

Ping Pong Balls

It is early morning. The house is quiet, and everything is still. Outside the window, it looks like it could be a good day with the early morning frost beginning to disappear. I am sitting comfortably, and I have been focussing on my breathing, trying to centre, having just read a passage from the New Testament. Protected, precious time. I'm beginning to feel at peace. I'm deluded enough to think this is what holiness must feel like, then Ronnie the cat crashes into the room chasing a ping pong ball. The holy aura of the moment is entirely punctured. This is not the first time the cats (for there are two) have trashed my path to saintliness. It is a regular occurrence. Irritation always gives way to amusement, as there is something intrinsically comical and daft about a cat chasing a ping pong ball. In contrast to my earnest self-reflection and desire for some sort of improvement, one of the joys of having a pet is their lack of self-reflection. You take pleasure in the cattiness of the cat entirely being itself, free of pretension and artifice. What walker has not had the pleasure of their rambling enhanced and amplified by the company of their dog darting about all over place, enjoying its own doggieness.

One of the risks of the contemplative stuff is its seen as some kind of retreat from the real world. Maybe there are times when the real world insists on its presence because there are good things to be seen and a lot of the time we do not see. Retreat must always have a return and hopefully a return that in some ways contributes more. The bridge between contemplative stuff and seeing the world afresh maybe lies in the notion of attentiveness. How often we pass our days not being fully present in the moment? Most of us are remembering or thinking of the future at any given point of time. Try staring at an everyday object in your house until it becomes strange again. We are so overfamiliar with the stuff of our lives and there can be simple pleasures in admiring the curve of that chair, the grain of that wood, that glint of light reflected on the table. Goodness knows, we will all have enough time to slow down and do this kind of thing in our various forms of isolation.

One of the pleasures of watching Ronnie chasing his ping pong ball is a delight in the kinetic energy of being able to scamper about. Getting a bit older, memories of being fit and fast are just that, memories. Below is a section of a Seamus Heaney poem which I find powerfully evocative of childhood memories of me chasing a ball, I can just imagine this scene so vividly

A section of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Markings' –

Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field
As the light died and they kept on playing
Because by then they were playing in their heads
And the actual kicked ball came to them
Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard
Breathing in the dark and skids on grass
Sounded like effort in another world..
It was quick and constant, a game that never need
Be played out. Some limit had been passed,

There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness

In time that was extra, unforeseen and free.

The joy of being lost in play in those endless summer days. Maybe Ronnie captures that a bit for me. One of these days I may have the sense to shut him out, or on the other hand I may just have the sense to let him in.

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