

# Absolute Comfort Corrupts Absolutely

*My men went on and presently met the Lotus-Eaters,  
nor did these Lotus-Eaters have any thought of destroying  
our companions, but they only gave them lotus to taste of.  
But any of them who ate the honey-sweet fruit of lotus  
was unwilling to take any message back, or to go  
away, but they wanted to stay there with the lotus-eating  
people, feeding on lotus, and forget the way home.*

*Homer (The Odyssey*

*IX:91-97)*

*I have become comfortably numb.*

*Pink Floyd (The Wall)*

Shortly after Odysseus and his men leave Troy, heading home after the interminable siege and ultimate destruction of that City, they land on the island of the Lotus-Eaters. After the horrors of war, with its blood-letting and blood lust, these peaceable folk seem very attractive, at least at first glance. They remind us perhaps of proto-hippies, choosing “peace” and “love” over war and hatred. They certainly seem attractive to Odysseus’ war-weary men who, like disillusioned veterans returning from Vietnam, embrace a lifestyle based on the use of soporific drugs. They desire to be “comfortably numb.” The problem with such a lifestyle choice, as the perennially wise Homer reminds us, is that those who choose it “forget the way home.” The problem is not primarily the drug itself, nor is it the apathy that it induces; the problem is that it distracts us from our ultimate purpose, which is to get home. To reiterate, the problem is not principally the drug, nor the drug-induced torpor; it is the distraction.

This point is made clear when we realize that we can

substitute all manner of other things for the Lotus-plant. Other natural and synthetic drugs will spring to mind but so will drug-free addictive pursuits, such as pornography or the obsessive-compulsive way in which many of us engage in social media. The things with which we choose to distract ourselves are variable and therefore in the philosophical sense accidental; the thing which is common to all these multifarious means of distraction is the distraction itself, which is therefore, literally and philosophically, of the essence.

The best and clearest way that I can exemplify the harmful effects of distraction-addiction is to recall my experience in prison. (Yes, dear reader, I have been to prison, serving two separate sentences as a young man. Those desiring more details should see my book [\*Race with the Devil: My Journey from Racial Hatred to Rational Love\*](#).) During both of my sentences, I spent most of the time in solitary confinement, an experience that nurtured in me a lifelong love for solitude and the time that such solitude affords for contemplation. For most of the second sentence, I lived and worked in the punishment block in which rebellious prisoners were sent to spend time in solitary confinement. For the vast majority of prisoners, solitary confinement was just about the worst punishment imaginable because it forced them to go cold turkey from the distraction-drug to which they were addicted. With no distractions, nobody to talk to, no screen to stare at, and no music to listen to, I have seen prisoners, after a day or two alone in a cell, on the brink of breakdown, clawing the walls and screaming hysterically.

So where is this discourse on distraction leading? Does it have a point or is it nothing more than a distraction itself? The point, to which I hope it points, is Home.

Homer, in his own inimitable way, shows us in the character and voyage of Odysseus an image of *homo viator*, the man on a journey who experiences the adventure of life as a means of

getting Home. To be sure, Homer, as a pagan, does not have the same vision of Home that the Christian has, though his vision of the after-life, as experienced by Odysseus, is much closer to Heaven than many realize and much closer than anything perceived by our own deplorably relativistic Zeitgeist. Odysseus suffers many distractions, including love-lorn goddesses promising him immortality to love-lorn virgins offering him marriage and worldly power, but he ultimately resists and rejects everything that will keep him from his ultimate goal of getting home. Indeed, in an uncanny premonition of the Christian Way of the Cross, Odysseus embraces poverty and humiliation at the hands of the most contemptuous of people as the necessary precondition of his getting Home and claiming his reward.

For the true pagan and the true Christian alike, the way home is paved with the necessity of spurning the transient comforts offered by worldly distraction. The choice for all of us is whether to remain comfortably numb, losing our way as we pursue nothing but *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses), or whether we choose to remain uncomfortably alive, finding our way as we pursue nothing but the *Via Crucis* and the *Via Dolorosa*, knowing that the Way of the Cross and the Way of Sorrows is the Way Home.

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