

trying to scream now, but her energy was being exerted in holding with claw-like hands onto the sheets, which were slowly slipping. Her breath was coming in animal grunts, through lips strained back over teeth, each gasp a paroxysm of terror.

It took her about five more minutes to fall, and it was about fifteen minutes later that the nurse came in for her afternoon round of temperature-taking and found the old woman, quite dead, and her daughter sitting in the chair beside her, shaking her head ruefully over the pity of it all, smoking a cigarette.

The Trauma of Truth

Clarice Noland

KNOWLEDGE is wondrously enlightening, throwing off the shackles of ignorance which bind man to a lowly, unimaginative life, giving him wings with which to soar to gloriously dizzy heights of understanding, and yet making him humbly appreciative of the world and what mankind has achieved with the faculties given him by a magnanimous God. Much has been said about how little man knows; much has been expressed stressing his incompetence. But, consider what he does know and what he has accomplished in a relatively short span of time on the celestial calendar. Knowledge, painfully gathered through eons upon eons, has placed man upon an ever-spiraling staircase to the stars, with each step freeing humanity from a disease, helping man to better his way of life, giving him a greater comprehension of his environment. By knowledge man is freed from the innate characteristic of fabricating a reason for everything within his capacity to conceive. To him the truths revealed by knowledge are often as fantastic as the fallacies. Knowledge may be awesome; yet this knowledge which raises man to undreamed of heights may also heave him headlong out of his blissful security into an abyss of despair and disillusionment. As a result, many beliefs of our childhood, a period in life which we view as having an impenetrable sanctity, are brutally smashed by the crushing weight of an unsuspected truth. The person, a victim of his own ignorance, wanders blindly in a cloud of disenchantment, feeling he has been forsaken by humanity and missing, perhaps for the first time, the invulnerability of childish dreams. "So clear and deep are my fancies of things I wish were true," deplores a popular song, voicing the lamentations of all men robbed of their dreams.

Several years ago I felt that the world, so loving and warm, had suddenly deserted me in the middle of a horrible nightmare. I was alone, I felt, to confront this perplexing situation. Never had I recognized how fully and unquestioningly I believed that I knew the exact whereabouts of heaven. How vividly can I yet recall, still with an involuntary shudder, the fateful words of my Sunday school teacher.

"Remember," he said, "how, when you were little, you thought that heaven was straight up above you in the sky? You never worried about where it was during the day, but at night thoughts of God came with the twinkling stars and bedtime. You could look up into the sky and point out heaven. Perhaps you never wondered what shape it is or what happens to it when the sky is light, but at night you knew exactly where your prayers went. But, now that we know that the sky is not a dome or a bowl turned upside down, but that space goes on forever, where is heaven now?"

My teacher never suggested answers, but left us all disturbed. Now that I think back, I suppose that he meant to shock us into serious reflection and review of the beliefs we had taken for granted. I wonder, though, if he knew just how shaken a few of us were. For a long time I pondered, spending nearly every wakeful moment torturing my mind—if heaven is not where I had unthinkingly expected it to be, where is it? Is there a heaven? Is it on some distant star? If so, would that not make it like another Earth, another civilization? If there is no heaven, is there a God? I was haunted by a dream that returned to torment me every night. In my hallucination God was calling me, but from where I could not discern. I stumbled on over ruts, over fiery rocks, through slimy, oily mud, but never knowing which way to turn to find Him. Alone in a desolate wasteland I screamed for Him and wailed my terror, awakening my parents with my cries. As concerned and as willing as my parents were, they were not able to help me. When I asked Mother where heaven is, she said, "Heaven is where love is." This simple answer brought me no peace, for I felt I needed a tangible heaven, and at my age and as upset as I was, I found no relief in her words. Not until a year or two later did I come to see that her answer, quieting though it was not, was more rational than my frenzied attempt to visualize a palace in the clouds.

As this search of my soul altered my religious tenets and therefore my outlook on life, I can declare with the authority of this experience that truth can shatter one's happiness and blast one's serenity. The further pursuit of truth may lead once more to peace, but unless this second apprehension of truth is much greater and overwhelming than the first, or unless the arrest leads to a deeper and purer conviction, the person may be tortured for the rest of his days. I know, for I went through several months of hellish anguish before I was able to accept an alternate course of belief on which to found my faith. Nothing is more of a shock to a person than to see the faith that has sustained him since his childhood fall apart. This outer force, truth, with its unexpected savageness casts man adrift in a sea of fear. Truth may enlighten and uplift man, but it may also distort the happiness it brings so that the beholder sees only that the belief around which he has built his life is a mere fantasy, and he feels his soul crushed by the weight of the unknown.