

## VAPOR TRAIL

More and more often these days, a certain type of tramp – the modern version of the hobo – drifts into the Church office – asking for a meal, a bus ticket to the next town, a temporary job, a little cash. He’s clean, educated – and a professional drifter – a compulsive wanderer with a tale to tell: his job he quit. It galled him. His family he deserted. And they deserved it, he says. Religion he has small use for. The Church is just for an easy touch. Where’s he going? Nowhere. What’s he going to do with his life? Nothing. Where will he end up? No telling. As one of them said to me recently: “I’ve hit the vapor trail.”

That’s descriptive. You’ve seen the vapor trail left by the passing of a jet plane. The plane was going somewhere – all power and speed – but the vapor trailing behind it just refuse in the sky: floating – drifting –insubstantial – slowly evaporating into nothingness.

It seems to me that an increasingly large percentage of us moderns are wanderers of a sort – our lives like a vapor trail – we may not be asking for a meal – or bus ticket to the next town – or a hand-out (not yet at any rate – though any day now). Of course, too many young people expect unending hand-outs from their parents – and too many of the rest of us are expecting everything “for free” as we say from generous (and at times slightly dotty) old Uncle Sam... – (but this is not the sort of no-good, shiftlessness I’m talking about.)

I’m talking about the clean, educated, upper-cultured type tramp – with a job he’d like to quit because it galls him (only he doesn’t dare) – a family he dreams of deserting because they deserve it, he thinks – the type for whom religion has smaller and smaller use – for whom the church is just for a touch of entertainment.

Of course he keeps on working at his increasingly unworkable work – and living with his increasingly unloved ones – and attending his institutional church – and he’s even prosperous, even respected – but at the heart-level – at the soul of him – he’s “hit the vapor trail” – the jet age that produced him – all mechanized power and speed – the civilization that threw him up – seems somehow to have gotten beyond him – left him trailing – like refuse behind – floating – his life insubstantial – slowly evaporating into nothingness.

So – he “hits the vapor trail.” Maybe he just smokes too much – drinks too much – spends too much – travels too much. Why? Because the things that used to make sense to him – don’t make sense to him anymore. (Or, the things he thinks should make sense to him – or the things he thinks did make sense once upon a time to his father and to his father’s father – don’t

make sense today: his job doesn't make sense to him, neither does his family; and his own thoughts make the least sense of all.) So he stays too long at the club, takes one too many, gets back late – [outwardly] he's very proper, very prompt, very [respectable], and very impossible miserable. Either way – life – for him is losing meaning –the purpose of it all is somehow evaporating – “love,” “truth,” “beauty” – all that kind of thing – are becoming very insubstantial – a trail of vapor ...in spirit, if not in action, he's become a ho-bo – at the soul of him he's a drifter – a well-paid, high class, professional bum! And quite possibly, a Presbyterian...

But the feeling is far from modern – it has ancient precedent.

Ecc. 1:2

*“Utterly inane, utterly inane, everything is vapour!*

*Man labours at his toil under the sun; what does he gain?*

....

*Weary beyond words (weary beyond words)”*

Come now – if you can't make life make sense – the one thing you're not being is original – you're just one in a long, long vapor trail –going all the way back to Ecclesiastes (and, by the way, that word “vanity” – “Vanity, vanity – all is vanity” – is better translated – as its Arabic cognate suggests – “vapor -- vapor -- all is vapor: life is inane, a trail of insubstantiality, a bundle of nothingness, a [destiny] of emptiness – “

Of course, it was not without a struggle that old Ecclesiastes lost his way – he tried more than one thing to make life make sense and if they all failed him –or fell short – was it his fault?

You remember –

- 1) He tried scholarship. But he gave that up in a hurry. He discovered “in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorry.” True. The tree of knowledge is not quite the tree of life. Educate a devil and he's only a more clever devil, D.D. . And I've known some devil D.D.'s. The Arabs have a proverb: “A man who knows too much is never happy.” To see, too, too, well can be the sight of hell. Out of knowledge, we've learned to [distrust] each other. So the Faustian: “I have turned away from knowledge in all its forms! Now let me plunge deep in pleasure.”

Ecclesiastes on his way to insanity – tried that too.

2) He turned from scholarship to sensuality to see if that made life make sense. It didn't. Sensuality has short longevity – "I (soon) said of laughter, it is mad: and of mirth, what doeth it?" Well, the senses don't do much for you – especially after 40!

So he drifted further –

After 1) Scholarship and 2) sensuality

He tried

3) Suburbia – "I builded me houses ... and made me pools of water." How modern can you get? In the Old Testament? Split-level swimming pools... and all that. But suburbia didn't work for him either. It still doesn't. It can leave you empty. It's a split-level trap if you're mean in it. For if man is more than mind and more than body - he's also a far sight more than *Better House and Gardens*. Suburbia can leave you as cold souled as scholarship and sensuality – for as he said, "when goods are increased, they are increased that eat them."

So on his way to insubstantiality – Ecclesiastes has one last fling at it. He tries simplicity. He won't give up being knowledgeable, a little lubricous and rather well off – but, with all –he'll play the role of the simple, honorable man: not too conservative, not too liberal – all things to all men – and moderation ever – he won't stand on the right hand and he won't stand on the left. But that doesn't work either – that sort of simplicity makes life make least sense of all –he discovers just being simple is not enough, the question is a simple what? A Simple Simon or a simple Simon Legree? You don't stand on one side or another – you don't stand anywhere – God's lonely man – no friends – indeed, not even God's – just nobody's – if you don't stand for something – you're worth exactly nothing – a vapor trail – the world that's going places wither to heaven or to hell has left you behind –a soul – an insubstantial idiot – (waving to the crowd: -- "hello, old buddy, hello darling, hello love, I hate you all.") – a bundle of inanity --- trying to please everyone and pleasing no one – lest of all God and ...in spirit, if not in action, he's become a ho-bo – at the soul of him he's a drifter – a well-paid, high class, professional bum! And quite possibly, a Presbyterian...