

The Order of Things

Michael P. Smith

It's 9:30 AM on a day that lasts forever. I'm sitting here watching Sesame Street, thinking about the children. I'm not sure what's expected of me.

A group of young people, a class of aspiring police visiting McNeil Island Correction Centre, just marched through here in what I'm sure was another smashing success, glazing brute reality with promises of protection and equanimity. I heard The Man tell them that where men had 42 square feet of their own (as opposed to being stacked ten high in a room 16 by 20 feet – like those *not* in Preferred Housing) they were less likely to fester, less likely to take with them back to their broken streets and misspent years the animosities so neatly stacked in glowing piles of indecency and in rows of degradation. Their wide, wet, blinking eyes sucked much into their brains; as I watched from a distance, the woman with the frosted hair, the young men, trim and well fed, hated with new passion, nodded resolutely, as if knowing the score. And I'm certain they did – for what such grades are worth.

There then came a loud, sudden, piercing wail from a gray cone on the wall, fresh and of significant pallor, of oppressive pitch and volume, ordering us to dine. "*Mainline!*" it called, smug and self-satisfied.

Single-filing down the hard, neat stairs, so finely stacked in their own proud fashion, my thoughts were awfully beautiful, the truth of all this. Where shall it lead? How shall it end?

For an instant I was angry. I could not penetrate the thick shell of semantics which so often separates the soul from the song.

We are all victims of child abuse, traces of it seeping into us every day. We hear of cannibal rapists; of power-drunk racist police; gangs of marauding teens anchored to philosophies of violence, drugs, and cults of death. Forces conspiring beyond reason or desire result in the death of a child. We are all to blame.

We have made bad decisions. More prisons are built – like idols – when wisdom is best served by building fewer. We are quick to judge. We substitute need for vengeance, cry 'no answers!' and seal our fate. Our focus is as misspent as our past is damaged; paradise is sacrificed in favour of headlines and commerce.

We deify death, mutate sorrow into obscenity, as a young woman, having never been offered the skills of nurturing, fries in the electric chair for drowning her baby – to the great joy, consternation, and last hope (?) of society – at the expense of every victim. What reality, what truth, what God does this serve?

When imposed upon others, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of knowing who is the target. We cannot imagine the process through which another has suffered, has endured, and has thus been enlightened by life. We all share in the passionate delusion that the profit of love is suffering and the profit of suffering is rapture, compelled beyond cost, safe in our reason, to guard, maintain, and above all vindicate our lives *even when we are wrong*.

Human, spiritual and relational skills must again be valued, hands-on skills of interaction between sound and loving human beings, inclusion before vengeance, remonstrance, and guilt. As we approach compassion – for ourselves and for others – only then are answers found.

I find comfort in knowing, not 'believing,' we live in a random universe. The point is that there is no point. As a poet in prison for manslaughter, I would like to think I can save the world. But I can't. So I settle for my acre.

As I gaze out the soiled mess window at our departing class of future cops – the then, now, and future agonies of this world – at the high heels and flowing robes and the handsome years of ruin; at the boundless arrogance and condescension; at sensational globes of flesh and fire, the straight white teeth and brave new dreams; and finally across the Puget Sound beyond, I can assure you straight from experience that steeper sentences in larger prisons solve nothing. I can also assure you (no matter how heinous the crime or how much closer we get to solutions congruent to our culture) that incest, child abuse, murder, and the rest, will always be with us. I find this realization somehow liberating.

Speaking only for myself – having been a victim and a victimizer, and thus, perhaps, able to empathize more fully with those who suffer – having accepted for the grace that it is the liberation of knowing, I know that survivors need not suffer alone. This will change nothing for humanity, but it will make a difference to God – my God: The Absolute Order of Things.