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On philosophy

Philosophy is a very simple thing at one level. It's not about highfalutin ideas. It comes from the quotidian; the everyday. In essence, it's quite simply the making explicit of the things that go on all the time in our lives.

In his book *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus said of the absurd that you come across it sometimes – as you would any philosophical idea – in a swing-door. It can strike unexpectedly when perhaps you are simply going in or out of a door.

I began my philosophical studies at Glenstal Abbey by learning about Heidegger and the existentialists, and ever since I have felt very drawn to both. Even though philosophy wasn't on the curriculum at the time, Patrick Hederman, Andrew Nugent and other monks taught us about Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir and more through the study of French literature. I discovered then that I had a great love for philosophy.

There's an idea in existentialism that the moods that we have, about anxiety, wonder, fear and joy, raise and respond

to philosophical questions, the most basic one being: to be or not to be? Now, that is a question about being and nothing, and Heidegger would argue that that comes, not from some great metaphysical revelation from beyond, but by simply experiencing – as everybody does at some point in their lives – real moments of angst and of nothingness, where everything slips away: all meaning, all value, all sense of self-identity.

In those moments of what we might call existential depression – not clinical depression, but being in a very strange, dark mood – somebody may ask: 'What's wrong with you?' And in response, the individual who appears depressed might reply, 'Nothing.' That in fact is the truth: *nothing* is what's wrong; there's no cause for it. There's just this gap, this emptiness, this absence, this nothing. As Heidegger and the existentialists said: that's the beginning of philosophy – the experience of nothing, when you no longer take everything for granted and then suddenly, through the experience of the nothing, *something* emerges as important.

Wittgenstein said: 'That the world is; *that* is the mystical.' Suddenly you marvel that something exists. This 'mystical' or 'metaphysical' experience has been formulated in different ways by Aristotle, Plato and philosophers right down to Heidegger and Sartre, but it begins with that existential, ordinary mood of just not knowing anything any more. We usually fear this mood and flee from it, particularly in contemporary society, where there is really no language for it, and also in many of our western secular cultures where religion no longer answers the question: why is there something rather than nothing?

That question is the first question. Yet, it doesn't begin as a silly question like something from a pseudo-intellectual

dialogue in a Woody Allen film. It is something quite basic. For the Greeks it was the very beginning of philosophical wonder (*thaumazein)*.

There is a certain kind of folly to philosophy. After all, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' is a crazy question. And in a way, when one experiences the mood of anxiety or wonderment, one is kind of mad; there is a moment of folly that takes over. *Idiōtēs* (as in 'to become an idiot') was the word Aristotle and the Greeks used to describe the act of becoming mad.

Socrates made the point that philosophy is accompanied by a certain *mania*. He himself (and Plato describes this in some of his dialogues) fell into these moods. Suddenly, he would stop still at a doorway and his friends would be looking at him while he was off somewhere in his thoughts – 'off with the fairies' as we say in West Cork. He was somewhere else, being visited by gods and demons. Socrates actually spoke of a special *daimon* existing within the psyche, a mysterious double of the self, an other within us that puts us into question and invites us to think beyond ourselves.

The Greeks use the word *enthusiasmos* (literally: to be one with the gods) as a way to describe that. Idiocy is another way, as is mania or madness. So philosophical 'enthusiasm' meant 'to be visited by the divine'. *Ex-stasis* is a term Heidegger plays on, meaning a form of 'ecstasy' where we stand outside of ourselves. It is as if to say that the beginning of metaphysical questioning is a certain moment of hysteria –tears, laughter, wonder – where we find ourselves beside ourselves and so put ourselves and everything else into question. Heidegger says that the human being is the only being whose being is at issue for it. Animals and plants don't interrogate themselves, don't go to psychoanalysis.

Hysteria was a term originally used disparagingly to describe the madness of women. The Greeks used the word *hysterium* to describe the womb – that part of the female being that was inhabited by the other. Hence, women were 'hysterics' because they were not themselves; they were beside themselves in their moods. That view was accepted for thousands of years, until psychoanalysts like Freud, Lacan and Kristeva came along and disputed it. They said that hysteria was not necessarily a pathology, but part of the human psyche in its more transgressive and creative modes. They also said it was something that belonged to men as well as to women. They de-stigmatised it. Even so, it's still regularly used in disparaging terms, as are the 'crazy moods' of ecstasy, enthusiasm and mania.

Sartre defined the thinking self as a being who is what it is not and is not what it is. In one sense, that is what it means to exist in time: it is to be what you are *no longer* (that is your past), and what you are *not yet* (your future). So, before we even hear the word 'philosophy', we are all inhabited by the double 'not' – the 'not' of both past and future. This informs and splits the present moment so we are never totally at one with ourselves. We are beside ourselves, outside of ourselves, strangers to ourselves, inhabited by otherness. Rimbaud famously wrote: '*Je est un autre*' (the I is other). It's thanks to this that we can, as Heidegger puts it, be the only beings who ask the question: what does it mean to be? We only *ask* that because we *don't know* what it means to be. We put ourselves in question because our very being is in question. From the beginning, our existence is in issue and at issue for us, because it's not a presence that coincides with itself.

In many respects, prayer, yoga, being one with nature, alcohol and food can be different ways of responding

to the gap; bringing ourselves back to a certain kind of presence. Sex does that too, in so far as it's about being totally and immediately there with the other person. Ideally. Supposedly. There's an attempt to be present in the present moment, which is actually impossible, existentially, because we are always shadowed and ghosted by a 'no longer' and a 'not yet.'

It is sometimes thought that one of the purposes of meditation and silence is to become almost animal-like or plant-like. Some say: 'Oh, you happy carrot.' They say this because a carrot doesn't worry about what does it mean to be? Similarly, an animal doesn't go to confession or therapy or read existentialism. In that sense, Heidegger or Sartre would say it does not exist. It 'is', but it does not 'exist'. To exist is to stand out and apart from – *ex-sistere*. The animal does not do that, and that is the beauty of the animal, and one reason why we relax with animals: they calm us and bring us back to earth, to basics, to peace and quiet. Think of a purring cat or a sleeping dog.

In many religions, the same applies to the mountain, the river and other natural things. In the Celtic religion, it applies to stone. We see that in stone circles, such as the one we have in Drumbeg in West Cork. Those circles remind us that a stone is a stone is a stone. It endures. It is itself. Rest in peace. Look at tombstones. Burial mounds. New Grange. And that is true of certain animals too in places like India, where the monkey and the cow are worshipped. They are sacred because, unlike us, they are at one with themselves. They don't even have to meditate and stand on their heads in order to 'cease the fluctuations of the mind' (as Patanjali prescribes in the Yoga Sutras). They simply *are*.

So philosophy is not a thing for animals, plants or minerals. It is about no-thing. And that is why, at one level, it

is a sort of pathology. All humans are a little dis-eased, and so a little philosophical by nature. We are born philosophers before we ever know we are. But the positive side of our being philosophical is that we don't take things for granted – we can begin anew, from nothing, start all over again, rewrite our history and our story, be surprised by joy and wonder. Life as an endless journey of questioning and questing.

At one level we are all philosophers

There are lots of philosophers here in West Cork who don't have PhDs or MAs or BAs. I recently had a great conversation with a farmer who is a neighbour of ours. I met him about a year ago when I was trespassing on his land, and he drew up beside me in a tractor and got out.

I said: 'I hope you don't mind me walking through your field.' To which he replied: 'No, not at all. Sure, you must be one of the Kearney family. I heard you and a brother of yours on the *Miriam Meets* radio show. One of you was very good; he believed in God and works with Jean Vanier and the disabled. The other, who was discussing his new book, seemed very confused. Which brother are you?' To that I replied: 'I'm the one who is confused.'

After that, we had a great conversation about God, God after God and God after the death of God. As we spoke it struck me that this man was totally philosophical, even though he didn't have an academic degree.

So, at one level, we are all philosophers, but at another I would say that our society is one that prefers to deal with 'problems' rather than 'mysteries', and given that problems are generally and necessarily the domain of science, technology and commerce, we sometimes lose the dimension of mystery and enigma that philosophy fosters.

Slowing the mind

Every morning I try to take an hour away from technological devices to read, think and meditate, and when I do I can feel my hand reaching out, like an alcoholic for a vodka, for the tab or switch. The pull of virtual communication is amazing, but its rapidity and velocity comes at the expense of meditative thinking and questioning.

If I don't take that hour free from technology in the morning, I switch on and get into a very rapid way of working. A real buzz, a fix stronger than five cups of coffee. If I want to read or write properly, I have to slow down. I never read from electronic texts in the same way that I deep-read from a book. I never grade work on an electronic medium, because if I did I would read the text so quickly I'd miss half of it. I sound like a Luddite, while in fact I am for an ambidextrous approach – namely that while we need access to online information – who can live without email or Google? – we also need material books to take it down a notch, to go gently, to attend.

There's nothing like the smell of the page, putting a hand on it, turning it, making notes in the margin and a little personal index at the back of the book, maybe opening it at the wrong page, finding an idea you weren't thinking of, then putting it back in the library, and as you're doing that suddenly finding another book with another unexpected, unsought idea. There is a happenstance about the embodied world that we can lose with the pseudo-immediacy of the virtual world.

Wisdom

While I think I have done a pretty bad job on myself in terms of gleaning wisdom in life, I do hope a little comes from the study of philosophy and from thinking about

things. I certainly hope that when I teach philosophy, some of my students get some wisdom.

An occupational hazard

I am very high-energy, but I have very low dips. I have learned to manage those over the years, but I have had to be helped by spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation, and there were times when I needed to take Prozac, sedatives and therapy to get through depressions. So I am a great believer in all of those ways of coping.

In some ways philosophy can go hand in hand with a certain type of melancholia; it's almost an occupational hazard – we need only think of Sartre and Heidegger. Existentialism, going back to Nietzsche, deals so much with dread, anxiety, depression, melancholia and emptiness – because that's part of the philosophical and maybe the artistic imagination too. There are highs and lows – certainly Socrates suffered from them, and when he talked about mania, enthusiasm and so on, that in itself was 'high-energy.'

When I write a book, whether fictional or philosophical, I work non-stop. I write maybe one hundred pages in a week, then spend months going back over it. But the initial run is always manic, mantic, enthusiastic; hysterical even. For me, the challenge is trying to find the balance between being one who is high-energy and one who experiences the void that follows. That is why in my second novel, *Walking at Sea Level*, I was trying to find a balance between the highs and the lows.

Deepest source of solace

I am very, very close to my family. While my wife Anne and I live in Boston, our two daughters live in New York. My

happiest times are spent in West Cork with them. I come from a big family. There are seven of us. We all congregate in West Cork at Christmas and in the summer, and that is a huge source of comfort and solace for me. Whenever I am low, that's where I go.

In tandem with that, I spend a lot of time in the garden. I have taken to growing trees and crops in our little garden in West Cork. I go out fishing every day. There's a rhythm that goes with that; a feeling of getting back to nature that's very good for keeping my mood in balance. Nature – both sea and land – keep us at sea level, and that's a source of equanimity. One of the reasons I also love living in Boston in winter is that I need only walk out my back door to go cross-country skiing. I find that very meditative. I spend an hour at it every day.

I also make time first thing and last thing every day for yoga, meditation and prayer. And I spend time with animals. Ever since I was a child, I've had a dog. We've always had dogs and cats in the house.

An abuse of power

I was very fortunate to have met many good, spiritual people growing up in Ireland, given that many others met very bad spiritual people who beat the hell out of them. I was particularly fortunate in terms of my Irish education in so far as I wasn't physically abused. Now, I don't want to be down on the Christian Brothers, because some of them are great, but I saw a lot of beatings when I attended a Christian Brothers' school in Cork, before I went to Glenstal. That's the sort of behaviour that puts people off religion, or off an ecclesiastical form of institutional religion, for life.

The child abuse scandal also turned many away from religion. Power was at the core of that. The whole power thing was sick in Ireland, and the Church was sick because of the collusion with the State (and the Vatican wasn't much better!). I abhorred the appalling interference of Church power in Irish society and in Irish politics. The ongoing revelations of mistreatment of women and children are a case in point. But there are now signs that people have had enough. The old system is beginning to collapse. As Nietzsche said, 'When something is leaning, give it a push.'

Glenstal Abbey

I was very blessed to have parents who were extremely devoted without being devotional. They were really good, spiritual people who practised their Christianity in the most tolerant way. They were tremendously inspiring in so far as they never pushed religion at us, never interfered, never said we had to go to Mass. They had an enlightened approach, and I was influenced by that, as I was by the monks at Glenstal Abbey.

One of the reasons our parents sent us to Glenstal was that they were very unhappy with the fact that beatings were happening at the school we attended; they just didn't want us to continue in that environment.

One of the first classes I had at Glenstal was taught by a monk by the name of Andrew Nugent. He walked into the classroom, and the first thing he said when he addressed the class was: 'Put your hand up if you believe in God.' Every pupil in the class raised a hand. 'We'll see about that,' was his response. Then he introduced us to the arguments *against* the existence of God. We read Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*, Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration

of the 'Death of God', Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* and Simone de Beauvoir's writings on God as the oppressor of women – all of which were incompatible with the thesis of God. When we had read all of these and more, he asked: 'Is there a Christian left in the class?' Not a hand went up. 'Right,' he said. 'Now we can begin.'

That method of teaching kept me open to all that is good in Christianity, particularly the monastic and mystical traditions. It also kept me open to the practical side of Christian faith, as in the service to the poor. I was greatly influenced by the social activism of Sister Stan, Jean Vanier, Father Peter McVerry and Dorothy Day, and also by my mother, who did a lot of voluntary charity work in Cork.

These were the sides of Christianity that greatly influenced me. Therefore, even though atheism is sort of mandatory in academic circles, I keep myself open to the spiritual, the sacred and the religious.

What drives me

Freud suggested that to be healthy is to love and to work. Or more exactly: 'The communal life of human beings has a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work ... and the power of love' (*Civilization and its Discontents*). I really love writing and teaching philosophy, and if I wasn't paid I would pay to do it.

For about ten years after I went to the States, I stopped doing media work and went silent. I didn't do any work for the National Public Radio, TV shows, writing for the *New York Times*, or anything along those lines. Now I'm coming back to that again. I recently did radio series for CBC and ABC, and I'm writing more popular, accessible books – of the public intellectual type.

While I enjoy philosophical work that engages with political, ethical and artistic issues, I also love the solitary, monastic, meditative side of philosophy, where days on end can be spent thinking, writing and walking. So, I am motivated by both the public and meditative sides of thinking.

Then, going back to Freud's definition, there's love. I am also motivated by love; anything to do with love. I love people. I love my family, my students and my friends, and that's a very passionate commitment. So, the two big things for me are love and work.

On being labelled 'a brilliant intellectual'

I really don't consider myself a brilliant intellectual at all. I always feel as though I haven't done any real work yet; that the real work has still to come. But maybe that's not being sufficiently grateful for the work I've been able to do.

Looking back, I remember Micheal O'Reagan, a wonderful Dominican therapist I used to attend in Dublin. He would say to me: 'Richard, sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labour. Be grateful for what you have already done.' But because I am so highly strung, driven and hyper-motivated, I'm always thinking of the next thing to do. When my first novel was published, I had no interest in talking about it. It was the next book, the one I had yet to write, that I was already fixed on.

Certainly, I don't consider myself a great philosopher, like Heidegger, Sartre or Ricœur. Nor am I a great scholar. I don't have the patience or the depth, the skill or the attention to detail that is required for great scholarship. But while I don't consider myself an original philosopher or scholar, I hope I am at least a sort of 'thinker'. I make a distinction here between philosophers, scholars and thinkers.

Who I am at the core of me

I asked my wife Anne, once, whether there was anything she liked about me. This was after a row. 'Three things,' she replied. 'You make people laugh, you love children, and you love life.' Certainly my being a thinker didn't feature on her list, but I believe that, had she had time to reflect, it would have, as she admires the fact that I work hard and that I try to think things through. I hope there's some kind of gift or virtue in that.

I am a very happy person most of the time. When I have my dips, however, I am singularly unhappy, but that's the price to be paid.

I am a person who loves to think. I love philosophy: talking about it; talking to you about it. But for me to say 'I am a philosopher' sounds a little bit pretentious. I don't think I am there yet. At one level, there have been relatively few philosophers in the history of the world; at another, everybody is a philosopher. But the word 'philosophy' can be a bit intimidating. So I find it easier to say: 'I try to think; to be a thinker' than to say: 'I am a philosopher.'

I am quite interdisciplinary in my work. I like thinking across disciplines in an interdisciplinary way. I do a lot of work on the realm of narrative imagination and trauma. I am very interested in psychology, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and in the philosophy of religion. Some of my most recent work, particularly *The God who May Be* and *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, has been about the latter.

So, in saying that I am a thinker I mean that I try to think aesthetically, politically and theologically outside of the box. In some circles – particularly in analytical philosophy circles in North America – philosophy has become very much a specialist discipline. In those circles, any kind of interdisciplinary work would be deemed a

lesser compromise. Pure, abstract, technical thinking is what is preferred.

I try to bring philosophy out into the street. Socrates did that. He brought it into the agora – the marketplace. Because I very much believe in the benefit of that, I greatly support Michael D. Higgins's attempts to develop a 'presidency of ideas'.

A retreat

I was really glad to move from Ireland to Boston when I did. Not just because I like moving on and being on a journey, but because, as mentioned, I had been suffering from very severe depressions. I think the fact that I was over-extended played a part in that. At the time I found it difficult to say 'no.'

At one point I was a member of the Arts Council and of the Higher Education Authority. I was also chairing the Irish Film Centre building project, running the Irish Film School at UCD, running UCD's Philosophy Department (rotating with my colleague, Dermot Moran), teaching in Boston College and the Sorbonne as visiting professor, holding a lectureship under the Erasmus exchange and hosting a TV show.

Then something snapped, and I felt a need to go underground for a while. So, while it may seem strange to go to Boston to go underground, that's what I did. While there, I worked slowly and patiently on my trilogy: *Philosophy at the Limit*. Out of that came *On Stories*, *The God Who May Be*, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* and eventually *Anatheism.*

To do that work, I needed to be away. I don't think I could have done it had I remained in Ireland. I was too busy in Dublin; too over-committed. In Boston I discovered

a sort of anonymity. I was nobody there. I could and did retreat. The silence of the phones!

Now I am feeling, rightly or wrongly, that it may be time to come out of the woods again, so we'll see what happens.

Change

I love change, but for me it's change in stability, in the sense that West Cork always remains an anchor for me. No matter where I may be working or travelling, that's my real 'home'. Our house near Union Hall is off the beaten track. There isn't a hotel for thirty or forty miles. We are right out on the coast. When there's a storm we can see the islands being lashed by tidal waves. The roads around us are unpaved and rocky. I like the inaccessibility of the place. It saves me from my social instincts.

What most concerns me

At a personal level, what most concerns me is the happiness of my children and the well-being of those I love. That concern should and does also extend, of course, beyond family and friends. When she used to pray, my mother – and she was no craw-thumper; no sanctimonious beater of the breast – would always pray first for the family, then for the community and then for those suffering elsewhere in the world. Her prayers were like the extending circles that Stephen Dedalus talks about in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Those extending circles of concern kept me open to an authentic potential within religion – that the religious imagination was at best an empathic imagination that never got caught up in itself, but was always concerned with others.

In India, a Benedictine Sister once said to me: 'I am here not to convert, but to listen and learn.' That seemed right to me: that the religious imagination should ideally and authentically be an attentive imagination, an acoustic imagination, an auditory imagination – one that listens rather than preaches. Patrick Hederman has spoken often about that.

Each trip I have made to India has been both a return to the heart and a return to the body. There, I learned how to breathe again, how to be in the body again, how to climb a mountain and see its sacredness and that of the rivers, animals and birds. The extension of the sacred to include the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds is not apparent in our western Christocentric culture. I say that with no offence to Christ, because he probably did love animals, plants and things. But, apart from what we know of St Francis, it has not been a side of Christianity that has been celebrated.

It is the reverence for all sentient beings in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism that I find important as a supplement and complement to Christian humanism.

The perception of what it is philosophers do

My wife Anne has often heard the remark: 'It must be very interesting to be married to a philosopher. What kind of conversations do you two have?' Her reply is always the same: 'We never talk philosophy.' There is a general perception that she and I regularly have profound discussions about great metaphysical themes like being and nothingness, being and time and the God who may be, when the reality is that most of our conversations are very ordinary, but never boring. Like 'pass the salt'. I love salt!

What scares me

I am not a person with a huge amount of fear. I don't fear death. Nor do I fear physical danger. Maybe I am a little reckless at times – my wife would say I'm pretty fearless. At least of the sea.

I fear the potential within certain human beings for gratuitous evil. Human evil scares me. I fear cruelty. The fact that people can torture gratuitously is terrifying to me.

What most surprises me about people

I am also astonished at how impossibly good people can be.

Religion for me is as much about the community of saints as anything else. Most saints were never canonised – they are people like Jean Vanier, Sister Stan, Stanislas Breton, Sarah Grant, Choqui Nyma and people like that. I have been lucky to have met some of them in my life. You know when you are in the presence of really holy people like this. They are full of love, full of joy. They are never sanctimonious; never take themselves seriously. There is a simplicity about them that is almost childlike or animal-like.

Stanislaus Breton, a great teacher of philosophy and a friend of mine, used to get down on his knees and laugh like an animal to amuse my daughters, Simone and Sarah, when they were little. There is something in the presence of Choqui Nyma that reminds me of the essence of a deer or a llama. When I met him, the Dali Lama was scratching under his arms in monkey-like fashion. I am always struck by the inconspicuous simplicity of the holiness; the fact that so much goodness can inhabit such embodied human beings.

I have been blessed to have met very many good people in my life. Why I have met them, I don't know. Maybe I seek them out, because very good people bring hope in the midst

of what is a pretty dark world at times. And while they bring me hope, so too does the impossible love that people can have to overcome evil and to forgive enemies. Hope in the impossible is an inspirational and motivational force.

Prayer

Prayer is the attention of the soul.

What life has taught me

I am a very impatient person. I always have been. I hate to wait. But life has taught me to be patient, to listen. Attending is literally tending to, caring for someone or something that is there; someone you normally take for granted or pass by. Patience has passion (same etymological root: *patio-patire-passi-passum*) in it, but it also has suffering, as in the Passion, as in suffering little children to come unto you, as in letting it happen, letting things be. It has that sense of suffering; of acknowledging the pain and woundedness that is within all of us.

It's important that we learn how wounded we are and to work from that, as that awareness helps us to become more empathetic with others. Having experienced my depressions I have learned to live with suffering and to be much more sensitive with others than I might otherwise have been. If someone is behaving really badly, I ask myself what pain they're coming from, what wounds are behind the violence or meanness.

I think our woundedness helps us to be more human – as in *humus*, from the earth – more earthy, more humorous, more incarnate. Probably the best thing we can learn from philosophy is to laugh.