

Is a Happy New Year Possible? Sisyphus and the Feeling of the Absurd are Entwined,

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"The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." – Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Really? Or was he joking?



Whenever January rolls around and a new year begins with its implied ending, I think of my father and Albert Camus, both born in 1913. Camus died on January 4, 1960 in a strange car crash, which might have been an [assassination](#) according to Italian author Giovanni Catelli, while my father, who almost died in a car crash, was born on January 9. They did not know each other personally, although they were kindred souls in the way that seeming opposites attract.

One a Nobel Prize winning author who wrote *The Fall*, the confession of a lawyer, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, whose monologue from a seedy bar reveals his guilt for living a phony, cowardly, and inauthentic life – "When one has no character one *has* to apply a method," he says; the other a lawyer with character, an eloquent and witty writer who always, unlike Clamence, downplayed and did not parade his good deeds because he did them out of a pure heart.

Camus said he did not believe in God, yet I think a part of him did as filtered through his secular saint Tarrou in *The Plague* and his dialogue with Dominican Friars, among other

writing, although he kept it publicly well hidden. My father, baptized a Catholic like Camus, was a life-long believer, never letting any doubts directly show. Both were reserved men in the best sense of the word.

For faith and doubt always play their shadow show in all souls.

In a review of [Bread and Wine](#) by Ignazio Silone, Camus wrote, "For the grandeur of a faith can be measured by the doubts it inspires." In this case he was referring to secular faith, but he was lavishing praise on a novel that explores the interplay between secular and sacred faith, the former having its deepest roots in the later.

It is the story of Pietro Spina, the anti-fascist Italian revolutionary during Mussolini's time, who is in hiding disguised as a priest, and his former teacher, the priest Don Benedetto. Hunted and surveilled by Italy's fascist government, they secretly meet and talk of the need to resist the forces of state and church collaborating in violence and suppression. Don Benedetto tells Pietro, "But it is enough for one little man to say 'No!' murmur 'No!' in his neighbor's ear, or write 'No!' on the wall at night, and public order is endangered."

And Pietro says, "Liberty is something you have to take for yourself. It's no use begging it from others."

The two characters represent one truth, that the spirit of rebellion is sacred and profane. This Camus knew from the start, despite his reputation for being an unbeliever. When Pietro and Don Benedetto meet and talk about the need to resist the fascist government – two priests, so to speak, one disguised and one real – we come to fully realize that they are one genuine person separated at birth for story-telling purposes. The younger tells the older that "it was a religious impulse that led me into the revolutionary movement," but that he lost his faith in God many years before.

To which the elderly priest replies, "It does not matter. In these times of conspiratorial and secret struggle the Lord is obliged to hide Himself and assume pseudonyms. Besides, and you know it, He does not attach much importance to His name "

Silone writes: "The idea of God Almighty being forced to go about under a false passport amused the younger man greatly. He looked at his old schoolmaster in astonishment, and suddenly saw him in a very different light from the image of him that he had preserved during the long years since they had last met."

If one carefully reads Camus' oeuvre, it becomes apparent that his sense of the sacred was profound even while saying that he didn't believe in God; so too was his commitment to resist evil and to see the sense of the absurd as a starting point and not a destination. "But does nothing have a meaning? I have never believed that we could remain at this point," he said. "Even as I was writing *The Myth of Sisyphus* I was thinking about the essay on revolt (*The Rebel*) that I would write later on...."

Not to wallow in the absurd but to rebel against human suffering and oppression and to also serve beauty were always his twin goals. He saw his vocation as an artist as a call to give voice to the sorrows and joys of everyone, not as a solitary elitist, but as a writer engaged in the world.

In an illuminating essay, ["Thomas Merton's Affinity with Albert Camus,"](#) Jim Forest wrote the

following, which I would second:

In fact what Camus rejected was not the person of Christ but a pseudo-Christianity that had become a mechanism for blessing the established order, a religion of accommodation that provides chaplains to witness executions without raising a word of protest, a religion committed to the status quo rather than the kingdom of God. What Camus was missing in the world were Christians who reminded him of Christ.

Which sounds like Silone's Pietro Spina and Don Benedetto in dialogue.

But then there is Sisyphus and this happiness issue, which is my central concern. Camus always fought against injustice and was well aware that he was living in a world where soulless and ruthless force was the context for all he wrote. The specifics have changed today, but the general principal prevails with social convulsions, violence, and endless wars in many guises. The old Cold War is now the new.

For Camus, the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the never-ending need to roll our rocks to the hilltop only to watch them come tumbling back down, these rolling stones of effort upon effort to resist the world's predators with their death-loving violence and the feeling of the uselessness of these uphill battles with our stones falling back at our feet as we try and try again to say "no" – this, and the indifferent silence of the natural world that devours people as appetizers – he called the absurd, the unbridgeable chasm between our desires for happiness and the world's indifference, including the hateful indifference of the world's elites and their evil efforts to control and murder regular people.

And lest I forget one tiny insignificant detail, and one that was at the heart of Camus' writing, the fact that we all die and that the day-to-day grind of struggling "to make a living" and be normal social beings can collapse in an instant on any street corner when one asks "why," and the absurd enters as "the stage sets collapse."

For Camus, Sisyphus and the feeling of the absurd were entwined, but why *must* we then imagine Sisyphus happy? The endless struggle against violence, lies, and injustice is exhausting and one must fight against falling into the pit of despair. So I ask again: Was Camus joking? He was not known for his humor.

Happy is a funny word; its etymology tells us so: it derives from the Old Norse *happ*, meaning chance, good luck, fortune. And I think for anyone who contemplates it, happiness, however one defines it, is not a constant state. It comes and goes if one is lucky. There are so many suffering people throughout the world for whom the word is a foreign language, since they are so victimized by violence and poverty that just to survive is their kind of luck.

Happiness can not be sought, although there are countless books and happiness gurus who will take your money to tell you it can and they have the method. It's interesting to note that over the past twenty-five years or so the happiness industry has grown in equal measure to the overwhelming deterioration of the world situation. The more depressed, deprived, and distracted more people have become as the world's elites have waged war in all its forms everywhere, the more the clamor to "just be happy" has been heard. If it weren't so "absurd," I'd think they had invented happiness pills.

After reading Edmund Gosse's 1907 memoir about his Victorian childhood and his relationship with his very religious father, *Father and Son*, my father wrote to me saying that

it reminded him of the two of us, a father who remained conventionally religious while the son rejected conventional Christianity for a dissident's path. But then he added, commenting on the seeming difference, "Quién sabe? (Who knows?)."

Contradictions abound, which he knew, and such contradictions cut through the human heart. So I wonder, what can cut through the contradictions?

For we are all contradictions in our different ways, but the question remains how we might be happy in the midst of life's struggles. How to live with our contradictions, how to reconcile them. How not to be so single-minded that we can't say, "Happy New Year" and mean it simply in all its complexity.

Although I think Camus was slightly wrong to say "we *must*" imagine Sisyphus happy, I think we may. Albert himself famously said that "In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer." This "invincible summer" is the love of life despite all the struggles we go through. Camus was no stranger to them – the delights and the struggles – nor my father nor I nor anyone. Life is an *agon* – a conflict, struggle, contest – as the Greeks would put it. But it is also, if we are lucky, filled with love, beauty, and passionate delights, that, although they may not manifest themselves constantly, slumber within like cats on a hearth in our hearts, as Albert wrote of the writer's task, to be true to and awaken "those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his[our] heart[s] first opened."

So I must conclude by saying Camus wasn't joking, but humor was not his forte. It was my father's, his seeming opposite. With humor we might summon the dozing genie. I think it true what Lewis Hyde writes in *Trickster Makes This World*: "A touch of humor or levity, then, is one mark by which we know that a creative spirit working in the force field of contradictions has kept his promise, has not fallen from his tree, and so might actually move beyond the enclosing oppositions."

And since tomorrow is my father's birthday, I will recount a little story he wrote to me in his eloquent and inimitable style. It differs slightly from Attorney Jean-Batiste Clamence's confession from the "Mexico City" bar in Amsterdam, with the exception of the booze. It goes like this:

On ecclesiastical matters I have a funny true story for you. Dennis Casey, one of the attorneys I used to work with, told it. He had an uncle who was a Bishop of some county in Ireland and, like a few citizens of the Ould Sod, could put away a drop or two of the creature. When Cardinal Cooke was alive in the late '70s, the Bishop attended some ceremony at St. Patrick's Cathedral where he was to give the homily. Dennis Casey was with him and said the good Bishop fortified himself with quite a few shots or smiles, as Uncle Tim used to call the creature, before ascending the pulpit. He then went on and on infinitum, saying in his thick Irish brogue, 'if he had the cathedral filled with gold, I'd give it to the poor; if I had it filled with food, I'd give it the hungry,' etc., etc., etc. Finally they gave him the hook after a few nods from the Cardinal. After the Mass the hierarchy retired to the Chancery for a reception. The place was filled with Bishops, Monsignors, and prelates of all shapes and sizes and everyone partook of liquid refreshments, including our friend, the Bishop. All went well until someone started a singalong when they coaxed Cardinal Cook for a solo. He tried to beg off, saying, "I'm not much of a singer," but the majority prevailed and he started a few notes of Danny Boy or some such song. After a couple of lines and false notes, the Bishop's stentorian

brogue burst through the hall, shouting, "You are right. You can't sing a Fucking note." I think he was whisked back to Erin forthwith and now he sings with the heavenly choir or the devil's band – having departed for his just reward.

Happy New Year, Albert and Edward, Sr. Let's raise our laughing glasses high to the beauty of the days gone by and those to come, even as we rebel.

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Featured image: Albert Camus and Edward Curtin, Sr. (Source: [Behind the Curtain](#))

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