

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Would You Have to Die?

I have come late in my life to the work of Rainer Maria Rilke, drinking deeply from his well of poetry and reflection only over the last year or so. It is interesting to me that some of the most helpful books on the subject of vocation come from those more aesthetically inclined, often marked by their brevity. Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*, for example, comes to mind. Another is Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. A young man asked Rilke if he should become a poet. Rilke says:

You ask whether your verses are good. You ask me. You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts. Now...I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you to write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all – ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: *must* I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "*I must*," then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.

The inner necessity of which Rilke speaks is our vocation. It is also illumines the power of a single question when the question is the right one. Many struggle with the nature of their calling. Here Rilke simply asks, "For what would you have to die if it were denied you...what *must* you do?" Rilke wisely adds this counsel:

I want to beg you as much as I can...to be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves...do not now seek answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live

everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer...

I spent the past week speaking to hundreds of college students from across several states at an Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship camp in the mountains of Virginia. Over meals, I talked with scores of young lives, alive in Christ, all eager to do His bidding. A surprising number were pursuing what would today be considered non-traditional majors, such as English, philosophy, and history. I caught myself asking them, somewhat skeptically, what they planned to do with their major. Most were honest in saying that they did not know, but they were quick to add that this was not the important thing. As one English major put it, "All I know is that I *am* a writer. God must know what He wants to do with that." She knew what she *must* do, and was content to continue living the question until the day she lives into the answer.

The sad students were those who held majors of note, but for little reason. "Why are you majoring in mechanical engineering?" I asked one young man. "I don't know," he replied. "I guess because I know I can get a job." There was no passion, no vision for his life-investment. Instead his face was lined with fatigue too soon for his years, and a resignation never meant for the young.

He was not answering, much less living, the question. He was not even bothering to ask. Rilke would not ask such a person what he would have to do lest he die. He would ask him if he had ever done anything that had caused him to live. "Ask me whether what I have done is my life," asked another poet (William Stafford). To which Parker Palmer would then wisely apply the old Quaker saying: so then "Let your life speak."

James Emery White

Sources

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Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.

Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*.

William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*.

About Serious Times

Launched in conjunction with the release of the book, *Serious Times* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), the aim of this site is to serve the vision of the book in an ongoing manner. At serioustimessite.com you will find reading lists and book reviews, "whitepapers" on critical issues and strategic links to other sites, small group resources and homeschooling curriculum, tapes/cd's and study guides. You can even sign-up for this bi-weekly "Serious Times Update."