's done as a conscious service for others and not as a chore to get over with as fast as we can. A person who cooks with love has taken one step toward the sheep and one step away from the goats.

You may not be into cooking. That's fine. Just take some ordinary task of life, one you already enjoy at least a little, in order to make it easier, and put a little more "love" into it by being conscious that you're doing it *for* someone else. If Christ could do it with a footbath, there's no reason we can't do it with the laundry or the yard work or anything else.

My great-grandmother, for example, was not a cook. Instead, she put all her love into sewing which was how she made her living back in the days when even ordinary women had their clothes made by a seamstress. When I was a kid in the 1960s, my great grandmother made everything I wore, although now I'm ashamed to remember how hard I begged my mom for a store-bought dress. And when Grandma wasn't sewing clothes, she was edging pillowcases with lace, embroidering handkerchiefs and making quilts. She made quilts for all the people she loved, including one for my mother and father when they were married, every inch stitched by hand. It belongs to me now.

One day I took it to the dry cleaner and spread it out on the counter for the owner to see. She admired the beautiful pattern and colors and all the fine stitching. Another customer came in and admired it, too, then asked where I got it. When I told her my great grandmother had made it all by hand, she said, "Thank God women have better things to do with their time these days."

That remark still sends a shock of pain through my heart. Anything, I mean anything, we do with love for another person is the best possible use of our time. It doesn't matter whether it's brain surgery or toilet cleaning. Because by doing it for our brothers and sisters, we have done it for him, just as he told us to do.

My second suggestion has to do with a way of making a little more peace in our hearts so that we can more fully appreciate the blessings and the joy that come from these little acts of service. The great enemy of peace is anger and so the goal is to start withering away any anger that is insidiously taking control of our emotional lives and choking off our potential for joy the way bindweed chokes every plant in the garden.

Anger is pulsating everywhere these days and I think I understand why we're so attracted to it. It gives a lethargic life a kind of energy, the way spice gives a tasteless food flavor. But, it's a false energy and if trying to satisfy a hungry heart with busyness is like trying to nourish the body with empty sugar calories, then anger is like trying to artificially energize it with cayenne pepper.

Jesus had a particularly stern teaching about anger. He said, *"You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment. But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raqa,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna."*

I think he was so severe because anger is the one deadly sin that we actually make worse by giving into it. Give into gluttony, sloth, envy or lust and you'll lessen those urges for a bit, but give into anger and it just intensifies its grip on your life.

So, after long years of wrestling with anger myself, I've come to the conclusion that the best way to deal with it is simply to deprive it of its oxygen the way we put out a candle. That

doesn't mean turning the TV off—at least not at first. We can snuff out anger (or get a grip on it) by focusing ourselves on the goodness all around us instead.

St. Paul told the Philippians, *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...Then the God of peace will be with you.”*

It's true. When I'm focused on noticing and enjoying the goodness I see all around me, I don't have much interest in being angry. And it's made me realize that it's the “virtual world” of people I don't know which is over-heated with anger, tempting me to join in, while the real world I actually live in is full of the lovely, the gracious, the honorable, the just, the pure and the true. I just have to pay attention.

I see it in the father across the street swinging his two giggling daughters on a swing. I hear it in the woman saying, “God bless you” to the homeless man in front of the Starbuck's. I watch it in the caregiver taking his patient to the Dunkin' Donuts for a special treat and I even experience it myself in the driver that lets me into his lane on the highway.

But my favorite example took place in a Denny's in Cleveland, Ohio where, Alan, Fr. Joe, my mother and I stopped for breakfast at 6:00 am after a road trip to New York just after Labor Day.

A few other customers were already eating when our waitress came over to take our orders. I asked for a fried egg and toast. She said she could save me some money if she added my egg to Alan's Grand Slam and I ate the toast Fr. Joe didn't want, then my meal would only cost \$.59. She said she likes looking out for her customers.

While we were waiting for our food, I noticed a middle-aged man and woman at a table nearby. When they got up to pay their bill, the woman stopped by our table, wished us a good day and said the two of them had paid for all four of our breakfasts. We were astonished, and while I pressed her, she wouldn't tell us why.

Given that our breakfasts were free, we decided to give a big tip to our good waitress in return. Fr. Joe said, “I just got \$100 from a friend. Let's give her that!” So we did.

But she protested, “Oh, I can't possibly take this!” We said that of course she should. Then she said, “Alright then, I know what I'm going to do with it, I'm going to pay for the breakfasts of the other customers in my section.” And she walked right over to a table nearby and told an astonished couple their breakfast was on her.

The story is so full of goodness I don't know where to start: our waitress who got me breakfast for \$.59, the strangers who paid our bill, Fr. Joe who gave away his \$100, and again our waitress who bought breakfast for her customers. With goodness exploding like that, who wants to bother joining the heads exploding over the day's catastrophe on Twitter, Facebook or the

nightly news. When I remember Denny's, I realize that all that is nothing other than the "vanity of vanities" and I don't need to join in their chase after the wind.

And last, when we focus on making the ordinary tasks of our daily lives more conscious acts of self-giving service, and as anger begins to dissipate as we notice the overwhelming goodness of the real life all around us, something else will begin to happen, too—at least it did to me. Little cracks of space will begin to open up in our hearts and if we will be docile to them, the Holy Spirit will use them bring us even greater opportunities of self-giving service to the world and an even greater sense of meaning to our lives in return.

So, perhaps, eventually it will occur to us to try to make a task we don't like an offering of service, too, on top of the ones we do like. We may decide to add some little thing to our calendars, like sending a card once a month to an elderly relative who doesn't get much mail. Or, we may even decide that for one of those things that has been sitting at the bottom of our "to-do" list for a long time—like becoming a minister of care, a Sunday school teacher, a Meals on Wheels driver, a prison visitor or even a hospice volunteer—that now is the acceptable time to just do it!

Holy Spirit used such a little opening in my heart back in 2011 when he gave his blow torch over to a Carmelite priest to use on me. By that time, I'd been a Catholic for two years and weekly visits to my hospice patients had become a regular part of my life. On that November day, I went to the Shrine of St. Therese of Liseux in Darien, Illinois for a day of recollection and the Mass was celebrated by one of the Carmelite Fathers in residence. When it came to the Litany of Prayers, I was struck that he recited them differently than I'd ever heard them said before. Rather than, "Lord, we ask you to bring food and shelter to the homeless, consolation to the grieving, and comfort to the poor," he said, "Lord, please bring into each of our lives a lonely person who needs company, a sick person who needs comfort, a hungry person who needs food, a child who needs a teacher, and let us give of ourselves to serve them, in the name of Christ our Lord."

Through that little open crack in my heart, I responded with a heartfelt, "Lord, hear our prayer!"

Two months later, our friend, Fr. Joe, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Helping him go from the brink of death back to health and now back to work at Mundelein seminary over the last five years has become the center of my life, and Alan's along with me. Frankly, if you'd told me on that day back in 2008 when I spent the night crying over the last 10 verses of Matthew 25, that nine years later I'd be spending my days keeping an 87-year-old priest healthy, happy and serving other people, I would not have believed you.

The days can be stressful and exhausting. So many things that used to occupy my time have had to make way. But, when I hear the parishioners at the church where he celebrates Mass once a week exclaim over the quality of his sermons, and when the seminarians at Mundelein tell me how much having him as a Spiritual Father means to them, and when he looks at Alan and me

each morning and says, "I'm so happy to be alive! What's for breakfast?" I know I matter. I found my life by losing it to someone else. And so yes, I'd say I'm satisfied, and God can take me anytime.