

# 1 The Call

And all this comes to an end.

And is not again to be met with.

*Ezra Pound, "Exile's Letter" (after Rihaku)*

Mother Walatta Petros, an Ethiopian noblewoman of the seventeenth century, had four children in a row who died shortly after childbirth. After that, writes her hagiographer, she "bore in mind the transience of the world."<sup>1</sup> Her husband still loved her, but she no longer wanted to stay with him. She spent her days in prayer and fasting, and her nights in vigils. At holidays she threw banquets to which all were invited, the poor and the wretched along with the townspeople and the priests. When her husband left on a military campaign, she saw her chance. She gave away all her possessions, including all of her jewelry, "eighty ounces weight of gold," and with two monks and three servants walked all through the night.<sup>2</sup> They traveled several days to the monastic settlement at Zade, where Walatta Petros shaved her head, took a nun's cap, and swore to remain all her days.

Her husband, learning of her departure, was furious. His men destroyed the town near Zade and set out to arrest her. Seeing how much damage he was causing on her behalf, she returned to him. But her heart still sought the monastery. At the time, thanks to the arrival of European missionaries, the Roman Catholic faith had begun to make inroads into the

ancient Christian practice of the Ethiopians. The king had adopted the “faith of the filthy Europeans” as the hagiographer calls it.<sup>3</sup> The Coptic Orthodox patriarch whom Walatta Petros followed had been murdered.

When Walatta Petros’ husband showed sympathy with the Catholics, Walatta Petros stopped eating, drinking, and beautifying herself, and lived as a nun in her husband’s household. Her husband finally let her go to live with her brother. From there she escaped again, only to be held captive by the king for a time, in an effort to make her renounce the Orthodox faith. At last, she was freed and able to pursue monastic life without interference. She continually gathered disciples, even while imprisoned. Once released, she moved frequently, forming all in all six communities; the last, for which she wrote a rule of life, was eight hundred strong.<sup>4</sup>

The vocation – the call to religious life – of Walatta Petros was rooted in a perception of the transience of things. Once she perceived it, she was moved to sacrifice married life, wealth, privilege, and beauty to follow Christ.

The grief of Walatta Petros and her call to religious life might be illuminated by a twentieth-century Orthodox nun who found her vocation after the death of her infant daughter. Mother Maria Skobtsova describes her manner of mourning:

For [some] it is not even a question of grief, but the sudden opening of gates into eternity, while the whole of natural existence has lost its stability and its coherence, yesterday’s laws have been abolished, desires have faded,

meaninglessness has displaced meaning and a different, albeit incomprehensible Meaning has caused wings to sprout at one's back. . . . Into the grave's dark maw are plunged all hopes, plans, habits, calculations, and above all meaning, the whole meaning of life. In the face of this, everything needs to be reexamined or rejected against falsehood or corruption.

For Mother Maria Skobtsova, grief reveals the truth about the world:

People call this a visitation of the Lord. A visitation which brings what? Grief? No, more than grief: for he suddenly reveals the nature of things.

Because grief brings us into contact with the nature of things – what Mother Walatta called “the transience of the world” – one can and ought to resist its fading and the return to the “normal” sense of things. Life without grief is “blindness”:

Eventually, they say, time heals – would it not be more accurate to say “deadens”? –all. Normality is gradually restored. The soul reverts to its blindness. The gates to eternity are closed once more . . .

And I am convinced that anyone who has shared this experience of eternity, if only once; who has understood which way he is going, if only once; who has perceived the One who precedes him, if only once: such a person will find it hard to deviate from this path, to him all comforts will appear ephemeral, all treasures valueless, all companions superfluous if in their midst he fails to see the one Companion, bearing his cross.<sup>5</sup>

For Mother Maria Skobtsova, the collapse of meaning in the heart of grief clarifies the eternal. The vision of death, since it destroys every illusion, reveals the reality that is beyond things that die.

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In vocation stories, success is as common as grief in inspiring a disruptive discontent with ordinary life. In Teresa of Avila's account of the foundation of her monasteries, she tells the tale of another noblewoman with a religious vocation. Doña Casilda is beautiful and the heir to a large fortune. Her two older siblings have entered religious life themselves. Her relatives fear the same for her, so they betroth her to a relative when she is only ten or eleven years old. She falls deeply in love with her fiancé. Teresa writes:

She had been spending a very happy day with her betrothed, whom she loved with an intensity rare for a child of her age, when suddenly she became very sad, for she realized that the day was over and that all other days would come to an end in the same way.<sup>6</sup>

She attends a liturgy where a young woman is clothed with the Carmelite habit. She is enchanted by the poverty of the monastery – one of Teresa's foundations – there, she thinks, one could really serve God. Visiting the convent later with her family, Doña Casilda asks the prioress to stay. Her family protests; the prioress refuses her request. She leaves the convent but begs to return. Her relatives insist that she is too young to enter religious life; she replies sharply that if she is old enough to marry (as they have insisted), she is old enough to give herself to God.

When staying with her grandmother, she asks to go into the country with her governess for some recreation, and arranges a gambit whereby they stop by the monastery to donate some wood and to ask for a jug of water. She slips inside and throws her arms around a statue of the Virgin Mary, begging the prioress to accept her. This time, the prioress agrees, and so her family has to remove her by royal order. Both her mother and her confessor oppose her, along with her relatives; she stays at her mother's house with her hostile family.

One day, attending Mass at a church with her mother and governess, her mother steps into the confessional. Doña Casilda acts quickly and sends her governess away to ask a priest for a Mass. In Teresa's account:

She stuck her overshoes up her sleeves, caught up her skirt, and ran away with the greatest possible haste to this convent, which was a long way away.<sup>7</sup>

The governess tries and fails to overtake her; when she reaches the convent, they give her the habit at once.

The attraction to a vocation is strong enough to break all other human bonds, not only the bonds of romantic attachment but also the ties to one's parents and one's origins. In her novel about the nineteenth-century French missionaries to the American Southwest, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather describes two young curates who promise an American bishop to join his missions, without telling their parents.<sup>8</sup> The two friends meet at dawn in secret to catch the coach to Paris, where they will be trained and sent out. One of them, his father a widower,

has been walking the fields all night, his face swollen with tears. His friend takes his arm and reminds him that he can be absolved of his promise to the Ohio bishop, once he gets to Paris. In the end they both cross the ocean, without saying goodbye to their families, and die in the land of their missions.

Thomas Aquinas, too, fought for his vocation. His noble parents intended him to become the abbot of a wealthy monastery. While studying in Naples, Thomas met the new radical community of the Dominicans, who renounced land and wealth to serve as itinerant preachers, begging for their necessities. He joined them. In response, his family kidnapped Thomas en route to the Dominican community in Paris and kept him in captivity for a year. While Thomas was confined, his brothers sent a courtesan to him in the hopes that he would be seduced from his vocation. With the help of two angels, he chased her from the room with a torch. He escaped his parents – according to some accounts, lowered from a window on a rope – and made his life with the Dominicans.<sup>9</sup>

It is impossible to believe that a bloodless intellectual conviction could motivate such determined sacrifices. Nor could ambition, at least not obviously. These particular men and women sacrifice all of the benefits of wealth and nobility, not only comfort, but prestige and power, the typical objects of human striving. What drives these men and women? What shapes their determination?

Certainly, fear can drive a person to extremes – think of Maria of *The Sound of Music* (1965), who flees back to her convent once she realizes she is in love with her employer. But

Maria's fear is not strong enough to hold out against the kind advice of the superior to return. In what becomes a repeated refrain in popular films of religious life: to be drawn to religion isn't a losing or a fleeing, but a finding and a seeking.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that some have sufficient fear of life in the world to drive them to religious life. Still, it seems worthwhile to test the hypothesis that fits the phenomena more closely: These are men and women in love.

In love with what or whom? With poverty perhaps – we will return to that possibility. Or like Antony, Martin, and Francis, they are in love with the Jesus Christ of the Gospels, the Poor Man of poor men. Yet I would like to begin with the problem that sets the background for the passion's development. Mother Walatta feels the transience of things; Doña Casilda notices that even the best days come to an end. Such insights could inspire resignation, depression, or despair, but they do not. These women are in love, I suggest, with God as transcendent and eternal. That love is sparked by an insight that leads them to reject the ordinary objects of love: wealth, power, and even distinctive human individuals, husband, fiancé, mother, father.

### **All Is Vanity**

What is the insight that provokes Doña Casilda to give up her beloved? She realizes after a wonderful day that it will end like all the others. She sees a life dedicated to romantic love and marriage as futile. Romantic love, in our North American and European culture, is the pinnacle of a human life. The young teen longs for it; the elderly pine its loss; in

between is the drama of marriage, bereavement, divorce, adultery, friendship, and loneliness.

The futility of even a life infused with a happy romance is taken up with unusual clarity in the 2013 Polish film *Ida*. *Ida* was left on the door of a convent as an infant during the Second World War and raised by the nuns. When she is preparing to make her profession and join the community, her superior tells her that her family is Jewish. Before taking her vows, she is told, she must meet her only surviving relative. She leaves the convent for the first time and gets to know her aunt Wanda, a famously brutal prosecutor for the Soviet-sponsored government. She also meets an attractive young musician. She returns to the convent, disquieted, and postpones her vows.

In her time away from the convent, *Ida*, like *Walatta Petros*, has had an encounter with death. She and her aunt, in their time together, have learnt about the murder of *Ida*'s parents and Wanda's young son, and have transferred their remains to a Jewish cemetery. In their travels, it becomes evident that Wanda assuages her pain with casual sex and heavy drinking. These medications fail in the long term. After *Ida* returns to the convent, Wanda commits suicide.

*Ida* leaves the convent again for the funeral, where the musician seeks her out. They spend the night together. The next morning, he invites her to spend the day with his band. "And after that?" she asks. "We buy a dog." "And after that?" "We get married, have a few kids." She asks, "And after that?" He answers, "The usual. Life." She recognizes this answer as an evasion of an unanswerable question. She puts her habit back on and walks back to the convent.



“This day will end like all others.” “And after that?” Both of these women inquire into the meaning of life and encounter the transience of things. It seems to them that since even the most wonderful experiences happen in a sequence, one after another, each coming to an end, they cannot qualify as goods that make life worth living. All of the goods a person might dream of or strive for, including the most meaning-laden activities and experiences, turn to dust.

Why does a recognition of the transience of things make life in the world seem pointless? Death is as old as Adam, yet human endeavor continues as if it makes no difference. If we find ourselves in crises of meaning, we can live in the moment, taking each day as it comes. Can we not “kiss a joy as it flies,” as Blake put it – treasure our loves and our work for what they are in the moment?

Could living in the moment console Walatta Petros for her lost children? The answer must be no. No matter how real and concrete the joy at the birth of a new human being into the world, the grief of his or her lost future would swallow it right up. To try to see it otherwise stretches human capacities to the point of cruelty. “Live in the moment” is common advice, containing real wisdom, but on its face, it assumes a certain prosperity. It is quite difficult to follow such advice when our moments are laden with grief or disfigured by deprivation – at least, unless we find a way to value grief and deprivation themselves. As I discuss further on, grief and deprivation can be treasured in the state of Christian abandonment, as a union with Christ crucified. Only there, I think, can “live in the moment” be sound advice.

The story of Doña Casilda illustrates that the recognition of the transience of things belongs to joy as well as grief, to success as well as failure. The brilliant poet of transience, author of the book of Ecclesiastes, writes in the voice of King Solomon:

A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever . . . What there was, that will be; what was done, that will be done, but there is nothing new under the sun.<sup>11</sup>

Grand palaces and gardens, fine wine and beautiful women, all amount to nothing. Even wisdom – the gift for which Solomon is most renowned – is pointless, since the wise man and the fool go to the same place, the grave.<sup>12</sup>

Ecclesiastes speaks to the emptiness of all things from the perspective of the wealthiest, wisest, and most powerful king of Israel, and his words are echoed nowhere more closely than in the speeches of Job, the once wealthy man who loses his property along with his twelve children in a single day.<sup>13</sup> Job sits scratching his boils with a potsherd, scolded and belittled by his comforters, demanding that God justify his fate. Solomon, in his cushy palace surrounded by every luxury, does not demand or lament as Job does. But his success yields insight similar to that yielded by Job's grief.

What insights do these two ancient wise men share? For one: Death makes all acquisition futile; it reduces us to the poverty of birth:

As [the rich man] came forth from his mother's womb, so again shall he depart, naked as he came, having nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.<sup>14</sup>

To seek justice or practice mercy is pointless: it does not guarantee flourishing, which more often goes to the wicked: “Why do the wicked survive, grow old, become mighty in power?”<sup>15</sup> Both the justice of the just man and the wickedness of the wicked man are annihilated in death.

As it is for the good man, so it is for the sinner; as it is for him who swears rashly, so it is for him who fears an oath. Among all the things that happen under the sun, this is the worst, that things turn out the same for all.<sup>16</sup>

To both authors, God is defined by absolute power and total obscurity. His plans are secret, and his omnipotent will cannot be overturned – what God does cannot be undone by any human endeavor. “Whatever God has done will endure forever; there is no adding to it, or taking away from it. Thus has God done, that he may be revered.”<sup>17</sup> Despite God’s universal and implacable governance, his work is impossible to understand: “Just as you know not how the breath of life fashions the human frame in the mother’s womb, so you know not the work of God, which he is accomplishing in the universe.”<sup>18</sup> All in all, it is best not to be born. The grief caused by seeing the futility and vanity of human life is not worth anything.<sup>19</sup>

It is Solomon, not Job, who promotes enjoyment of the good things in life, life in the moment. Of course! The king is the one who has them. The savoring of the moment is, it seems, for the lucky – not for everyone.

If you, like me, are an emotionally volatile lover of literature, you cannot read poetry as beautiful as Solomon’s or Job’s and not believe, somehow, that what they say must

be true. But such sentimentality does not befit philosophers. Is it true that the transience of things, the inevitability of death and of endings, drains ordinary life of its value? The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argues that it does not.<sup>20</sup> Nagel argues that if something matters, no extension of the duration of its existence makes it matter more, any more than its small size, expanded, would also increase the degree it matters. For Nagel, it is our unlimited capacity to seek justification, not the structure of our desires, that forces absurdity. Life seems pointless and absurd only because we are always able to question any candidate for its meaning.

Nagel has mis-framed the problem and come to a solution too easily. When we seek a meaningful life, we mean a satisfying life, a life that is worth the trouble. I can formulate a question in words that has no impact on my general sense of satisfaction. Life is pointless and absurd not because we can always seek a further justification, but only when we deeply care about things we cannot have. The absurdity that matters is when our passion for the unattainable drives us to approach life with the wrong tools, like emptying a lake with a sieve. Whether this is true can only be settled by looking at what human beings care deeply about, asking if they can have it, and, if not, how the desire for it might be managed.

Nagel's claim that the universal destiny of destruction does not strip life of meaning relies on thinking that something's duration does not affect whether it matters or not. If it matters now, it will not matter more for lasting for longer; if it doesn't matter, no length of time will grant it the power to do so. Nagel has assumed value and added time. He has not

considered that time or how we imagine time plays a significant, even a necessary role, in giving things value.

Loving something entails wanting it to last.<sup>21</sup> That is so for a beloved human being as much as it is for a treasured teapot. Some precious experiences are essentially shaped by having an ending, like a piece of music or a particular conversation. But if a beloved piece of music or a conversation partner were to be permanently extinguished from the face of the earth, our response would be grief.<sup>22</sup>

It is true that our experiences are episodic, but it is also true that we carefully cultivate the objects of our experience, taking care of or supporting them (if they are people), donating or volunteering to support them (if they are experiences), preserving and developing them (if they are lands, places, communities, or objects). These are the activities that seem to give human life on earth its meaning. We also create and invent, seeking new experiences or the recovery of old ones. But we could not do any of this unless we imagine what we build or nurture will last.<sup>23</sup> As we live our lives, caring for people, music, dance, conversation, or other endeavors, we don't simply add experiences together. We perceive greater and greater richness in their objects, caring about them and dreading their loss all the more with the passage of time.

How long do we want what we love to last? The fact that we are often reconciled to the chaotic destruction and replacement of various beloved things does not mean that we desire them to last only a certain time. When we are truly reconciled to the loss of something, it is because we have found something new, put our focus elsewhere, when our

love has effectively died. We divide our attention, hedging our bets against grief and loss. We love conditionally; when the conditions fail, our love fails, and we move onto something else. But I reckon that to hold something in loving attention while reconciled to its permanent annihilation is not humanly possible. If it does not seem this way, it is because we have found substitute forms of survival – a stone grave marker, a memory, an album of photographs, a memorial project, a young person with the name or the voice of the dead – that continue.

The fear of death and the fear of loss then, may be one ground of our automatic half-heartedness, our difficulties in devoting ourselves to something completely. Wholeheartedness means putting all our eggs in one basket and waiting for them to break – as all eggs surely will. Lukewarmness is the natural condition of self-protection against loss. Philosopher Eleonore Stump calls it “willed loneliness.”<sup>24</sup>

It is true that experiences and relationships would lose their poignancy if we did not die.<sup>25</sup> But it is also true that they would not be poignant at all if we did not long for them to last, even unto the end of time. Poignancy results from a clash between a desire and the nature of its object. We seek eternity and get poignancy. To treasure poignancy above eternity is to treasure the terms of our dissatisfaction. So we face the central question to which Christian teaching responds: Is there anything that can satisfy our desire for a joy outside of time?

For Mother Walatta Petros, it is the deaths of her children that spark the insight into the transience of things. How much of our life or work is about our children? Consider a world without children, as portrayed in the 2006 film of P. D. James' novel, *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón.<sup>26</sup> In the film, every human on earth was suddenly stricken infertile twenty years earlier. The youngest person on earth is twenty-one years old. The schoolyards are empty, and endemic violence is narrated by a competing array of propaganda machines. Only fanatics seem to have projects of any scope. Life under these circumstances appears utterly pointless.<sup>27</sup>

The threat the scenario poses is not to the childless, but to any of us. The lives of childless persons like myself have meaning thanks to other people's children. I am a teacher. I pass on to young people the habits of mind I learned myself when I was young. They shall (I hope) replace me as teachers of the young when I am no more. If there are no young people, there is nothing and no one to teach; those habits of mine will die with me and my contemporaries. So too with any endeavor: starting a company, planting a farm, building a skyscraper, lobbying for justice. These are instrumental endeavors, of course: The company makes possible leisure time with my family; the farm permits a rural life; lobbying for justice makes it possible for others to live fuller lives, packed with meaning. Either way, without the people of the future, what could any of this mean? It appears to be all reduced to momentary entertainment.

The scenario of the film raises the broader prospect that the meaning of our activities is a sort of optical illusion.

After all, should we imagine that the last generation of fertile humans *did have* a meaningful life?<sup>28</sup> Is the last round of childbearing rendered meaningless by the catastrophe that follows it? Perhaps one generation is not enough to make the previous one valuable. How about the one before that? How many generations are sufficient to generate lives of value and meaning? If we know that the human race will come to an end – and surely it will – why should anything at all matter?

The Swedish vessel, the *Vasa*, built in the early seventeenth century, was among the grandest ever made, decorated with hundreds of brightly colored wooden sculptures and armed with enormous brass cannons. It was launched with great fanfare into the Stockholm harbor in 1628. It sank from the force of two gusts of wind, 390 feet from shore. Its hull was pulled out in 1961 and sits in a Stockholm museum, a monument to the futility of human endeavor.

What is the difference between a great ship that sinks after five minutes and one that sinks after some days? What if it lasts for some years? A ship's value can be weighed against the profits it brings, which emerge over time; voyage after voyage, it begins to pay off the costs of building it, and to exceed them. It might break even in one voyage, or twenty. But we are not weighing materials against materials, but the value of a life, or several lives. How much is a human lifespan worth – human desire, enterprise, endeavor, accomplishment?

Consider the tragedy of the work of ten years, or a lifetime, undone before one's eyes. One dedicates one's life to a company (for an easier life), a school or a philosophy



department (to cultivate minds), a church (to nurture souls), a small business (to serve a community), any institution or enterprise. When we are too advanced in years to begin again, it crumbles as we watch, along with the human activities our endeavors made possible. Our work has been futile. Now imagine that the crumbling takes place just after our death. Our work is still futile. Yet, we know, everything crumbles. We have most of us walked in the ruins of empires. Nothing lasts forever. Why not draw the conclusion that all our endeavor is futile?

Of course, we have experiences that feel complete in themselves: the walk in the woods, the symphony, the dance, late-night conversations with friends that continually lapse into laughter, holding your infant in your arms and looking at its tiny fingernails. These experiences may hold ultimate value, existential value, in a way that building things over years does not. Yet, again, we build things over years to secure those experiences. We cultivate things for the sake of something of more fundamental value, yes; but those riches of life in which life culminates also depend on their continuous cultivation. That is why the work of building is so meaningful and so gratifying, and why its undoing is so painful.

The problem we have been circling around is worse than facing one's own death. Death can be borne, I think, if one knows that the things and people one cares about live on afterward. What we are looking at is annihilation, the destruction of everything. I am persuaded that if death alone does not render life meaningless, annihilation certainly does.

## **Eternity in the Heart**

Solomon describes the futility of human endeavor as a work of God. God has given everything its proper time and season, birth, death, planting, sowing, grief, joy. "He has made each thing beautiful in its time."<sup>29</sup> The promise of wisdom is that the wise person comes to know these times and seasons.<sup>30</sup> However, even the wisest of us is ignorant of what is to come, and none of us is master of our life or death. Solomon diagnoses our resulting discomfort:

[God] also put the world [or: eternity] into their hearts, so that man cannot find out the work of God from beginning to end.<sup>31</sup>

We might have been put together in such a way as to enjoy the world simply as it is presented to us, taking in each thing, beautiful at its proper time, accepting our end as it comes, unforeseen. But we are not. God has put the world into our hearts. We long to see the future unfold indefinitely. We want to know everything and to act in such a way as to make a permanent mark. Just as we seek to know what is always and universally true, we seek to act under the aspect of eternity, to build monuments that will last forever.

In the countries where I have lived, the resting places of the dead are marked with carved stone. The stones are meant to last, it seems, as long as the inscriptions of the Assyrian kings. But our graves will stop mattering within a few generations. We may be charmed by an ancient cenotaph, but chances are, its living relations have long ago forgotten it. Our desire for things to last may not be fully rational or easily

guided by the fact of the matter. We imagine that things go on and on. But they do not. Everything dies, is destroyed, or falls out of range of human attention, losing its meaning.

Our desire for eternity need not be conscious. Could we act, could we do anything at all, if we had a vivid sense of the lifespan of its results? When we have the privilege of calculating costs and benefits, of course we can: We can build a furnace that will last a hundred years and longer, paying for its materials and more. The film *Arrival* (2016) hypothesizes that we would choose to have a child, knowing that it would live only ten years. It invites a cruel question: would we so choose, if we knew it would live but five years? One year? A single breath?

What would we be like if we had no sense of indefinite time, of lasting forever, or if we had no sense of the whole of time or space? Yet the desires provoked by global imaginings cannot be satisfied. "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing."<sup>32</sup> We are small in width and stature, we are blind to the future, and we die.

Either a lawnmower works, or it doesn't. Machines don't lie. But a human life can run in circles and insist that those circles are proper functioning. Religious life and all of its renunciations begin from the recognition of our broken machinery and reach with all human power for the work that gives our lives meaning and that fulfills our deepest desires.

The desire for eternity is not straightforward or transparent. It hides underneath our more ordinary loves and desires. The ambition to change the world is not only limited by the ravages of time but is actually fed by illusions.

The “world” we can reshape is nothing like the whole that lies only in our heart, known only by love. We reduce the world to a given sphere – say, academic philosophy; the small town we live in; the actions and passions of a handful of political figures, whose actions seem rather less deliberate and less effective than those of an ordinary carpenter. When we exhaust ourselves in burnout and in midlife crises, we turn to crafts: gardening, woodwork, knitting. Here at least our action is effective, even if our scope is much more limited.

It isn’t only our goals that are futile. It is also our leisurely activity. Time may drop away in a spirited card game or in the silence of nature, boating down a cliff-bordered river among the diving kingfishers. We may think or study without any end in view – for as long as we have, our understanding grows, and is worth whatever time is spent. It is the very timelessness of these activities that puts the world into our hearts, to make us long for joy that never ends. Such activities cannot be properly added up into a sum of accomplishments, any more than a single minute of excruciating pain could be traded for an equivalent number of minutes of a pain proportionately less.<sup>33</sup> We cannot help wanting eternity – not everlasting activity where our muscles get sore, our eyes tired, and our souls sink into boredom – but a joy that does not end, just as our best activities tantalizingly suggest.

If our activities are sometimes directed at accomplishment, other times on experiences holding their value in themselves, in which sense does our longing for immortality lie? Allow me to speculate. Accomplishment is a means of power over our circumstances, a way of evading fragility and vulnerability. Eve’s desire to be a god – as much as my own

busy effort to endeavor, control, or manage – is an anxious response to inevitable decay and destruction. That can be so even if my intention is not direct. My pleasure in weeding, or hunting, may well lie in my exercising power over my surroundings, the setting of my strength against that of something else, and winning. This is not so much an evasion of death as an evasion of the condition for death: weakness, powerlessness, hapless receptivity to circumstances.

A project may be completed successfully or not, but its completion always fails to make us invincible. Likewise, the coming-to-an-end of a treasured activity, or the death or collapse of the thing we loved in it, proves that we have not escaped time at all. Not only will that activity, once restarted, again come to an end, but the beloved objects and companions in that activity, the friends, family members, cliff-lined river, also will all come to an end.

Perhaps indestructible knowledge alone can satisfy my deepest longings. Even so, as Solomon understood about wisdom, what matters to me is *my* knowing, and that dies with me, as in the famous description of the death of the Homeric warrior “who lay in a whirl of dust . . . having forgotten horsemanship.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Myself and Others**

If this sort of argument undermines the consolations of our collective future, what possibilities remain for understanding the value of a single human life? When I first began teaching philosophy, I had my students read a paper by utilitarian philosopher Jonathan Glover called “The Sanctity of Life.”<sup>35</sup>

Glover argues against the idea of the sanctity of life by claiming that since we would choose death over permanent unconsciousness and over continuous terrible pain, neither life nor consciousness matter in themselves. For Glover, lives are only valuable when they are worth living. In one class, I tried again and again to explain the argument, but the classroom, full of Alabama Christians, could not catch on. Finally, I said: "He's asking what value your life has for you!" and a young woman asked, "Why would you think that the value of your life was for *you*?" My jaw hit the floor. I had never heard such a thing.

The only thing that has equal value to a human life, absent God, is another human life. That is the insight behind our commonplace wisdom that love is all we need, or that lives of service, teaching, nursing, search and rescue, farming and food service, parenting, the administration of justice, the care of the poor, the defense of the innocent, are the truly meaningful lives. So Mother Maria Sbotsova reflects, after the death of her daughter:

For years I did not know, in fact I never knew the meaning of repentance, but now I am aghast at my own insignificance. At Nastia's side I feel that my soul has meandered down back alleys all my life. And now I want an authentic and purified road, not out of faith in life, but in order to justify, understand, and accept death. No amount of thought will ever result with any greater formulation than the three words, "Love one another", so long as it is love to the end and without exceptions. And then the whole of life is illumined, which is otherwise an abomination and a burden.<sup>36</sup>

Mother Maria, in the face of the death of her child, sees all human endeavor as useless, swallowed up by annihilation. At that point, she felt, she had no alternative but to respond, by dedicating her life to love of her neighbors. This she did, until her attempts to hide and protect the Jews of Paris got her sent to Ravensbruck and murdered by the Nazis. Yet I doubt she thought her work would be rendered futile by such an end. She has found in the love of her neighbors that “the whole of life is illumined.” That suggests that something eternal and transcendent is found there, something that lies behind everything we experience.

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I have had, more or less, a sheltered and comfortable life. The time just before my conversion was a remarkably happy one. I had found moderate success in a high-prestige graduate program; I was able to relax enough to feel that I had been accepted not as an aspiring phony, but as myself. Yet it was suddenly and violently exposed to me that I was living in radical contingency and world-cracking suffering.

My exposure to this reality took place as I witnessed the transformation of the World Trade Center into smoke, ash, and human remains, all in minutes. I watched the news coverage on live television, in a student common room on the campus where I was studying at the time. I sat with one of my teachers, among the most self-assured, implacable people I had ever met. He kept turning to me and asking, like a child, “The buildings are gone?,” “They’re really

gone?,” “Are they not there anymore?,” “I can’t believe those buildings aren’t there anymore.”

The towers of the old World Trade Center were enormous. One saw them from outside the city, from a long way off, in the car or on the train traveling in. Once, visiting the city with friends, we took the elevator to the top of one of the towers. Through vast windows, we saw a thunderstorm, well below us, flashing lightning as it moved across the city, from Brooklyn into lower Manhattan. I had never been above a thunderstorm, before – or since. It was magnificent to see something that would be overwhelming or dangerous on the ground reduced to a beautiful entertainment, harmless as a school of tropical fish.

It came out on the news that day that a task force on the earlier bombing of the World Trade Center had recommended a terrorism response center. It had been planned, built, staffed, and located . . . in the World Trade Center. The managed safety of the wealthy and the powerful was in the rubble, just as the rescue teams, fire, police, the helpers, were themselves rubble. The civic effort of one of the richest cities in the world to preserve life and prevent catastrophe had failed.

The bombing shook my privileged sense of the safety and predictability of the world into shambles. Anything could happen; I gobbled rumors, speculations, deeply unnerved by the vast new landscape of possible events and experiences that opened up. An evening thunderstorm sounded like a bombing raid; a rumor of a threat resonated in waves of fear.



No one I knew died in the bombing. Yet I was not only overwhelmed with a sense of contingency and fear, that the whole world could change in a matter of minutes, but with grief. I lived an hour away from the city. At the local rail station, homemade flyers with pictures of missing loved ones were stuck up with tape. I wept daily over the newspaper, which published story after story of bereaved spouses, grieving parents, and orphaned children, alongside the acts of heroism that emerged, slowly, from the rubble. All in a moment, daily life, its tedium, its joys, its frustrations, had evaporated, and a new dimension of value, a different level of love and self-sacrifice, had opened up. On the one hand, life had been emptied of its previous meaning, as Mother Maria Sbotsova described. On the other, “the whole of life had been illumined” – something shone out that I had not seen previously.

We began by asking what drove Mother Walatta Petros, Doña Casilda, and many others to renounce wealth, rank, power, romantic love, and filial duty to serve God alone. The perception of the futility or transience of things did not provoke despair or resignation: It was the occasion for falling in love. But that object of love still evades us. Whatever it is that motivates these tremendous actions of courage and endurance, we know at this point only its basic shape: the shape suggested by Solomon, the shape of the eternal, the timeless, and the complete. It is the shape of God himself that he has put into our hearts. As another courageous renunciant put it: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”<sup>37</sup>