



Mary and Bob often find themselves sharing common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry. When approaching ministerial concerns from different angles, He Said - She Said is a venue to share differing perspectives.

Artificial Universe

Mary's Perspective:

In our [previous blog](#), we made some observations about how mediocrity appears to have become the norm, and perhaps we even vented a bit on why that is (or should be) unacceptable. As often happens, we found that, once we put those words to paper, we observed even more instances of the topic we have been discussing. How many establishments have you observed with signs asking for patience due to staffing shortages? I personally was trying to reach an insurance agent whose voice mail (rather rudely) indicated it would take several days for a return call and advising not to leave more than one message in a three-day span. Even our community pool has posted shorter hours or unannounced closures due to lack of lifeguards. A parishioner recently asked why I thought there is such a worker shortage, particularly given the current economic circumstances. We surmised that what was experienced during the Covid pandemic definitely changed attitudes and work ethics. But could it also be that we've lowered our standards, choose not to push ourselves as hard, or have lowered our expectations of others?

I really don't intend for this blog to be a vehicle for venting my spleen, but rather for provoking thought and perhaps encouraging positive growth. So stay with me here...I promise, I'll make a point! First, permit me to share another observation:

As I write this, Bob and I have recently attended a "pub night" with a group of fellow musicians. I am also in the midst of planning an evening of reflection for a larger group of fellow musicians. One of those attending the pub night reflected later that he entered the evening with some trepidation. While he thought he missed hanging out with his musician buddies, he also wasn't sure he really wanted to be there. Would it be awkward and uncomfortable? Should he wear a mask? Would anybody interesting show up? It wasn't until the conversation got rolling and we shared a meal that he realized just how much he had desperately missed these types of gatherings. He likened it to a person who hasn't eaten in a while and doesn't even really feel hunger, until they take that first bite – and then recognize they are ravenous. Yes, it's been lonely to be isolated, but we have adapted. And social situations can be really challenging, even



mentally draining. However, on the drive home, this friend felt energized, hopeful, and nurtured by the evening spent with others on a similar journey.

At a recent meeting with the members of my music ministry, we reflected on our experiences of the past couple of years and discerned the best ways to grow our ministry going forward. One of their observations was that they missed gathering outside of Mass – particularly for meals. It was important to them that we simply spend time together. This provided one of those serendipitous moments, as I was trying to arrange dinner for 20+ in a local establishment, only to discover that the first six places I called were not willing to accommodate such a group during the typical dinner hours. Two other places never returned the messages I left on their voice mail. Again, whether due to staffing issues or complacency, it felt to me like I was head-butting directly against mediocrity again!

I belong to a professional organization of pastoral musicians, and currently that organization (in my opinion) seems to be struggling to find its identity and niche. From its inception, the organization offered great formation and training, resources and gatherings for its members. Sparing the details, they have accomplished the initial mission and are now less clear on the direction needed to support those in the association. While we discussed this on a walk recently, Bob made the passing comment that the best thing this organization can offer is camaraderie and fellowship. That got me to thinking...

The whole thing about camaraderie and fellowship – and my friend’s experience of the pub night – is it reflects (and requires) an outward focus. I believe the mediocre stay inwardly focused.

Those who know me know that I do not have any social media accounts, nor have I ever. (Bob maintains our *Sustaining the Journey* Facebook account – and we historically have posted very little there.) I know many use social media to stay connected to others, but I have always believed that the negatives outweigh the positives. Staying connected is good, IF you are using social media as a vehicle to support your personal (meaning in person, on the phone, even emails and texts) relationships. However, so often social media connections are complete strangers. It feels the opposite of relational to “follow” someone you barely know or spend time with. Also, I don’t think anyone cares that I like mashed potatoes or spent time yesterday cross-stitching – why should they?



My experience of observing others is that those who post to social media find just the right pictures and descriptors to present their version of reality. Yes, it's so cute when you got the dog and the baby to smile at exactly the same time with the lighting just so... but the reality is that was the 49th attempt to capture the perfect picture, with the baby having a meltdown and the dog wandering after a butterfly in the midst of the process. How "real" was that, *really*?

And, on the other side – those who are seeking the posts (as opposed to doing the posting) get this impression that others have the perfect life, the perfect job, family, pet, vacation, whatever, without any of the challenges that plague their own experiences. This naturally can cause feelings of jealousy, inadequacy, and defeat to bubble up within. The response may range from drawing more inward (avoiding personal interactions) to lowering expectations of oneself because there's no way you're going to reach the heights that others have. The whole process just feels fake to me. Lacking integrity. Artificial.

So what's the point? Relationships are messy and they take effort. But they also are nurturing, supportive, energizing, and empowering. Again, alone, I can't do much. Within a community, we can effect change. Maintaining true depth – above the mediocre – involves risk and challenge and downright work sometimes. As believers, we are called to look outward with an eye to improving life's circumstances for others. We are challenged to reach beyond mediocre. When believers are transformed to disciples, they, too, are looking outward, and the benefits far outweigh the effort.

Today, I propose two challenges. First, consider how you interact with others. Are the majority of your connections based on what you've seen on a screen? How real is that? Even though it may be out of your comfort zone, take some time to look outward and spend some actual time with someone else. It may be a walk with a friend, or coffee with a coworker, or a pub night with a colleague – just make the initial effort and you'll be reminded of what you've been missing.

We have spent the better part of two years now focused inward. Patterns of social interaction came to a dead stop. Fear replaced joy, and withdrawing from society was deemed protection, for ourselves and for others. The second challenge I propose is to take a dispassionate look at how you fit within your community – be it family, church, neighborhood, work, school, or perhaps a combination of those. What were you doing two years ago that fed you, that you've



stopped? Is it time to begin again? What can you be doing to leave this planet a better place than how you found it? Perhaps this week it's time to rejoin society – the real one, not the media pictures one – and actually make a difference. What's your first step?

Bob's Perspective:

So what is an “Artificial Universe?”

We've all *visited* an artificial universe from time to time – and that's not a bad thing. When practicing meditation, I occasionally *visit* a place in my mind that's filled with beauty and peace. I sometimes I find myself at the Cleveland Museum of Art, where I will sit in front of a painting or a sculpture and (in my mind's eye) allow myself to *visit* the place and time from which the artifact originated. As I've mentioned in other blogs, I'm a fan of Bob Ross' program, *The Joy of Painting*. Although I have very little (if any) skill when it comes to painting pictures (or even fences or walls for that matter), I enjoy (*visiting*) watching and listening to him create his “world” in which there are “no mistakes, but only happy little accidents.”

Thus far, I've illustrated examples of artificial universes. They are all marvelous and of great value, but none of them exist in real time. They are all fragments, figments, or distortions of reality.

Over the last decade or so, I've come to observe that much of society seems to be retreating into an artificial universe. While *visiting* is one thing, *inhabiting* is quite another. Plain and simple, *visiting* is a form of entertainment or escapism, while *inhabiting* is delusional and potentially harmful. In my mind, the greatest damage done by COVID was not the disease itself (although it was terrible), but the exacerbation of this societal retreat into an artificial universe.

We are constantly bombarded with fragments of truth and information; rarely (if ever) do we hear the whole truth or the whole story about anything. Getting only pieces of information is fine if it whets our appetite and motivates us to find out more. However, that seems to be a rare case, as much of society seems to allow those fragments to become the whole story upon which we guide and direct our opinions, our morals, and our way of life.

I recently witnessed a conversation between two friends as they were talking about another guy who wasn't present. He hadn't been showing up for a weekly “boys' night out” for some time. They jumped to conclusions as to the reason – ranging from laziness to blowing off his friends to being hen-pecked. What they didn't know is that he was dealing with a heavy-duty medical



issue, and was trying to keep it private. They weren't privy to that fact. For pastoral reasons I couldn't divulge what I knew. However, I corrected both of them because what they were saying was not only inaccurate but unfairly judgmental. When we base our opinions about someone on hearsay and assumptions rather than on fact, we're living in an artificial universe.

Many times we hear of misunderstandings between family and friends in social media – a simple disagreement turns into a huge fracas because someone misinterprets an inflection or sentence. The placing (or misplacing) of a comma can change the entire meaning of a phrase: "God makes, preserves and redeems us," reads differently than "God makes preserves and redeems us." In the first example God is clearly our creator, in the second example he creates jelly for our toast. Fortunately, both phrases do agree that God redeems us. When we retreat from in-depth conversations in favor of terse texting and email – especially when the result is strife and hurt feelings, we're living in an artificial universe.

God created us to be social beings. That's why he gave us the Ten Commandments – rules for living in a peaceful, healthy, and wholesome society – not an artificial universe.