



## Swimming for our Lives

Wednesday, February 14, 2007

Here begin my notes from our recent desert saga. Long story short, my friend Beau did this trip last year and convinced me it was a good idea. The premise goes something like this: 10 people hike 3 miles into the Sonoran desert with minimal gear, tiny rations of food, and 6+ gallons (or 48+ lbs.) of water for the express purpose of listening to God.

Armed with a knife, a *yucca* plant branch for a staff, a Bible, a notebook, the clothes on your back (+ one change of underwear & one extra pair socks) you wander into the wilderness to face your doubts, insecurities and nightmares. It is, to quote *A Few Good Men*, an experiment designed to see if you can indeed “handle the truth” about yourself, God and His designs for your life. Escaping the confines of everyday life creates space to see that which would could not see before.

The inspiration for such a quest is found in the writing of ancient and contemporary masters of the contemplative tradition. People wiser than I have learned that activities like silence, solitude, fasting and prolonged periods of prayer are good for the soul. In his book *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Thomas Merton writes “Society ... was regarded [by the Desert Fathers] as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life... These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets

and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.” Reflecting on this passage, Henri Nouwen states “The basic question is whether we... have not already been so deeply molded by the seductive powers of our dark world that we have become blind to our own and other people’s fatal state and have lost the power and motivation to swim for our lives” (*The Way of the Heart*, 21).

It’s a fascinating metaphor, this swimming for our lives. A year ago I would have told you that culture was neutral, not specifically a positive shaping force, nor an obviously negative one. Yet, the more I examine the dominant themes in Western society, the less I’m sure about my initial conclusion. Every day we’re bombarded with messages that remind us that “It’s all about you,” conflict is an enemy to be avoided, consumer purchases have the power to make us happy, sex is a right, prize or weapon, achievement=worth, and so on. In our saner moments we know that any one of these statements is absurd, but truth be told, we don’t live in a sane world. It’s easy to be corrupted by a lifetime of exposure to such pervasive themes. Could it be that culture is not a benign and pedestrian force? Is it possible that the world that comforts, entertains and distracts me is the mortal enemy of my very soul? That, in order to save myself, I must flee it like a sinking ship?

Don’t know where I heard this, or if it’s even true, but I believe it’s a fair association.

Someone said that in WWII sailors were trained to get as far away from sinking vessels as fast as they possibly could. For the danger did not expire once one escaped the actual confines of a listing destroyer. In fact, remaining in the immediate vicinity of a ship about to sink was a death sentence as sure as being trapped in its icy hold. Apparently, a massive steel vessel creates an equally large vacuum as it slips into the sea. As a result, anything or anyone within a substantial radius of the ship, is sucked deep into the ocean. So, we engage God, and ourselves, in the literal and figurative wilderness so that we can swim for our very lives. Swim away, friends, swim away.

Much, much more to come.

2 Comments 

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rk

what is the metaphor for a lifejacket? (i feel like i'm at summer camp). i'm not that good of a swimmer, so if i can bring along something that will keep me afloat... :)

Tuesday, February 20, 2007 - 07:26 AM

[JIMMY h](#)

it's interesting how Western themes have crept their way into Christianity as well... how my faith is all about me - *my* comfort, *my* success, *my* blessings! i pray for the strength to swim away from this paradigm - this, as Mcmanus would call it, civilized religion as well.

Tuesday, February 20, 2007 - 10:43 AM

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