

Seeing the Lamp by the Light of the Tree

Yesterday evening, on my way home from the gym, I found myself waiting at a stoplight. Not being one who feels the urgency to check for text messages at every available moment, I ignored the handheld device which, in any event, I hadn't bothered to bring with me, and looked about me. At such moments, I like to read bumper stickers, not least because it gives me an inkling of what my neighbours consider important enough to broadcast to the world around them. The car in front brandished two stickers, or actually the same sticker twice, which told me to "Disconnect and Drive." With wry amusement, I considered the irony that I was only reading it because I was disconnected. If I'd been reading or writing a text I wouldn't have noticed it!

It was then that a deeper irony struck me. I was actually connected to the world around me, noticing what my neighbor thinks important, because I was disconnected from my handheld device. I was connected because I was disconnected! This set me thinking about what it actually meant to be connected. Are we more connected to reality when we're surfing the web or when we're not? Admittedly we can learn more things when we surf the net than when we spend time looking at the dance of sunlight on fall and falling leaves. How many Wikipedia entries might I have read or, more fruitfully, how many articles on Intellectual Takeout, if I hadn't spent time watching the various birds arriving and leaving the bird feeder at breakfast this morning? Who is wasting time? The net-surfer and Facebook browser, or the one who lights a fire in his yard so that he can watch dead wood come alive with dancing light?

Is it better to see by the light of day or by an artificial light? Well, it must be conceded that it's good to have

artificial light once the light of day fails. As the days get shorter and the nights longer, who but a fool would wish for interminable hours of gloom each evening and morning? I am, for instance, writing this article at 4:30am and it's pitch black outside. Actually it only appears to be pitch black outside. If I switched off the light and looked out of the window instead of at the computer screen, I would see the stars; and because I'm in the countryside, away from all the light pollution caused by artificial light, I would see many of them. Still, I am not looking at the stars, as is evident from the fact that I am writing this article. Am I, therefore, a hypocrite?

I hope not. Indeed, I believe not.

It's about spending the limited time we have well. Spending time well is about taking it and not wasting it. This is the secret.

I am reminded of a dialogue in Chesterton's novel, *The Man Who was Thursday*, in which the two interlocutors are discussing the relative merits of a streetlamp and a tree. It is night and the tree is lit by the light of the lamp. Having been told by the first interlocutor that the tree is superior to the lamp, the second interlocutor reminds him that "just at present you only see the tree by the light of the lamp" and then adds one of the greatest lines in literature: "I wonder when you would ever see the lamp by the light of the tree." Life, the fullness of life, well lived, where time is taken and not wasted, is about learning to see the lamp by the light of the tree. It is about learning to see the artificial in the light of the real. It is about seeing virtual reality in the light of real reality. It is about disconnecting so that we can connect.