

LV – A Passion for Life

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By Butler Shaffer

Political systems do far more than diminish the material quality of our lives or deprive us of our liberties. To the degree of their power over us, they help to deplete the passion for living that gives meaning to our experiences here on earth. One sees a reflection of this inner emptiness in the zombie-like behavior of men and women who have long been accustomed to tyrannical regimes, or in the looks of detachment in the eyes of concentration camp prisoners. We have all seen newsreel footage of persons being liberated from Nazi imprisonment. One would think that being freed from months or years of dehumanized captivity would have brought looks of joy into their faces. Instead, we saw expressions of the deeper costs of tyranny that go far beyond the calculation of the dead: the breaking of the human spirit.

Statists do not want us to think in terms of how their practices erode our sense of being human. While they are not comfortable with our awareness that their systems resulted in the deaths of some two hundred million persons in the twentieth century alone, they can live with such information. After all, these are only collective statistics, abstractions which, like references to "gross domestic product," "rates of unemployment," or the "Dow-Jones industrial average," cloud the costs individuals always pay at the hands of the state. Such information may be an embarrassment to statists, but it poses no significant threat, for it is too disconnected from personal experience to rouse individual souls from their slumbers.

To speak of the dehumanization or spiritual depletion of the lives of individuals is so alien to most of us that few can even begin to envision the meaning of such concerns. Our institutional masters have trained us to regard the depletion of our income, or savings, or other material factors as the only "costs" to which we ought to devote our attentions. Sadly, even many of my free-market, libertarian friends seem stuck on the proposition that a laissez-faire economic system would be sufficient for a free, peaceful, and productive life.

To be free to make decisions regarding our own lives and property, and to be able to enter into voluntary agreements with others is, of course, essential to an individually meaningful life. Having a daily supply of food and water is equally essential to our lives, but hardly sufficient for living well. I shall forever recall George Orwell's description of the institutionalized "tinny stew" fed to the humanoids in his 1984, as exemplary of the ways in which the state feeds — but does not nourish — its conscripts. How reminiscent is this of the cafeteria offerings in government schools, prisons, or military establishments? Can one find any correlation between being adequately fed — so as to sustain the conscripts' usefulness to the state — and the pursuit of a meaningful life as a human being?

The problems we experience at the hands of the institutions to which we subject ourselves do not derive from the malevolence or ambitions of power of those purporting to be "authorities" over us. Rather, they are the consequences of our acknowledging them to have such authority! Most of our problems originate within our own minds, and we are generally too frightened of the specters we might discover therein to want to search out the root cause of our difficulties. Like the man who searched beneath a streetlight for the car keys he lost a block away "because the light's better here," most of us opt for the quick-and-easy explanations that target institutional flaws. It is so much easier for us to think of ourselves as victims of the state, than as having suffered the consequences of our own thinking.

So many of us live dispirited lives because we have given up on ourselves, and look for direction and meaning in life by attaching ourselves to external agencies or purposes. In the course of doing so, we emasculate our emotions and feelings as hindrances to the sense of "responsibility" we believe we have to such external forces. We repress our inner voices with drugs, alcohol, or programs to help us "adjust" or "adapt" to our servitude. Not wanting our children to be left out of the system, we accede to their being labeled "hyperactive" or suffering from "attention deficit disorder," when their only offense has been to pursue the self-directed exploration that is the essence of life. Like their parents before them, children must learn to become serviceable to their masters and to live according to agendas set by others. Dispositions for autonomous thinking or behavior must be smothered, whether by fear, intimidation, or the on-campus drugs against which school systems are not at war!

The institutional order — particularly the state — requires us to live externalized lives, in which our attentions are drawn to the pursuit of values beyond ourselves: wealth, fame, status, power, or the approval of others. To be an externally-directed person is to give up on one's sense of being; to admit to the unworthiness of one's very soul; to seek meaning in others rather than oneself. Ultimately, it is to embrace the mass-mindedness that inheres in every collectivist system. The contest between collectivism and individualism has always been, at its core, a struggle for the human soul.

To live well means more than simply staying alive or being comfortable. Our pet animals enjoy that status. If life is to be experienced as our nature has prepared us, we must learn to live with passion; with a sense of focused, self-directed energy. The study of economics reminds us that life is a subjective process of learning, making choices, taking actions. The search for truth and the principled life occurs within each of us, or not at all. We are volitional, choosing beings; what the poet Seamus Heaney called "the hunters and gatherers of values."

To live with passion is to live an internally directed life that exhibits a fiery, creative, exploring spirit. When we live this way — rather than as numbers in faceless computers — we see through the cruel and brutish ways by which we cooperate with others in degrading

and destroying our lives. This is not some theoretical proposition, but reflects ways in which humans have occasionally transcended their bleak and dispirited conditions and experienced life as inner, fervent energy.

The Enlightenment was one of the most dramatic and creative of these epochs. In his study, Peter Gay observed that this period consisted of a "loose, informal, wholly unorganized coalition of cultural critics, religious skeptics, and political reformers" in Europe and North America. Its participants insisted on a number of conditions, the most important of which was "freedom in its many forms — freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one's talents, freedom of aesthetic response, freedom, in a word, of moral man to make his own way in the world."

And what of that greatest of all periods for the advancement of the material well-being of mankind, the Industrial Revolution? In contrast with collectivists – who feign concern for the welfare of a humanity that they insist on keeping in abject, but equal, scarcity — inventive souls discovered the creative potentials of the marketplace. In the words of the noted English historian, T.S. Ashton, "England was delivered, not by her rulers, but by those who, seeking no doubt their own narrow ends, had the wit and resource to devise new instruments of production and new methods of administering industry."

The anti-business zealots, Marxists, and lesser socialists have always been unable to see the correlation between the spiritual and material dimensions of life implicit in the Industrial Revolution. This is a sad reflection of how far our abstract thinking is removed from the pursuit of those means that exalt and nourish both the body and spirit of mankind. Are we to believe that any of this was brought about by men and women marching in lockstep to the beat of statist drummers? What political leader or agency ever produced anything that truly advanced the well-being of humanity? When have the collective efforts of externally-directed oafs – their minds carefully scripted to vocalize the establishment line — ever produced through opinion polls, "town meetings," bumper-sticker slogans, or talk-show babblings, any value or insight that improved the condition of man?

The tenacity with which some plead the case for liberty is an expression of the spirited passion for life. That the autonomous spirit of individuals not be restrained by others is central to what it means to live in wholeness as a human being. There is a life force within us all that statists insist on channeling into behaviors that serve their ends. Thus, young men are induced to believe there is something ennobling about fighting and dying in wars, or strapping bombs to one's body and killing innocent "others." Young adults grow up thinking that participating in government programs to compel people to do things they do not choose to do, is a form of "social responsibility."

What is worse, we have been taught to repress our passion for life, or to confuse "passion" with "excitement." Rather than regarding our feelings and emotions as warning signs to apprise us of the folly or danger of a present course of action, we have been told to deny

such voices. We are admonished to "stay calm" and not "get emotional," particularly at a time when our emotions ought to be in communication with our rational judgments.

When those with ambitions for power conspire to command, plunder, and destroy the lives of others, it is time to "get emotional"; not in reactive, violent ways that pose no serious threat to their intrigues, but through introspective means that awaken the inner spirit. No more than when we are in the midst of muggers and rapists ought we to "stay calm," like contented cows, amongst those who seek to ensnare us in their schemes with lies, distortions, and threats. Such people are telling us, by their conduct, that they are unable to share with us a life of integrity, and it is integrity, or wholeness, upon which a focused life depends.

Such an awakening must begin with an understanding of how personal liberty is the expression of the human soul in society. But it must go beyond abstract philosophizing. We need to become truly inspired, in the root meaning of that word, i.e., "to breathe in the spirit," or, as I would suggest, to rediscover the spirit that is already within us. We could reach back into human history to try to find the source of the spiritual energy that powered the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and other periods of individually relevant life.

The lessons of history provide insights, but are unable, in themselves, to affect the transformations of will that must occur within you and me if we are to reclaim our spiritual sense. Such changes must begin with a determination that we are individuals worthy to act within the world for our own purposes, rather than resources to be acted upon for the ambitions of others.

If we are to become emotional about our own existence, perhaps we need do no more than rekindle that enthusiasm for life we experienced as children, when the word "why?" was our response not only to the unknown but to those who sought to restrain us. Might we rediscover how to live with such a constant variety of things to do that we lose all sense of time; and with the awareness that time is too valuable to either count or kill? Might our work become as joyous as our childhood play; and might we recapture daydreaming from those who see it only as "dawdling," rather than a "fine art?" Might we, in other words, awaken that passion for energized living that we have been conditioned to keep in repose?

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