

8/26/14

Verse 71

No one in this world remains free from becoming,
in a state of sameness; this is said to be a beginningless play;
to him who knows this, which is unlimited, as a whole,
boundless happiness comes.

Free translation:

No one remains established forever in a state of sameness. The process of becoming is ongoing, and all are subjected to this beginningless sport of the Divine. When all this is known in its entirety, one becomes happy beyond measure.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

Bereft of becoming none stays here on earth
In equalised state; a beginningless sport all this!
In its global fullness, when, as a whole, one knows this
There comes to him unbounded happiness.

Yet another of the verses that “says it all,” Verse 71 was one of Nitya’s efforts to gently correct us, and it often causes discomfort. While this is a sign that something real is being addressed, the habitual choice of most people is to distance themselves from it as soon as possible. Our footsteps have learned to casually walk around obstacles rather than regard them as signposts.

Nitya well knew this, and used his masterful ability as a storyteller to draw us in to the transcendental peace he hoped to communicate. Captivated by his stories, we relaxed our guard without knowing it, and so some sensible seeds could be planted.

After some preliminary remarks to put the class at ease, Nitya lays out the gist of our work in the second half of Atmopadesa Satakam:

Narayana Guru makes two points in this verse. One is that we should know that life is a *lila*, a sport, and the other is that we should know this *akave*, as a whole, all together. These are the two saving factors.

If you do not know that this is a *lila*, this partial knowledge can be very tormenting. And it can be a nightmare if you don't know it as a whole. Understanding this as sport relates to what may be called the non-Self, while 'the whole' has reference to the Self. The whole panoply of life is played out between the duality experienced between the Self and the non-Self....

All the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible and the Koran are attempts through the spoken word to remove darkness from the mind and the still greater darkness perpetuated by the vital forces. You are trying to conquer the unknown by annexing more and more of it through the spoken word which makes things known. You may not be able to know everything as a whole, *akave*, but at least you can know that it is like a sport.

Once again the verse parallels our Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study, where we're in the section on light and darkness doing battle and finally being resolved. The secret is to know the *akave*, the total context:

A whole chapter of the Brihadaranyaka is devoted to attaining this great freedom of knowing all, *akave arinnal*. What is this meditation? The meditation is to know that there is a great paradox happening. Light is opposed to darkness. Light and darkness cannot be together; the quality-less and what has quality cannot be together. Yet light and darkness do come together in relative degrees. It is not an impossibility. We live in the midst of the paradox that light and darkness coexist and are interlaced. In the same way, the Absolute and the relative are not in two places, they coexist in the very same place.

We have all tilted our internal balance beam in favor of light and against darkness. Nitya describes it as having a screen we impose between ourselves and the world: "We are partially blind in this sense,

and it is this blindness that causes our misery.” Our crafty inner voice reassures us that we are by no means blind. Other people are, but not us. They are the ones who should change. Needless to say—or is it?—this attitude has to be surrendered for the word of the guru to have any effect. We too are blind. As Narayana Guru flatly states, all are subject to endless becoming, to the ups and downs of existence. There’s no way to dodge it. But a yogi is dedicated to not imposing more than can be helped on any situation. Many of the things we view with distaste can be made palatable and even tasty with a smidgen of insight.

In searching Nitya’s autobiography for his heart attack story (appended in Part II), I “accidentally” came across this highly germane passage. Nitya and Belgian Paul Gevaert are traveling with Nataraja Guru in the Himalayas:

During our time in Hardwar Paul became more despondent day by day. While we were walking along the banks of the Ganges, Guru said, “Paul is in depression. This is because he was spoiled by all his sisters when he was a child.”

It was very painful for Paul to listen to Guru’s remarks. Guru went on, “Nobody will admit anything that is deeply lodged in their ego. The vulnerable part of your ego is putting up a defense. If somebody touches that place, your soul will wriggle like a worm. To bring you back to the tranquility of the Self, you have to take your life seriously.

“Enthusiasm for the Absolute to prevail is the only medicine for states of depression. The human mind is so constituted that its instructive dispositions need a strong numerator interest: a passion for Truth, Justice or Beauty. When one supplies this element all blues and troubles vanish.”
(L&B, 234)

Breaking through the personal screen (it’s more like a steel curtain) of defenses a seeker of truth unconsciously carries is an almost impossible task, an art form that will never be popular. Yet good-hearted philosophers keep trying. The exceedingly rare

rapport between a guru and disciple dedicated to liberation is a perfect opportunity, and that is what we are nibbling at the edges of in this study, some of the time.

Susan sent a quote this week from good-hearted French polymath Blaise Pascal (1623-1662):

Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so. (From *Pensées*)

One theory espoused by both Narayana Guru and the Upanishads is that there is a continuous thread of unfolding evolution in our life, the *sutratma*. Very often the plans we make and the resolutions we take serve to impede rather than bolster this subtle but essential influence. Supported by the findings of science, we are now trying to open up to this veiled part of who we are and let it lead us, at least in our moments of freedom from external demands. Nitya hits on our clinging to superficial elements that screen out the *sutratma* and the way we kid ourselves that dealing with those is the same as liberating our psyche:

Everyone says you should resolve everything. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says that is the one thing you should *not* do. Thinking you know is a way of suppressing the beneficent flow of life. Once you resolve and make up your mind, things go against you and you have all the troubles in the world. The rishis' advice is, "Don't resolve. Just be free. Feel free. Why should you resolve when you know you are not the master of anything?"

One of the interesting oddities about this talk is that the vital forces are not seen as purely positive. They are part of the non-Self, the unknown impulses that drive our rati engine. They sustain our life and interest and many good things, but this is not the place to worship them. Nitya knew from experience that misdirected pranic energies could be dangerous, like having a hurricane loose in our innards. Here he demonstrates how we can treat the building blocks of our being either negatively or positively, with a commensurate effect on our mental health:

So what is known, yet to be known, and the unknown make up the whole thing. The word, the mind and prana—these constitute everything other than the Self: what is called the non-Self. The known makes a kind of shield. It becomes a screen against what is not known. What you desire to know causes all the restlessness, and the unknown is what frightens you. Still, these three can be made tools for happiness, too. What is known can make you happy because you know it, the desire to know allows for hope and gives life its promise, and what a great relief it is that you don't know a lot of things! You can look at it this way also. All that is required is akave. If you know all this, then you become very happy. It's not a great secret. It's really a very simple verse.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable part of Nitya's presentation is that life is a sport, *lila*. God's little joke. We think of all the dreadful news stories and personal tragedies of our friends and family, and wonder what he's talking about. Nitya was a very compassionate person who always looked into the cause of every problem. He wasn't naïve, and didn't minimize the painful stresses we have to deal with. He was talking about something vitally important to our well-being, and his examples of how our mindset affects of experience are classic, original and memorable.

A lot of what happens to us is powerfully colored, bright or dark, by how we frame it. Most of us are precious little aware that we already throw a strongly negative cast over events. Achieving a neutral balance

would relieve us of many of our miseries. So why don't we make a serious effort? It's baffling that most people would rather hold on to their accustomed chains that take them off. There is a world of difference between the chains laid on us by our conditions and those we wrap around us without any valid reason.

Lila plays a significant role in the late stage of Atmo. Most of us cannot accept the playful aspect of life. We surrender it when we abandon our childhood, and it recedes ever farther into the past as we age. We become sober, sedentary, even bitter, in old age. To ward this off we have to learn how to retain some measure of playfulness. Most of our peer groups urge us to become downers, to join them in the pits. There is an almost inescapable gravity in human society, like a black hole from which even light cannot escape.

Narayana Guru was born into a downtrodden caste that accepted its position and medicated it with toddy alcohol. He showed his fellows how to restore their self-respect, and in the process an entire region of the globe was transformed. As Moni protested, he was not a social reformer. He didn't direct any programs. He simply pointed out to people that they were the Absolute itself and had the power to choose for themselves, and that reversal of perspective initiated the gradual sea change from feudalism to democracy in South India.

Nitya's teaching is penetrating and intense, so he is kind enough to use himself as an example, along with another exemplary human, Carl Jung. We don't have to beat ourselves up because we prevaricate; everyone does it, even Nitya. The trick is that the deception becomes so deeply ingrained we are no longer aware of it. The discomfort we feel in even thinking about the subject is due to our need to keep that area cordoned off even from our self. It's a tough admission, but Nitya showed us how. Then he warns:

Many of us do the same thing, but only a few of us can get free of the syndrome after it becomes ingrained the way Jung did. I know I do it...it's such a great joy that all of you suffer for my sake. With so many attentive friends, a heart attack is a kind of performance. So

when you have such a realization, even disease can be seen as a sport.

Nitya was not speaking about the tragic circumstances where people are held in bondage by their environment. Plenty of diseases are not psychosomatic. He was using his surgical tools to help us excise our egotistical intractability about optional factors. A careful reading of his teaching shows this to be a continuous thread. A sizable chunk of our problems is self-imposed, and it is only our pride that keeps us from surrendering it, either all at once or bit by bit. In the ultimate analysis, it is our choice whether to hang on to our miseries or not. Again, it's "no fair" to define our voluntary ills as involuntary, but that's the easy road frequently taken. We should bring our intelligence to bear and see which give way and which don't. As the old adage goes, "Those who say I can and those who say I can't are both right."

As a way to realize this valuable teaching, I proposed that class members could write about something in their past they once felt was crucially important and heavy but later came to see as laughable. We can easily perceive those things in others: the ridiculousness of their posturing, the cheap gambits thrown up to disguise the flimsiness of their beliefs and all that, but can we admit it in ourselves? If you can, and are willing to share it, I believe everyone else will recognize themselves in your example. There is no time limit on this, and it can be anonymous (other than me I'm afraid). We don't need or want to hear about other people's foibles. Yours can be from the past: few people can admit to their current hang-ups, but by studying bygone follies, we can sometimes apply the perspective to the present. If you know a good example from elsewhere, you can make it generic.

Just a suggestion. Have fun out there!

Part II

Love and Blessings is such a wonderful book! Here's the bit about Nitya's heart ailment, with some introductory remarks about how his approach differed from Nataraja Guru's. At the time, Nitya was head of

the Institute of Psychic and Spiritual Research, in Delhi, and was visiting Singapore:

HEART PANGS

By some strange quirk of fate, the Singapore Gurukula was right across the street from the Sri Narayana Mission. Back in Kerala there was growing disenchantment among the devotees of Narayana Guru that the Gurukula and the Shivagiri Mutt were not working together. To the common man who never bothered to understand the details of the ideological clashes, the Gurukula was only a rival institution to Shivagiri. Only those who knew Nataraja Guru could understand the Gurukula's seemingly strange and hostile posture. Unfortunately, what was happening in Singapore looked like a reflection of the situation in Varkala.

When I arrived on my first visit, in 1965, the stand of the officers of both institutions was very obstinate and egoistic, and mutual envy and hatred were sky high. Still, there was hope on both sides that I would act as a peacemaker. I welcomed people on either side to come and present their grievances to me. To bring reconciliation where people have lost their way, understanding should be applied at the point where people have drifted away from altruistic values to become self-centered. I began giving classes at the Gurukula on this general theme. As days passed, more and more sympathizers of the Mission came to attend the classes, and there was a feeling that all differences could be minimized.

Just at that time Guru came. Our behavior patterns differ very much. My policy is to wait, giving a lot of opportunities for people to present themselves as they think they are, and only after establishing ties with them do I start correcting them. But Guru never wanted to waste any time. He never minced words, and in less than a minute he would cause a confrontation. Whenever he saw even the slightest exaggeration, he would tell the person right to his face that he was mad. Those with latent abnormalities would come out of their hideouts immediately with all the frenzies of really mad people. And after such an outburst they would either calm down or leave in a fury, never to return. This is exactly what happened to the Singapore crowd. After two weeks Guru

returned to India with all the peace talks in shambles. I felt deeply wounded in my conscience, and decided to leave as well.

I returned to Delhi, where events also took a wrong turn. Guru came to the Institute, and he saw immediately that the politicians and bureaucrats who were hovering around did not appreciate the pure and wholesale study of man and his spiritual nature. He made great efforts to expose their hypocrisy. I was working eighteen to twenty hours a day to make the Institute yield good results, and it was frustrating that the program had neither Guru's approval or the sincere appreciation of my co-workers.

Guru had driven a wedge between the Institute and me, and I was ready to walk away. So, I went back to Singapore with the intention of bringing a rapprochement between the Gurukula and the Mission. This time I succeeded, but the emotional strain of mediating between different groups with intractable vested interests caused me to lose my stamina, and I fainted while giving a talk. I was rushed to the hospital, where the doctor surmised I had had a heart attack. There was no foundation for the diagnosis; even so, I was initiated into the mystery of myocardial ischemia by being given all the worst drugs that are administered to heart patients.

After sixty-five days in the hospital, the doctors gave up on me. It was a remarkable night. Several nurses spent the entire night in my room, kneeling by my bed and praying to the Good Lord Jesus to save my life. I think God must have listened to their prayers. Next day, I was flown to Kuala Lumpur where a doctor consoled me, saying that there was a good chance I would live for at least six more months. I just wanted to hold out ten more days so that I could get back to Varkala and pay my last respects to Guru.

My sister was a pathologist and her husband was a cardiologist. They met me at the Trivandrum airport with a stretcher, a wheel chair and bags full of medicine, and took me up to the Gurukula, where Nataraja Guru insisted that I be accommodated in his room. After the doctors had left, Guru came in and looked disdainfully at all the pills and capsules and tonics. He insisted that I throw them all away as part of my therapy. In the morning he expected me to get up at half-past four and

take down notes as I had always done. He thought that lying in bed would only worsen an ailing heart. Later he took me by the hand and made me walk around the hill a bit.

Under Guru's care I slowly started improving. Little by little he gave me small assignments to do, and in the morning and evening he took me out for short walks. His theory was that we die when the plus side of our life is robbed of its vital interests. A good remedy for seemingly fatal diseases is to cultivate enormous interest in accomplishing something worthwhile.

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Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

Our life on earth is described in the Bhagavad Gita as that which is not known at its beginning, known in the middle, and also not known at its end. There are so many theories about time, but what is relevant to us is what we experience here and now. The sequential experiencing that goes on from the past to the future or from the future to the past is called becoming. In this verse the term used is *savanam*, the birth of events. Something is always being born and something is always disappearing from our attention.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad speaks of three aspects of life: the speech, the mind, and the prana. The speech is that which is known, the mind is that which desires to know, and the prana is the unknown. The mind has a central place between the known and the unknown, and also between the world of external stimuli and the inner impulses. Without mind nothing is known. We need the mind for the articulation of speech and the interpretation or the discerning of the meaning of whatever is heard or experienced. Knowledge is identical with mentation. Although the mind depends on the prana, the vital forces, it has no knowledge of its autonomic functions. In the Chandogya Upanishad, vyana is adored as the vital force that fuses the prana into apana and thus helps the continuous articulation of words without needing to take special time to breathe. Thus, prana is causally related both to the mind and also to

speech. From the unknown comes that which is desired to be known and that which is known.

The world of becoming is so fabricated that only a small fragment is ever revealed to our knowledge. Human interest is also shifting from one gestalt to another. This fragment can be joyous, dreadful or painful. Two remedies are recommended in this verse for transcending the consequences of suffering. One is to know the cosmic phenomenon to be a beginningless sport and the other is to know the phenomenality itself in its entirety. What is involved in the eternal sport is the non-Self. The total knowledge suggested in this verse is the knowledge of the Self. The painful duality comes in between the experiencing of “I am” and what is “other than me.” In the opening paragraphs of Sankara's commentary on Brahma Sutra, he presents the mistaken identity of the Self with the non-Self and the non-Self with the Self, and he considers that to be the basic ignorance that causes all experiences of misery. In our day to day experiences, our mind is veiled by a cloud of unknowing and hence our knowledge is bound to be relativistic and partial. The scriptures of all religions and all teachers or masters try to remove this screen from our minds. We are using words, which have the power to make things known to us, to throw light on what we desire with our mind and what may assail us from the unknown.

It is not easy to know everything in one comprehensive truth, but we can look at life as a sport. Take sports like football as it is played in the United States, or boxing, they are dangerous and masochistic, yet that does not stop people from enjoying them. If a man punches another's nose outside a sport arena, it is viewed as a crime and the police may even be called. This is the difference between seriousness and a sportive attitude. In a motor race cars overturn and burst into flames; in a flying display aircrafts crash and people die. This is treated as part of the game. Treating at least part of our life as a game is well known to us, but this attitude is to be extrapolated into other areas also. No one sues a friend for libel, even when the friend publicly ridicules him before others. The sportive spirit elevates our vision and keeps us cool. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung mentions how he brought

epileptic fits upon himself so as to attract attention. There are neurotic and psychotic traits that people do not want to be rid of.

Is poverty a sport? There are people who have taken vows of poverty. Jalaluddin Rumi says, "Poverty is my pride and obscurity is my refuge." It is all a matter of attitude. The poorest of the poor can do things which even the very richest cannot do. Permanent arrangements to feed and clothe pilgrims going to Badrinath in the Himalayas, shelters, roads and bridges all the way from Rishikesh to Badrinath or Gangotri were all accomplished by a renunciate who had nothing but a blanket as his sole possession.

Now let us pass on to the knowledge of the Self. By pushing the attitude of sport to another degree, you become the neutral witness of all. All the paradoxes we experience, such as light and darkness and love and strife, look like contradictions that cannot coexist. In reality, however, they are enigmatically polarized and they operate like the two sides of the same coin. When we admit dualities as aspects of the same reality, our acceptance becomes unitive. Unitive understanding leaves nothing outside. This brings peace and removes all sense of fear and misery. Total knowledge brings an all-absorbing silence. One can live in that silence even when the ear hears the tumult of the physical world and the eyes see many passing shows.

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Nataraja Guru's commentary:

IN the previous verse there was reference to the process of unfolding of the one libido into those psycho-physical elements portrayed as the chariot procession of verse 69. When wisdom dawns the forces or tendencies in nature tend to become equalised or harmonised so that phenomena become stilled or reabsorbed into the transparent clarity of the Absolute.

The common lot of humans on earth who are conditioned by the adjunct of a body that is ever subject to the processes of change

and becoming, cannot be said to be in a state of equilibrium as between rival tendencies. The three gunas or nature-modalities, called the sattva (pure-clear), rajas (active-emotive) and tamas (inert-dark), known to ancient philosophers like the Samkhyans, have the possibility of gaining the equilibrium of tendencies when a reabsorption of life-tendencies into the source can take place.

This theory has formed part of Indian philosophical thought in general over the nearly thirty centuries of its growth and development. It still holds the field as evidenced by the choice of expressions used by the Guru in this verse which are so reminiscent of the time-honoured theory of the gunas. It is however on the background of contemplative life that the gunas are to be operative.

Like the everlasting phenomenon of the rise and fall of waves on the ocean, we have here to visualize a process which as a process is beginningless and consequently endless in principle, except when the term to all process is attained by self-realization, when all relativistic aspects are absorbed into the absolute tranquillity and transparency of pure wisdom that knows no second. The rise and fall is an alternating process continuing ever within the relativistic set-up of human life here. The alternating process and its implications are examined more specifically in the next verse. Here, in the present verse, there is indication of this eternal game that goes on. Maya or error is an alternating process involving the plus and minus sides of absolute consciousness.

How is this subjection to the everlasting alternating process to be overcome? This is a question touching the very purpose of philosophizing or wisdom. It is proverbially known that knowledge has power. Samkhya text-books such as the Karika of Isvara Krishna themselves begin their inquiry by referring to finding the means of terminating misery:

‘The three-fold suffering causes injury, so an investigation into the cause of this injury. (If it be said) a consideration of this is a useless wish it is not so, for suffering has no perpetual existence.’
(Verse 1, Samkhya Karika by Isvara Krishna.)

Sankara himself starts his Brahma-Sutra-Bhashya by referring to this same overall purpose of knowledge. Ignorance is the greatest single cause of misery. Here, however, one has to remember that it is not piecemeal information-items or opinions that prevails against suffering, but a global or total absolutist vision.

If life is caught beginninglessly in a necessary process of becoming, the only way out of it is to attain to something superior to the process itself, of which the fractional events are partial aspects only. When such a superiority is implicit in a vision that is global and all-comprising, the truth therein can make one free. It is for this reason that the Guru here underlines the absolute, all-filling and total nature of the wisdom-insight for abolishing ignorance root and branch and establishing oneself in the happiness or bliss that is the same as the Absolute in its essence.

The question is often put whether absolute wisdom makes one happy positively; or whether it is the mere absence of misery that is to be counted as amounting to happiness. Even the inner duality implicit in such a question will not arise when knowledge is established fully and non-dualistically, as we should suppose when a perfect state of equilibrium referred to here is established in all its possible implications.

The process of becoming to which man’s consciousness is subject has dualities, both as between objects and as between inner factors such as ideas or emotions. Knowledge or wisdom can equate or cancel-out or abolish rival tendencies or trends in the innermost spirit of man to establish the state of equilibrium referred to. Such

is the way of self-realization here indicated, which is conducive to the unbounded happiness which all people seek at all times. This happiness is, strictly speaking, neither positive nor negative, but absolute.

Part III

We're back from a very fine Gurupuja gathering at the Bainbridge Island Gurukula. The sharing was heartfelt, and the small but significant sense of community was rekindled anew. By this time next year we will likely be finished with Atmopadesa Satakam, and then who knows? I at least feel reenergized to give this study my all. I know how hard it is to participate in without the direct guidance of a guru, but a few of us are hanging with it. For me, after nearly forty years of digging deep into this amazing work, it continues to generate life changing, life affirming insights.

Here's the part of the class notes I didn't have time to finish before we set off to reconnect with our dear friends—new and old—around the homam fire:

In the class I gave three examples of what I meant when I invited people to submit an instance of a former belief that was later discovered to be baseless, or possibly ridiculous. Easy to do when viewing others, it is quite another matter when we look into our own psyche, because we're not just looking in a mirror, the ego *is* the mirror. Therefore, it compensates in exactly the right way to always seem perfectly reasonable. One of the ego's primary roles is "plausible denial," the providing of a story for us to believe about the incomprehensible events we are enmeshed in, the play of lila.

The night before the class I had read out a story by James Herriot, the famous English vet who could really spin a yarn. The story involved a retired gent who would occasionally go to the horse races for a day, get drunk, and come home late to his dog, who was a master of the reproachful look. Despite the fact that his

wife had cared for it all through the day, the gent would be overcome with guilt and remorse, imagine his dog was dying, and call the vet in the middle of the night to come immediately. No amount of assurance was ever enough to convince him that the dog was fine, that the problem lay in him and not his pet. He suffered needlessly, and brought at least one other person into the whirlpool with him.

William Steig's brilliant illustrated kids' story, *Spinky Sulks*, hits a nerve many adults can recall from their childhood. Young Spinky has had his feelings hurt by his (loving) family, and he is going to make them regret it! His tactic is to feel sorry for himself and sulk. He holds on to his blues for dear life, and try as they might his family and friends cannot make amends. Only when he grows tired of the game does he make an abrupt recovery, in a very charming final scene.

I'm pretty sure I was secretly the case study for Spinky, because when I was out of joint as a preteen I could sulk for a week, and any kindness just bounced off my walls. In a perverse way I loved the sweet pain of feeling unloved. On the other hand, if my parents lost patience and grew angry with me, it simply reinforced my tamasic state. It ratified my condition, my belief that everyone other than me was mean and stupid. Like Spinky, I was an expert sulker who could not be defeated by any tactic. It may be that many people wind up permanently inhabiting that kind of place as adults, but I was fortunate to break free eventually. Because I was strangely aware that I was being held captive by an unwelcome force, I steered clear as soon I could. My gurus helped a lot.

The third example I thought of, far grimmer, is a shocking current event, where a policeman executed an unarmed black teenager while he was lying face down in the street. While there were plenty of strong sympathies with the victim and his community, there was also a virulent outpouring of support for the unconscionable action, stomach-churning evidence that the ugliest possible emotions are harbored by many, many people. What's

more, US laws exonerate virtually all law officers in advance, erasing any hope of justice. To even a modestly neutral witness, the hatred expressed toward the victim and anyone who resembles him cannot possibly be excused. It's the kind of unaddressed ego trauma that underlies many human tragedies. Narayana Guru gave the world his wise teachings so our species could learn to move away from perpetuating disasters, but it requires a frank self-appraisal that is not yet a part of our evolutionary heritage. It has to be carried out on purpose.

Our ego would love to claim (and does) that all our ills are unavoidable, that we are innocent victims of implacable forces. The idea gets us off the hook, and there is a measure of truth in it. Some things are most certainly unavoidable. But many things are, and a dedicated person should at least make occasional attempts to address them directly in themselves.

It brings to mind a quote from Kurt Vonnegut, from one of his graduation speeches: "Earth, we could have saved it, but we were too damn cheap and too damn lazy."

So it goes.

* * *

I did get one submission to my request, from Peggy:

As per your V71 request for humorous admissions:

In the kitchen,
my mother sat quietly
reading the newspaper,
enjoying a hotdog for lunch...
with mustard, sweet relish,
and a soft white bun.

Tears of condescension swept over me
as I took retreat in the backyard,

so deeply disappointed and aghast
at her ignorance, and cruelty.

How could a brilliant mathematician not know
that animals have feelings too,
that hotdogs will kill you,
that someone died for her lunch...
what next?!

Might she grind up my leg
and eat that next?

I had just become a vegetarian.

* * *

Jake's commentary:

Isaac Bashevis Singer's Jewish folktale "Gimpel the Fool" can be a foreign and off-putting short story for thoroughly American readers. The protagonist in this short piece, Gimpel, personifies just about everything the adjusted 21st century American finds repellent in the human character: naivety, complete trust in others, and a fearlessness of life borne of those qualities. Gimpel is a loser. Constantly duped and taken advantage of, he becomes the poster boy for suckers among the citizens of a rural eastern European ghetto set in an undefined time period. Thoroughly embedded in the mores/folkways of a faith-based medieval/renaissance kind of rabbi-centered environment, Gimpel is repeatedly counseled on how to handle all the social abuse heaped on him by his village comrades: have faith and God will show the way.

Eventually, Gimpel becomes a successful village baker, supporting a duplicitous wife who produces a number of offspring none of whom are his. (She never allows him sexual privileges.) But he lovingly accepts all the children as his own, providing for

them and for his wife, Elka, as she continues to cuckold him in front of the entire village.

Gimpel is the stuff of American daytime television and melodrama generally. Repeated endlessly, this archetypal fable has been transformed into the functional stereotype of the innocent victimized-down-trodden in need of “help” that can now, in a secularized culture, be provided only via social engineers and the “experts” of various disciplines all dedicated to instructing the Gimpels of the world on how to overcome their deficiencies, busily leveling the manifest playing field in the process. Implicit in all these “good” works is the fundamental premise that authority and expertise are always located outside the Self. The Other holds the awareness.

In Singer’s tale, Gimpel takes the alternative route. Turning inward, Singer provides Gimpel with the devil’s choice between getting even with the people of Frampol by urinating in the dough he will subsequently sell them in the form of bread or by embracing the world of becoming as a passing phenomenon. In Singer’s hands, this contest takes the form of a dream in which the now-dead Elka visits Gimpel warning him of the darkness she inhabits as a result of her life choices, decisions that thoroughly embed her in samsaric misery where, she tells Gimpel, “they spare you nothing here” (p. 70, Kennedy).

Heeding her advice, Gimpel divides his estate, distributes the proceeds of it to his “children,” and takes up the mendicant’s life, begging a living, telling stories, and waiting for death where he knows, “whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived” (p. 71, Kennedy).

In the hands of the Guru and Nitya, Singer’s message gets in-depth treatment. That which is not, writes Nitya in his commentary (Gimplel’s village) comes along and passes through our field of vision, just like a film of incremental images being projected at normal speed to make a movie.” As in a film, we experience our lives in the present only; the past is beginningless

and the future endless (p. 489). At this point in his commentary, Nitya follows the Upanishadic notions concerning how we operate as we navigate our “awake-movie” state. Ideas, events, and so on seem to appear out of nowhere, and, he continues, these things are born as “speech, mind, and the vital forces.” Sound (*vak*) includes all of it and is not limited to human speech. Our mind is that medium through which we perceive what is happening, and the vital forces (*prana*) is that which we breath in and works to transfer the external to the internal—the process of becoming: “the known, what is desired to be known, and the unknown.”

For its part, the mind continues on its mission to find out about the manifest world (a fact, I think, that accounts for its capacity to continue non-stop producing thoughts throughout the awake and dream states). “It’s not satisfied with what it already knows” and as it goes on about its business, the process through which it manages to do so via the vital forces (and the nature of sound itself) remains a complete mystery. The world of becoming, concludes Nitya, “is so fabricated that only a small part of it is revealed at any one time” (p. 490). In short, our minds do what they do but can never know everything (the reverse of an unstated premise dear to the materialist’s heart).

The lesson of verse 71 is in how to deal with our mind’s partial capacity in the world of becoming. If we can, as Singer’s protagonist Gimpel managed to do, come to understand life as *Lila* or sport and that it is only a fraction of the whole that constitutes the immanent and transcendent we can perceive life as it is. Without understanding the world of becoming as a partial play of maya, we are stuck in a “nightmare” of no escape, and without understanding the totality (the Self) in which it is played out we miss the larger point: “the whole panoply of life is played out between the duality experienced between the Self and the non-self” (p. 490).

Unable to know the Absolute and the totality of the whole, many (most) of us have the one-half option, to recognize maya as sport and to participate in it on that basis. Nitya presents a

catalogue of examples designed to illustrate the point, all of which indicate the fact that how we chose to address our conditions of life is entirely volitional. He cites the example, among others, of people who live in poverty and destitution, the poor, and compares their conditions to those of the Sanyasans (or the *schnorrers* in Singer's fable). In both groups, people are reduced to begging for a living, but the former group is often seen as unfortunate while members of the latter find enormous satisfaction in their life positions and are rarely perceived in a negative or sentimental light. These kinds of comparisons, says Nitya, point to our control (often out of awareness) we exercise in one way or another over how we chose to feel or think. The real test comes when we are faced with existential issues such as disease or other "tragedies." How can, say, tuberculosis be seen as sport? Here, Nitya makes an arbitrary claim that nine out of the ten diseases we experience are exactly that, and we play at them for a variety of self-serving reasons—they are not as dire as we pretend. Our attitude toward death is also part of the game, a play of Lila.

In his conclusion, Nitya writes that he thinks it is good that we know so little about the world of becoming because that fact gives us the opportunity to relax into and accept the wholeness of the Absolute and the Infinite. None of the contradictions of duality can be "solved" or settled because you are not in control and never were. This attitude is not a plea to resign all intentions and do nothing but sit and wait for death. It is, rather, a suggestion to view our life of becoming as a great play or sport, allowing us the distance to see it as it truly is: "I am Gimpel the fool. I don't think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that's what folks call me" (p. 62, Kennedy).