

Communing with Albert Camus in 2022. “The Past Two Years Have Been So Absurd, The Covid Propaganda So Consuming”

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The person with whom we are all most intimate is oneself. It’s just the way it is. I don’t mean that in some oracular Delphic “know thyself” way, or in any deep psychoanalytical sense, but very simply. We have our own thoughts and feelings that come and go like breaths, most of which never get expressed in words. Together with our actions, including speech, they make up our lives. We try to anchor them with photos and memorabilia and lots of things, but time has no mercy; it sweeps us all away. Then our things remain for a while until they become a burden to those who remain, and then the things go. As the song reminds us, “We come and go like a ripple on a stream.”

For most people, their congeries of living experiences evaporate as quickly as soap bubbles in a pan of dish water. This is also true for the social and personal facts of our lives that leave but vague traces. Yet some strange people record them. They are a small minority, writers being chief among them. They keep words. Words unspoken and spoken words.

I have kept notebooks since my mid-twenties. They sit in cartons in a closet. They were at first my imaginary friends who never responded. Maybe I didn’t want them to. They are still silent, although every once in a while I seem to hear inarticulate sounds coming from the boxes.



I usually give them my ear at the end of each year when I read my notebook for the previous year. I then extract any entries that I have not yet used in my writing and put them in a small writing project notebook. But this year it was very strange. There was only one entry for 2021: “It’s all lies.” Those words keep echoing in my mind.

Featured image: [Albert Camus, Michel y Jeannine Gallimard by Antonio Marín Segovia](#)

Most years I encounter many things that I have forgotten: a scene I saw and recorded; a snatch of conversation overheard; thoughts and musings; little paragraphs that I write that I might use later; feelings and emotions; questions; notes for future writing projects; things I did, people I met, books I read; events both personal and social that seem significant – almost anything that comes to mind. I have a love/hate relationship with these jottings, for I know that when I am dead, few, if any, people will care to read them. Why should they? I don’t, except once at the end of each year. For some strange reason I feel that if I burn the lot of them, the real me might disappear. But I also don’t really believe that, for I know I am not in those boxes. But I keep writing to myself nevertheless and then shut those words up.

“It’s all lies” concisely summed up my private disgust throughout 2020-21. I had tried in my public writing to expose those lies while having no energy or inclination left to write to or for myself. The past two years have been so absurd, the Covid propaganda so all-consuming, its madness so disturbing as so many people have gone off the deep end believing such outlandish garbage, that to contemplate this madness any more than I was already doing publicly must have seemed...I don’t know what. All I know is that I didn’t. I could only take so much.



Anyway, to start this year, having read my three words for 2021, I turned to reading the notebooks of my companion since my early twenties, Albert Camus. He too kept notebooks – *cahiers* – from the age of twenty-two until his strange death in a car crash – accident or assassination? – on January 4, 1960, a few months after his forty-sixth birthday, the age my daughter will reach this month. Camus was born in 1913, the same year as my father. These facts may be significant. I am writing this on January 4, 2022.

Brother Albert had always striven to serve both justice and beauty; to find a way to oppose a world of lies while living fully. I have recently concluded that many people who accept or oppose the vast tapestry of lies within which we now exist, the closing down of freedom and the rise of a new totalitarianism, have in a strange way unknowingly embraced a trick of the propagandists: they have become so one-dimensional in their obsessive need to defend or oppose their positions that they have forgotten to relish life.

One side lives in perpetual fear of disease and death and has turned into obedient and vengeful children wanting to ban the dissidents from society or burn them at the stake. The other side, flabbergasted at the credulous behavior of the compliant ones in the face of so many official lies and contradictions, feels compelled – and rightly so – to resist at every turn the gradual slide into a digital dystopian totalitarianism. But emotions are so raw and twisted that they flip at the drop of a pin. Or are flipped. This is how great propaganda works. For those behind the COVID hoax, Russia-gate, etc. want all the peons to hate life itself and embrace their dark and evil nihilism. To forget that life is both beautiful and tragic. To cut each other to pieces.

The journalist Andre Vltchek used to remind us, as he traveled the world reporting on the empire's atrocities, that to dispense with poetry and song and passion is to succumb to evil; it is to forget that true revolution demands art as well as politics, the best expressions of the

human spirit. For years before his untimely death in 2020, he noted how a grim sense of joylessness and indifference had descended on so many western countries, especially those, led by the United States, which cause so much human misery throughout the world. And he reminded us repeatedly, that throughout the world where people are oppressed, the spirit of resistance is preserved in remembering the great and beautiful poetry and music of their countries' artists, whose words regular people have memorized and celebrate for their beauty and joie de vivre – despite oppressive conditions.

Speaking for himself, in a moving essay, "Return to Tipasa," Camus wrote:

To give up beauty and the sensual happiness that comes with it and devote one's self exclusively to unhappiness requires a nobility I lack...isolate beauty ends in grimaces, solitary justice in oppression. Anyone who seeks to serve the one to the exclusion of the other serves no one, not even himself, and in the end is doubly the servant of injustice.

So I have turned to Camus' notebooks to see if I might fill in some gaps and learn some lessons for 2022.

On May 5, 1935 Camus made his first entry. Here is the opening sentence:

What I mean is this: that one can, with no romanticism, feel nostalgic for lost poverty.



That can be easily misunderstood, but he clarifies it. For Camus grew up in poverty but under the sun and by the sea in Algeria where he found beauty and joy in nature. He knew there was a grey, depressing form of poverty that did not provide such solace. He was trying at a young age to express what he later said differently: "I cling like a miser to the freedom that disappears as soon as there is an excess of things."

Yet here we are in 2022 drowning in an excess of things, possessions that keep the world captive to the evil genius of consumer capitalism and the false rhetoric of freedom, things that people don't need but want because of advertising's brainwashing and the existential emptiness that convinces people that if you surround yourself with enough things you are somehow protecting yourself, while that delusion feeds an environmental crisis that is destroying the earth. Possessions as a form of demonic possession, a protection racket that doesn't protect. But they give people an imaginary boost. Call them boosters. See the front page of *The New York Times* for all the latest consumer goods no one needs. They call it news, and the boosters, booster shots.

April 1937:

In the evening, the gentleness of the world on the bay. There are days when the world lies, days when it tells the truth. It is telling the truth this evening – with what sad and insistent beauty.

Yes, this has always been so, but it is terrifying and exhilarating. Living in constant fear as so many are now doing blocks both the sun and the clouds and reduces life to a caricature of its possibilities. All the official lies have produced passionless people afraid of themselves and others.

April 1941:

“It is always a great crime to deprive people of its liberty on the pretext that it is using it wrongly.” (Tocqueville)

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. When Camus wrote this, Germany was occupying France and the French Resistance was born. These days so many minds are occupied by endless propaganda that penetrates to the primal emotions and reduces carnal truth to digital abstractions. I think we will lose our freedom if we continue to embrace digital technology. Resistance is necessary.

August 1942:

Novel. Don’t put the “plague” in the title. Put something like “The Prisoners.”

He instinctively knew that it was not a plague that imprisons people but the mind-forged manacles of those who are afraid to confront it. Those who lack the courage to see the truth and resist it. To collaborate with the Nazis was for cowards. Free people fight back. As editor of *Combat*, the banned newspaper, he knew that when voices were censored it was because the censors were afraid the truth would prevail. A good lesson for 2022.

October 1946:

What makes a man feel alone is the cowardice of others. Must one try to understand that cowardice too? But it’s beyond my strength. And, on the other hand, I cannot be a scorned.

Ditto.

September 1949:

One must love life before loving its meaning, Dostoevsky says. Yes, and when the love of life disappears, no meaning consoles us for it.

Even depression is good. Even confronting evil is good. Even arguing. Pleasure is good. It’s all good. Life is an agon, always conflictual and agreeable. We were born to love and fight and try always to make the fight a loving fight. Words are our best weapons. I have always enjoyed writing them, for they always have seemed to be like wild birds in my breast, struggling to leave the nest. They are always taking us somewhere. Where is the question. Or better yet: Where do we want to go?

February 1950:

Later write an essay, without hesitation or reservation, on what I know to be true. (Do what one doesn't want, want what one doesn't do.)

What was that? I think he never wrote the essay but left us with his beautiful, unfinished novel, *The First Man*, wherein he wrote without hesitation or reservation and opened his heart. His was an unfinished life. I wonder if that is true for all of us.

June 1951:

Man of 1950. He fornicated and read the newspapers.

Sort of still right. 2022: They masturbated and checked their cell phones. Call it transhumanism. What's love got to do with it?

February 1953:

Two common errors: existence precedes essence or essence existence. Both rise and fall with the same step.

So the sagacious intellectuals ripped him for this. Subtleties of thought always escape them. Today's common errors: Obama differs from Trump or Trump differs from Obama (Biden). I once thought I was an intellectual until I understood their thinking. Small minds looking through the wrong ends of their binoculars.

May 1954:

Play. A happy man. And nobody can put up with him.

So what is happiness? There are those who think that it consists of having "fun." They cannot understand the joy of struggle, the artist's efforts to give form to chaos. One can only live if one is drunk with life, Tolstoy said. And he spent a bit of his life writing. Was he happy? Of happiness and despair we have no measure.

November 1, 1954:

I often read that I am atheistic. I hear people speak of my atheism. Yet these words say nothing to me; for me they have no meaning. I do not believe in God *and* I am not an atheist.

I do believe in God and yet one of my sisters years ago said to me that "I thought you were an atheist." This shocked me. Camus too was shocked by the meaningless of such terms. He knew there was a sharp distinction between the heart and the head and that belief and faith were not the same thing. Only the living-dead cannot distinguish them. Faith guides me. Camus, too, was led by an invisible star; he said it differently: "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer." The current age denies the invisible and promotes defeatism.

July 1, 1958 (his last notebook entry):

The lie lulls or dreams, like the illusion. The truth is the only power, cheerful, inexhaustible. If we were able to live only of, and for truth: young and immortal energy in us. The man of truth does not age. A little more effort and he will not die.



How to say it when “It’s all lies”? Keep trying, and try to make it beautiful. Only the artistic imagination can accomplish this. As you said, Albert, “Beauty never enslaved anyone...And for thousands of years, every day, at every second, it has instead assuaged the servitude of millions of men and, occasionally, liberated some of them once and for all.

After all, perhaps the greatness of art lies in the perpetual tension between beauty and pain, the love of men and the madness of creation, unbearable solitude and the exhausting crowd, rejection and consent.

Art advances between two chasms, which are frivolity and propaganda.”

Create dangerously indeed, you advised! For we are in the heat of combat.

Let us rejoice and fight on.

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