NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Searching for meaning during the summer doldrums

Chase Nordengren | Aug. 15, 2013 Young Voices

Summer is a quiet time in university life. The smarter among us run off to vacations and retreats while the rest of us board ourselves up to type and condense the work of the year. Foot traffic on campus slows down. Coffee shops close earlier. Even church has, in August, become slower: Our two services have pared down to one; our organist has taken her deserved vacation; and services have the prevailing feeling of continuance.

The quiet can be relaxing, but it is also unsettling. As a theological person, I find I often come to expect routine revolutions of thought: great debates, wrenched inquiries, and a continuous and rapid search for relevance and meaning. The existential theologians of my recent enamorment, much of it documented here -- Tillich, Kierkegaard, Robinson, Percy -- all write with the strong presupposition that the world is changing or is about to change in a dramatic way.

Whether for good or for ill, this change gives us theologians something to do. Like Paul, we hurriedly await the coming of the Kingdom. Like Paul, we may also find a great deal of our identities wrapped up in proclaiming the need for haste. For me, that rush has always felt strongest in my mind: the ever-present feeling that the next book, the next thinker, the next lecture holds the key to a whole new world of dramatic thinking about the nature of being.

Like the summer -- or like the dust on my bookshelf -- it seems my thinking has settled in for the time being. I have neither great revelation or great dissatisfaction. My search for meaning has for months stayed about the same. When one comes to expect dramatic change, this stasis is unsettling, even a little scary. One runs over and over again through all the presumed missed opportunities, the truth buried between the lines, the meaning just beyond grasp.

During periods like this, I seemingly always find my way back to this interview with Cornel West on truth [1], featured in the 2008 documentary *Examined Life*. As a text [2], it benefits from being read nonlinearly, almost as cut up by the documentary. Perhaps even more than usual, West is riffing on the experience of an engaged theological and philosophical life.

There is much in the interview of truth and love and death, of course, but also of time. West emphasizes the ways in which we too often see time through the lens of what's lost: the things we fail to do, the time we have *left* to live. Such defeatism may be incompatible with the search for meaning.

Since that search is never really complete, in West's view, it's instead vital to view time as a gift. Here, West draws clearly on the theological mind: Time is what is afforded us generously by God to do, to love and to be. Appreciating the value of time is appreciating the value of these individual experiences.

What resonates most with me in West's monologue, however, is a brief aside on the vitality of the life of the mind. Intellectual engagement, West contends, rivals all other activities for its level of spiritedness and engagement. "So it's true," he says, "that you might be socially isolated because you're in the library, at home and so on, but you're intensely alive."

Watching it again, I wonder where that vitality, which I have felt, has gone the last few months. Picking up those dusty books and flipping through them this week, it felt impossible to find an impassioned big idea for this column. The ideas in all of them felt too dated, too overplayed, too wrapped up in trite theological debates about sex or nation or evangelism. Frustration, self-doubt, anger: All can result from the absence of the revolutionary thought one hopes to find yet again.

I don't know where the next movement in my intellectual life will come from. Still, I seem well advised to take all times, even these quiet times, as a gift instead of a loss. I cherish with intense fondness late nights with sprawled open books, furious typing and scribbling until my hands are sore. But the opportunity to stew in what has been accomplished, to breathe before what is to come: That, too, is a blessing to be cherished.

[Chase Nordengren is a graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studies education policy.]

Editor's Note: We can send you an email alert every time a Young Voices column is posted. Go to this page and follow the directions: Email alert sign-up [3].

Source URL (retrieved on *07/08/2015 - 02:01*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/young-voices/searching-meaning-during-summer-doldrums

Links:
[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C_w
[2] http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story_detail.php?id=1277&page=1
[3] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup