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Swallowing the Camel by Wintering in Florida

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Swallowing the Camel by Wintering in Florida

Abstract

"Within the totality of life lived before the face of God these are pleasures that are the good gifts of God. I know this intellectually; I just have to convince my conscience."

Posting about challenging our lifestyles from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/swallowing-the-camel-by-wintering-in-florida/>

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in things

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Swallowing the Camel by Wintering in Florida

Dave Schelhaas

“You hypocrites!” says Christ in Calvin Seerveld’s paraphrase of Matthew 23:24, “You strain gnats out of your wine but swallow the American, suburban way of life whole, like a camel.” Jesus, of course, directed his stinging dart at the Pharisees, but Seerveld applies his to suburban Americans, and probably more specifically, suburban American Christians.

Seerveld is telling us American Christians that we may love to debate fine points of doctrine or morality, but swallow whole a lifestyle devoted to comfort, pleasure, and the consumption of material goods with little concern for the banality of our culture and the injustices and suffering that most people of the world are plagued with. (I read Seerveld’s paraphrase of Jesus as the epigraph in a collection of essays by my former colleague Charles Adams titled *Worldview*, and as I read his book, I find that Adams means the same thing that Seerveld seems to suggest.)

Throughout history, wise men and women—not always Christians—have looked at the lives of ordinary folk and criticized them for their superficiality. Emerson writes in “Self-Reliance” essay, “Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times.” His friend Thoreau critically adds, “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” and a hundred other judgmental things about the lives of ordinary folk. T. S. Eliot says in his pageant play, *Choruses From the Rock*, “Here were decent godless people, their only monument the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls.”

I like these guys. For years I taught Emerson, Thoreau and Eliot, reveling in the way they challenged the conventional thinking and lifestyle of my students. Also, I admire the

work that Seerveld and Charlie Adams have done from inside Christian institutions of higher education.

They have had my ear for many years now, and when I am feeling slightly superior and virtuous, I look at my American contemporaries and ask questions they might ask. How can we encourage our young people to spend huge amounts of time playing and learning to play sports when there are so many other, more important things they should be learning? Why are so many of us enamored of large, luxurious houses, fancy automobiles and extravagant vacations to exotic places? Do we really have to spend a couple of months in the South during the winter?

Now it is this last question that makes me pause because the extended winter stay in Florida has become a staple of my life. I have come to think of it as a need or a right. Yet, it seems to me to be an almost archetypal example of the “the American, suburban way of life” for American retirees.

So I experience this troubling ambivalence. My mind (or perhaps my conscience shaped by over sixty years of sermons and reading) tells me I should surrender myself completely to charity work and justice activities. But, I also want to go to the Gulf and enjoy the pleasures of swims for a season. So, I shake my fist at Eliot and Seerveld and say to them, “Who are you to make these wet blanket judgments about me and a large segment of the population?”

I realize I am being unfair to these writers, for I have always gotten the feeling from life lived within the confines of church and Christian school that God expects me to be on the front lines with those who are fighting poverty, hunger, abortion, racism, and environmental degradation. I should be with those who go to the far corners of the earth and to their next door neighbor to tell the good news of the gospel. Of course, I know I can't do it all, but I should find my place of service and then work for the kingdom with all my heart, mind and strength.

I know in my head the answer to my struggle with this tension, for no faith tradition answers it better than the Reformed tradition. That answer can be stated in a number of ways, but here is what Nicholas Wolterstorff said in an interview I had with him for *Perspectives* magazine a number of years ago:

[A]t the heart of the Reformed tradition is a passion for totality, for wholeness, for integrity, for not allowing life to fall into bits and pieces but to constantly ask, “What does my faith—what does the gospel of Jesus Christ—have to do with this and what does it have to do with that?” Never being content with the answer, “Nothing!”

What does swimming in the Gulf, golfing at one of the thousands of Florida courses, gathering for happy hour with friends, and basking in warm evening walks at sunset have to do with the gospel. Within the totality of life lived before the face of God these are pleasures that are the good gifts of God. I know this intellectually; I just have to convince my conscience.

Another of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner, helps me do that as he writes about that winter stay in Florida with wonderful explicitness:

For the last few years my wife and I have taken to spending winters down there [Florida] ourselves though for a long time we looked down our noses at such people as weaklings and traitors... There is something that wonderfully feeds the spirit in the sheer horizontalness of [looking out over the ocean]. It lets you see as far as the eye can travel—as if there is nothing you have to do, nothing you have to be, more than simply travel with your eyes out over the endless waters... [Florida] is full of people my age and considerably older who are there mainly just to enjoy themselves. There is of course something in all of us that recoils at that as indefensible and unchristian in a world full of suffering, but I think there is something else you can say about it too. The world is full of suffering indeed, and to turn our backs on it is to work a terrible unkindness maybe more on ourselves than on the world. But life is also to be enjoyed. I suspect that may even be the whole point of it... And if that is the case, then the old woman playing shuffleboard in the sun and the young man standing in line with his children to get into Disney World are in their own way praising God as truly as when they are serving supper in shelter for the homeless. . . (*Telling Secrets*, 97-98).

Buechner does not set the pleasure of play against the pleasure of service. Do both, he seems to say. The whole point of the creation might just be human delight. I can lose my thousand golf balls on a Florida course in the morning and then relieve the loneliness of an elderly couple in the evening by having them over for supper. To deny myself either would be unkind . . .to myself.