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Reconsidering the Response to Mass Violence: Meaning, choice and human truth.¹
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Introduction

On the first day of August, 1966, an Eagle Scout and honorably discharged Marine killed his mother and wife, then carried weapons, ammunition, and supplies to the roof of the University of Texas tower. From his perch and with his training, he was able to kill fifteen and wound more than twenty.

Some years later a retired accountant living in a sleepy community outside of Las Vegas, having squirreled away more than twenty weapons, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, and tools to make camera peepholes and barricades in a high hotel suite overlooking an outdoor music venue, authored the bloodiest mass shooting in American history.

Cheri Maples was a police officer, district attorney, and dharma teacher. She was a beacon of wisdom, inspiration and lovingkindness to thousands, me included. She was also Maureen's wife. Cheri was bravery and integrity personified. In late September of 2016 Cheri was riding her bicycle when she was hit by a van; on a sunny day in July of the following year, she succumbed to her injuries.

Richard Quinney (2017: 4): "As my brother lay for days in the hospital bed, I whispered to him several times to be consoled by the memory of our farm, to remember how fortunate we had been to grow up there and to have the loving parents that we had. I hope, in retrospective, that these were comforting thoughts. He was losing his life and the farm that had formed him from the beginning of life."

Moments like these hold us captive. We are held hostage, bound to an assailant or to a dead or dying loved one by our commitments; to be sure we are bound by blood to an assailant or by oaths of love to our beloved, but we are also held fast in these circumstances by our commitment to the idea of a meaningful existence. As the numbness wears off, a quest is launched: a quest for meaning. Spent shell casings are counted and loved ones' belongings are gathered from hospital drawers before that long last gray drive home; even at this moment sometimes, truly even before the cold lead weight has fully settled on one's heart law enforcement are amassing resources to suss out why.

Like the terrified denizens of the city served by Camus' protagonist, Rieux, we live with the threat of death around every corner; we recoil after every instance of violence or loss, though we sense the horror was almost inevitable, even scripted. Like Arthur's knights scrambling for a glimpse at the Grail, spending themselves in scattered and impotent fashion, an army of officers and investigators sought some sense of...sense... in Stephen Paddock's last actions. And they will search again in the shadow of the next unconscionable atrocity. And then again.

The search for why, though, is a fool's errand. What is perhaps more fruitful and forceful to say is that any why we find is only fool's gold; in fact, it is fair to say that the details of the why almost do not matter; rather, we in the wider community feel a pressing need for something, *anything* to be done in response to this latest unconscionable act. Justice professionals feel this need as well and are blessed and burdened with the opportunity to express this need in action. Prevention and prosecution are out of the question, of course. "Whylessness" seems to be an altogether unacceptable state of affairs, but why this should be is unclear. Consider the scale of the effort to find the why: current estimates of government-related costs from the initial incident through the end of October are in the neighborhood of "\$4 million and climbing" (Griffin, 2017: no page number). And it is not only law enforcement who seeks meaning regardless of expense; members of the fourth estate *en masse* have taken oath, almost audibly cheering *deus le volt*, and joined the quest. At the moment it is too early to estimate the total resource commitment to the pursuit of why in Paddock's case, but there is no doubt it is considerable. If the fallout from Whitman's attack is any barometer, to wit a national blue-ribbon commission chaired by the governor of Texas himself, the investment in Paddock's why at the end of the day is likely to be truly extraordinary.

The quest for why takes a more personal form when loss is expected, when grief's map is already sketched out. Cheri's injuries happened suddenly, but she bore them for some time. Richard's brother had been ill. In such cases the shape of why is different, perhaps: why didn't I go

first? Why like this? Why must he suffer so? James Taylor's existential ballad "Baby Buffalo" seems to pin part of the emotion experienced while standing in the hospital corridor, knowing what is to come, both dreading and embracing it: "Hold on to now till you have to let go. Easy through your fingers even so. I'm just guessing. I don't know. Maybe it's a blessing. I sure hope so" (Taylor, 2002). I know why: it was her time. Still, *I can't fathom why.*

Purpose of the Essay

The purpose of this contemplation is to consider formally, but perhaps in an unorthodox way, what we should be thinking and doing when confronted by heart-crushing violence or loss. By "we" I mean all of us: first responders, family, friends, strangers. The examples above with which we began our musings here – Stephen Paddock, Cheri Maples, and Richard Quinney's brother – are not all of mass-casualty violence, but they all possess the raw personal energy to punch a hole clean through one's chest. They are each a grief singularity for someone and in this they each represent an invitation to the rest of us to action. This invitation is sensed intuitively by police who flail about, seeking answers even though the hand that wrote the dark essay is itself now still and cold. The invitation is detected also by those who, like Rieux, are committed to service, even if the total nature of the invitation is not fully evident. This invitation, this gift, really, requires of us a profound level of wisdom so that our thought and action are not abetting the violence already done. The invitation and the gift is the invitation to love (DeValve, 2015).

In this essay I will contemplate briefly the nature of meaning and choice so as to have a clearer understanding, at least for myself, of the nature of human truth (DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018), in the furtherance of the cultivation of a loving justice (DeValve, 2015; DeValve, 2017a; DeValve, 2017b). Understanding human truth more fully I take to be a crucial step toward responding lovingly to unconscionable violence or to rib-crushing loss. It is necessary, then, to clarify what is meant here by "love."

Practically every philosopher or theologian, from Plato to Badiou and from Augustine to Tillich, has complained about an idea that interested them that was bent out of shape, or at least complicated, by common usage of a particular word. "Love" may be among the most problematic word in this regard, as not only has common parlance created a dog's dinner of meanings and implications, but also more than a few philosophers have added to the mess, myself included. Able and highly-regarded treatments on love by Fromm (2006) and Badiou (2012) have both helped and complicated the process of making love as an idea policy-ready. The argument is often made to me that justice policy founded on love is pollyanna and perhaps at most interesting fodder for utopian fiction. *Nothing* could be further from the case. The proof that love is *eminently* practical is to be found everywhere: across the dinner table, on the other side of the podium, on the patient's bench, in the dentist's chair. Love is practical already because we exist. *Dilectus ergo sum*, perhaps. What remains is to understand in detail what it means to love, and how we can and do act lovingly in concrete and policy-relevant ways.

As I have already enlarged on this elsewhere (e.g., DeValve, 2015; DeValve, 2017a; DeValve, 2017b; DeValve & Brightman, 2018; DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018), perhaps it is sufficient merely to offer only the briefest discursive here. Love as I intend is "the artlike, individualized, unconditional, aware and end-less praxis whereby a human or organization mindfully, assertively and continuously labors for the actualization of another human being as an end in herself, without thought of return, without reliance upon authority, without fear, or possibility of cessation" (DeValve, 2015: 103). This definition places the process of learning and reflecting at the center of what it is to love; the first crucial step in loving is listening. Listening is necessary because the truths at the root of any given person's suffering and actualization are solely their own, even if they share things in common with others. This pursuit of truth owned by each sentient being is what I mean by "human truth."

My thesis for this essay is that there is a pervasive misapprehension of human truth (DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018) that stems from preceding misapprehensions of the nature of human choice and meaning, both of which have led us to look in the wrong places for the transformative

insights we crave. These misapprehensions and their consequences compound human suffering in the wake of unfathomable tragedies like mass violence or personal grievous loss. We must endeavor to turn our attention away from the flailing about for why, and instead listen; as we will see, perhaps even listen to the ocean converse with a rocky shore.

A Note on Method

Before we progress further, it is necessary to pause very briefly and consider the epistemic approach I take here to allow proper evaluation of method and application of conclusions.

The method employed here is akin to a narrative criminological approach (Presser, 2016; see also Metz (1999) in relation to narrative as a means for contemplating Christian theology), as I will be analyzing meaning, metaphor, characters and other literary devices in order to extract useful insights. Criminological projects which employ literary readings are not new, of course. Ruggiero (2003), for instance, treats several great works of fiction through the eye of a criminologist; plot, purpose, motivation, development; characters and their authors are framed in terms of existing criminological theory. I seek to work in the other direction: instead of reading literature from a criminological frame, holding templates of criminological theory over the actions and motives of characters, I seek to enrich new theory (to wit, my theorizing about justice and love) through an examination of great works of literature. In this study I analyze key themes in two works of literature chosen for their relevance to choice and meaning, and from my thematic analysis I derive insights into how we might respond more wisely (read lovingly) to grotesque violence.

Young (2011) confronts a wide swath of criminological investigation, highlighting the apparent down-trend of explained variance in intricate quantitative models published in leading journals. Weisburd and Piquero's (2008) examination of scholarship in criminology indicated that statistical models not only were overspecified, they evidenced a decreasing trend in statistical relevance; soberly they ask the question whether this escalating incapacity is the result of the failure of theory, of method and measurement, or of some larger phenomenon. Young's reply is as resounding as McAuliffe's

"Nuts!" It is a failure of all three. "What we need," Young argues, "is...a method which is sensitive to the way people write and rewrite their personal narratives. Our problems will not be solved by fake scientificity, but by a critical sociology, honed to the potentialities of human creativity and meaning" (Young, 2011: 17).

Partly in response to Young's insights, there has been a growing movement in criminological thought toward reflexive methodologies of inquiry (e.g., Lumsden & Winter, 2014). The locus of criminology to agencies of power creates the potential for appropriation in the service of government interests and away from the purpose of inquiry: service to humankind through the increase and application of understanding. Criminologists/zemiologists not only must be reflexive and contemplative regarding the implications and consequences of their research, but they must also begin to seek understanding in ways and in places not examined as readily before. Because this study seeks to contemplate the meaning-making process in understanding the unconscionable choices of others, a reflexive approach is indicated as appropriate (e.g., Bischoping, 2018). In this essay, I will reflect upon two purpose-chosen works of fiction for the insights into meaning and choice they contain, in order to more fully understand human truth, in furtherance of the creation of a justice founded on love.

The method employed here is in actuality not in the least original, and bears resemblance to other reflexive projects. Sutherland (2012) invites MBA students to contemplate leading an organization through their participation in a choral conducting workshop. Colvin (2015) examines the capacity of redemptive themes in theatrical productions in prisons, particularly the nuanced nature of good and bad, for narrative therapy. She finds that the analysis and portrayal of works of relevant fictional literature can be transformative for prisoners through the creation of spaces that enable reflection and narration of inward experience.

In this project, I will be analyzing two works of fiction, selected because each speaks directly to one of the two central concepts: choice and meaning. Camus' *The Plague* grapples with the experience of the absurd: seeking meaning in a meaningless place; Tennyson's *Holy Grail* is in part an examination of choice-making. These works examine key themes related to what I call human truth; I seek to highlight wisdom they contain in order to deepen our capacity to respond from wisdom when we collectively confront grotesque violence.

Misapprehension: The "Why" as Meaningful

As of this writing, despite herculean efforts on the part of a veritable army of law enforcement professionals, no clear motive has emerged; autopsy results indicate no obvious abnormalities with his brain. The "experts" have been called in: the FBI to investigate motive, and Stanford University to look for micro-abnormalities in Paddock's cortical tissues. At this point, finding anything medically relevant is a long shot at best, and yet hopes remain pinned the discovery of...something to explain why he did what he did. They have searched his hotel suite and his house and found little.

Interviews seem to portray a secretive and angry man, but chances are good that you can name more than one disconcertingly "secretive and angry" person among friends and family; I know I can.

The why we ask when we are left holding a brother's cardigan, a soulmate's favorite t-shirt, or husband's hat, now empty, is both quizzically odd and perfectly natural at the very same time. It is odd because as a pursuit, it is quite pointless, almost absurd, as absurd as listening to the ocean surf for knowledge. There *is* no why; we should not expect to receive some kind of "because" statement, some receipt, from the universe. Any *because* one might get is little more than parent to the next, wider *why*. We should not expect a *because*, and in our moments of serene stillness we know that in fact we do not actually ask for one. You see, it is also natural to seek *why* because the question is not entirely what it appears to be. It is in largest part code for something else. It is not a plea for a *because* from somewhere else. It is an invitation to the community of sentient loving beings nearby, including, if you're so inclined, one's conception of God. It is an invitation that is more precisely understood as a cry for help. This cry for help is merely a special instance of Weil's (Bell, 1998) seminal, society-reorganizing question: "Why am I being hurt?" For Weil, society must be organized around the provision of a meaningful answer to that single question. This search for *why* is nothing less than the pursuit of human utopia (a place where human truth reigns supreme), and therefore is an assertion that such a utopia is fully possible, indeed is eminently practicable. Now utopias have managed to get themselves something of a bad rap over the course of the past half-millennium. We have come to think of utopia as a place that, almost by definition, could not ever exist. I cannot be overly emphatic: such an understanding of utopia is utter hogwash (Chambers, 1935, in Logan, 2011, p. 167). The community portrayed in More's *Utopia*, just a sliver over five hundred years old now, is far from perfect. It is not a place devoid of pain or need. Sex equality does not exist there. They disagree regarding moral philosophy. There are some who might even call General Utopus a conqueror and usurper. A utopia is not a place of perfection. It is simply a place where humans live according to their actualization, where need guides policy and the cry for why never rings unanswered, where human truth reigns. The dozens of works that portray efforts to create a utopia that end up creating proto-Soviet nightmares do little more than repeatedly treat the same straw man like an amateur in a UFC title bout. That, though, is a conversation for another time.

We humans trade in meaning like cash, and yet we often feel that we confront a seemingly insensate and meaningless world. Meaning matters greatly to us, but we often seek it where it could never be found. We manufacture meaning like the Federal Reserve creates value, sometimes from thin air; indeed the value of money, particularly in the instance of "debt" created by the Federal Reserve is a fine example of meaning's simultaneous significance and etherealness. Human agency in choice-making (at our current state of refinement) makes certain that some humans will do egregious things. The challenge before criminology/zemiology is to equip humanity to countenance the monstrousness of which it is capable; it is to understand the kinds of responses to the

unconscionable humans might make and which among them are truly worthy of choosing. Choices have meaning, and meaning-making is certainly a choice; meaning and choice are conjoined in the human understanding of other humans' actions. The criminological/zemiological effort to understand choice should be guided by the human craving for meaning. In an effort to more fully understand human truth, I will treat the juxtaposition of meaning and the experience of meaninglessness, something Camus (e.g., 1991a; 1991b, 1991c) calls "the absurd," in Camus' *The Plague*. Then I will contemplate the nature of choice as illustrated in Tennyson's portrayal of the Arthurian legend of the Holy Grail.

Human truth can help us more completely make loving choices ourselves regarding our search for meaning which in turn can help us transcend disgust and fury that naturally arise from the unconscionable and help us offer maximal healing and actualization to harmed and harmers alike. For if we seek to prevent future spasms of grotesque violence, we must give ourselves as fully as possible to skilled lovingkindness for all. Love is the highest, most potent mechanism of crime prevention.

The Problem: Choice

Choice is both a central focus in and an abiding problem for criminology. Why people do horrific things to each other (e.g., Agnew, 1992; Akers, 1990; Bandura, 1973; Barr & Pease, 1990; Chiricos & Waldo, 1970; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Messner & Rosenfeld, 2013; Tittle & Meier, 1990; Worrall, 2004); why people don't do more horrific things to each other (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969; Reckless, 1961); regardless of the perspective taken, choice in some form rolls like an underground river through it all. Humans have been seen as rational (e.g., Paternoster & Piquero, 1995; Stafford & Warr, 1993), semi-rational (e.g., Cornish & Clarke, 1986), and barely rational (e.g., see Kleck, Sever, Li, & Gertz, 2005). Humans' harmful actions against others, themselves, and their environment: from none of these perspectives is criminology as a discourse able to offer useful clarity regarding the vexing choices made by Stephen Paddock, Charles Whitman or a host of others. To be sure some may argue such is not the point of criminology at all. Some will sniff that macro-level theories are not intended to grapple with micro-level applications. Those who sniff thus might do well to have that conversation as well with Edwin Sutherland and Robert Merton. Social theories derived from the study of crime or harm are an essential human endeavor if for no other reason than they can offer one brand of insights into how a community might undertake to address broader causes of harm. My purpose here is not at all to diminish them, indeed, quite the contrary. Work like that done by Cullen (2006) and Agnew (2013) represent some of the very finest thinking in criminology. My fond hope is that such work will influence a host of criminologists to create a whole new generation of brilliance. However, theories at this scale do not provide sufficient leverage to double back upon themselves to offer meaningful answers to Weil's challenge: "why am I being hurt?" (e.g., Bell, 1998; Weil, 1962).

Choice, again, if not the whole problem, is certainly one of the most challenging problems confronting any social science. Regardless of correlates, regardless of vector and life course (Felson, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1997), regardless of parenting (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), resource deprivation, and the rest, the decision to harm (or heal) at any given moment in many cases is a choice, even if dimly understood as such at the moment². Official decision-making that causes harm (e.g., Bontrager, Bales, & Chiricos, 2005; Donner, Maskaly, & Fridell, 2016) is just as bound up with the problem of choice as is more traditional concerns of criminologists. Some (e.g., Cohen & Felson, 1979) have recognized choice's centrality and yet abandoned the effort to understand the geometry of choice by merely assuming when conditions are right, noxious choices occur. Choice is a problem

² Not all choices involve remotely the same amount or kind of cognitive processing. Harm can be accidental or reflex; forgiveness can be meaninglessly conditioned or a fully-intentional gift of grace. I do not want to become entangled in the circular reasoning process of limiting choice-theorizing to cognitively robust choice-making. I would invite other criminologists/zemiologists to conduct careful examinations of the phenomenology of their own lived choice-making at a host of cognitive levels as a place to begin.

for this essay because choices both come from and create meaning. Choice's challenge predates social science altogether; the second creation myth in the Bible is all about choice and the meaning of choices made but very likely not in the way many might assume. It has been argued that Eve's choice represents a noble and selfless act and is not the result of deceit, resulting in a strange but reduced sentence; it represents the very deliberate choice to descend in order to bring light to dark places (DeValve, Garland & Wright, 2018).

It seems rather more fruitful to contemplate choice-making in humans not from a stripped-down and hypotrophic idea set as has tended to be the case in much of American criminological thought, but instead from the recognition of the rich and nuanced world of human contemplation and choosing. In short, choice is better understood from the perspective of human truth, not through the pursuit of a nomothetic and objective architecture. The choice to consider choosing in an impoverished and etic fashion tends to desiccate the theoretical enterprise. Our children deserve better.

Human Truth

Elsewhere, colleagues and I (DeValve, Garland, & Wright 2018) turn our attention briefly to an idea we call "human truth." In our conversation on love's epistemology, we raise the idea of human truth as a phenomenon that concerns us, and we speak to some degree of its constituent parts, but we do not offer a concise definition. We try to make the point that any single avenue of knowing, whether scientific, spiritual, or affective, whether we attend to the world without or the world within, will not produce complete understanding of the human condition. Human truth as I intend the phrase exists as a combination of the known, the unknown, the understood, the felt, the external and the perceived; it is a combination of the phenomenal and the noumenal, of the transcendent and the ontic. Human truth is a combination of these things because we are a combination of these things. Each of us is a vector; we are each more process than object, more verb than noun. And we each live our process in the space "between the garbage and the flowers," to borrow Leonard Cohen's poetry, often not sure which one to place on the mantelpiece. We are beings of light and soil, of ether and dust. And a central (and ironic) reason for our misery is that we cling to distinctions like "garbage" versus "flowers" and forget what we were after in the first place. We know, we feel, we pray, we reason, we rage. We are ontic beings that dwell in Interbeing and often separate and confuse the two. We operate in an external world which we cannot reliably distinguish from the immanent experience of it. We experience a conscious *I* although such a thing appears not to have a clear biological seat (e.g., Fischer, Boes, Demertzi, Evrard, Laureys, Edlow, Liu, Saper, Pascual-Leone, Fox, & Geerling, 2016). The natural world does not rely upon our existence and perception, but evidence indicates that our perception alone may have some capacity to perturb the physical universe (e.g., Radin, Michel, Galdamez, Wendland, Rickenbach, & Delorme, 2012). Certainly we possess the capacity to modify our immanent worlds (along with the organ through which that world is perceived and with which that world is associated) behaviorally (e.g., Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, Rosenkranz, Muller, Santorelli, Urbanowski, Harrington, Bonus, & Sheridan, 2003). It is in this multivalent space in the *and* and the *or* of all of these where human truth can be found. It is in part empirically measurable (to a limit), it can be reasoned to (sort of), it can be touched in silence or in ecstatic vision, frozen in poetry or imaged in art. More properly, human truth is that which is commonly understandable through all of these means of experiencing. Thus the *how* we can know.

Our experience is social, immanent, spiritual, shared, negotiated, independent, and constantly changing, and truth is a function of that perception; cognition, rumination, assertion, communication, and reprocessing then follow *ad infinitum*. Reason, rigorous observation, spiritual revelation, practiced contemplation, affective experience... all combine in us to create the human experience.

Necessarily, human truth is a function of the nature of our corporeal existence (e.g., Kant, 2008): the colors we can and cannot see, our experience of time, the reach of our arm, the pitch range within which we can sing and hear, but also our lives and memories as children, our capacity to create and destroy, the moments we carry with us, the non-causal connections we make (e.g., synesthesia), and more. It also can transcend that corporeal existence, to the degree each of us chooses. It can be found in our individual and collective capacities, our negotiated and evolving understandings, our met and unmet needs (e.g., physical, emotional, spiritual), our fondest wishes and our deepest fears, all in relation to the universe in which we operate and inter-exist, and of which we are (among) the eyes, ears, minds and hearts. The things each of us can see, those things we choose not to see, the actions we undertake or that we ignore, the art we offer, the philosophies that hit or miss their mark, the gentle kindness shown to a suffering child or the wretched cruelty visited upon a starved horse, taken together for each of us and for us all as a species reveal, constitute, and perpetually modify human truth.

It is fair to observe that human truth is both a function of the overlap of all axes of human experience, within and without, thing-in-itself and thing-as-experienced, as well as the space in which such truth occurs or can be found. As many avenues to its discovery exist as there are humans who have lived, although certainly many have traveled, travel and shall travel along similar paths. Art, science, service, belief, leisure, sleep, death: as a result no one avenue can claim a corner on the market of human truth. Human truth is both what and how, both noun and verb, both object and process. In its simplest terms, human truth is what we learn as we go, and it is what we are as we learn.

The key, though, is that it is both individual and shared: human truth is that which belongs to each of us, and that which we share as fellow interbeing, sentient beings. It is shared also, best we can tell, with other sentient nonhuman beings. My assumption, in fact, is that all sentient beings experience truth on their own terms in much the same way as we do, for there is no particularly sound reason to assume otherwise. The decision to use the term “human truth” is in order to communicate the idea that truth as I understand it is conditioned upon my (and our) existence as a human being, that I experience the world as a human, and so I can only reliably describe truth as I, a human, understand it.

And speaking of death, a nontrivial aspect of the experience of human truth deals with the asking of big questions, like “Where did I come from?” or “What happens to my consciousness when I die?” Our mortality and our suffering are an integral, indeed invaluable condition shaping human truth.

Human truth as I mean the phrase is influenced, *inter alia*, by Eric Voegelin, Simone Weil and Johnny Cash. Two key insights from Voegelin (1990) give shape to my thinking about human truth. First, he argues convincingly that there can be no “absolute starting point for a philosophy of consciousness” (Voegelin, 1990: 33). Any effort to witness and describe consciousness is inherently contained within consciousness itself and is a function of its structures. This insight feels freeing; efforts to contemplate the contemplation of contemplation should seem of their nature to lead us into self-referential silliness. Second, “all philosophizing in the philosopher’s life history” (Voegelin, 1990: 33) as well as the history of her community, the species, and of the universe. Consciousness and thus its efforts to understand itself are a function of the human world, just as they contribute to that world; the distinction between part and whole therefore becomes increasingly unimportant.

A natural question arises from Voegelin’s points about the nature of the interaction of the consciousness and the universe. Among other ideas from Weil, her idea of “reading” has had considerable influence on my meaning of human truth, and provides a fertile understanding of the mediation of consciousness and cosmos. Human truth is inextricably bound up in our corporeal existence, in our bodiliness (e.g., Bell, 1998). In part, human truth must inevitably be corporate, incarnate not merely because we experience the world through our bodies but because our experiencing, understanding and altering the world happens in a praxis-like dialectical process throughout the course of our lives. We love the world, Weil tells us, in, through and because of a

specific being or beings (Weil, 1970), even when we love the wider world. This corporeality of thought and its consequences in the world Weil calls “reading” (Weil, 1962). It goes without saying, of course, that works of literature like those contemplated here represent “readings” as they have been portrayed by their authors. As readings of our shared state, works like the ones I have chosen reveal certain valuable insights into the nature of human truth.

We might then naturally ask after the nature of the understanding of the truth that is revealed when consciousness and cosmos are mediated through the human frame. When asked to describe paradise, Cash famously replied, “This morning, with her, having coffee.” In his cup of coffee, that morning with her, he touched human truth. In June Carter Cash Johnny Cash experienced the transcendent. The moments where these two sat together and shared themselves over breakfast were dripping with meaning for them both. One key antecedent to Cash’s paradise was the set of choices he made in advance of that moment; those distal choices, like his choices to honor his meaningful promises to June, and his more proximal choices like which coffee to prepare (perhaps her favorite). Cash’s choices earlier in life tended to be rather less edifying, but a set of sound choices led to his moment of transcendent bliss.

At the nexus of the perceived, known, felt, intuited and the revealed or enlightened we find *love*, love as both cause and effect of mutuality, both cause and effect of suffering, both cause and effect of transformation, actualization. Love is the *what* of human truth; it is why we exist, how we grow and thrive, why we die and how we conduct ourselves in the spaces between. We as individuals and as communities are possible because of, and we actualize through, love. Love obliterates the self as such and reanoints the self as both self and non-self. When misunderstood and misperceived, love turned topsy-turvy coronates a reified self. Misunderstood, love appears evil, it justifies acquisitiveness and violence, it buckles under the weight of fear and possession. Such a thing is not love in reality, of course, but is a function of love (e.g., a wraithlike iteration of love), nonetheless. Love is human truth, but in this we should not take affect alone to be what is meant (DeValve, 2015). Neither should we understand love as a static thing; as we change as individuals and as a species, so does the core human truth – love – also change. As we grow as individuals we increase our capacity to love through praxis; because of this individual praxis, as a species we also grow in our capacity to understand, apperceive, and practice love. Human truth (love) is a verb, a noun, an adjective and adverb. It is what we do, how we do it, why we do it, and what we seek in our action and thought. Love is human truth in that it gives meaning to what we do, who we are, and it is inevitably the result of choices we make. That we fail so often and so egregiously to love does not diminish human truth as such. Indeed, it advances it. Failure invites contemplation and renewed effort. Where things can get tricky, of course, is that the decision to honor human truth, to commit to self-actualization through other-actualization is, in the final analysis, a choice rich with meaning.

Meaning and Meaninglessness: *The Plague*

The absurd is, of course, an abiding theme in Camus’ corpus of writing. The absurd for Camus is the experience that comes from confronting the crushing silence from an unreasoning universe set in the context of the human search for meaning. And although his framing of the idea is somewhat less than precise, it is probably best understood as an experience of tension rooted in the desire to find meaning in a meaningless universe (e.g., Polzler, 2018). The absurd might most simply be described as “lucid reason noting its limits” (Camus, 1991a: 49). More specifically, it seems the absurd is a two-part experience: it begins with a deep awareness, a sensitivity perhaps, subtle but gnawing, that gives rise to more reasoned cognition. This two-part experience in turn gives rise to choices of action, like self-obliteration. Other ostensibly huge questions, like how life arose or the nature of gravity, are insignificant for Camus in relation to the question of suicide. Some, he shows, destroy themselves because they feel life is not worth living, whereas others separated only by inches and moments give the last measure of dedication precisely because they see life as precious, invaluable. Humans contrive and assert meaning on the universe, and when one discovers that the conversation is one-sided, that there is no one on the other end of the phone, the feeling of the absurd arises; this feeling, raised to the level of conscious recognition, is the other portion of the absurd. It is in this

moment of recognition where a person confronts “a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights” where she “feels an alien, a stranger” (Camus, 1991a: 6), where the divorce is finalized.

In *The Plague*, the beleaguered Dr. Rieux observes at one point his, the physician’s, call is one perpetually doomed to failure: no matter what heroic efforts one makes to save life, that saving is at best temporary in all circumstances. To save life, to assert human capacity against the universe’s capacity to destroy is like holding back the sea - the sea that rips at the shore behind him and haunts him throughout the narrative - with a bucket. Rieux sees this clearly and yet exerts himself to his fullest capacity against the plague as it moves through town. At no point do we hear Rieux ever contemplate his own danger, even though we know he is only too aware of his predicament; he iterates to one who seeks to help that because of the exposure his helping entails his chance of survival is one in three.

In the shape of certain characters and certain moments, Camus traces the path by which normality moves almost imperceptibly through concern, to panic, and finally to a bludgeoned acquiescence to plague-related conditions. As he watches, characters rise to the occasion or shatter under pressure. The young journalist trapped in the city by the quarantine begs and cajoles Rieux in order to be released from the calamity, to no avail. He reports the incident, along with the journalist’s eventual smashed acquiescence with detachment, watching emotion wash over the man like waves over a tide-break. Similarly, Rieux shares detailed moments of perception of the metal sky, the sea, and the streets at different times of the day and night. Almost characters themselves, the sky, the sea, and the streets changed countenances depending on the nature of events as Rieux understood them, foreboding at times, festive at others. For Rieux, the meaning of these objects, themselves unchanging, changed according to the season of the plague.

But let us return again to the inevitable defeat of every physician. If the physician’s charge is little more than tilting with windmills in the final analysis, why bother recounting it? Rieux’s purpose in offering the narrative is not to perpetuate some final victory, but only to offer a testament to what had been done in the face of indiscriminate and insensate human horror “by all who, while unable to be saints [refused] to bow down to pestilence, strive[d] their utmost to be healers” (Camus, 1991: 308). The very book in your hands as you read *The Plague* stands as evidence that human choice-making can indeed assert itself against the deaf bully sea, even if only for a time.

Rieux’s delicate wife was sent away just before the plague began; he, of course, was in the very thick of it and survived. She, even though away in safe harbor, succumbed to her delicacy, rendering impossible the joyous post-quarantine reunion he saw others savor so intensely. Yet in the face of the absurdity and fickleness of death, Rieux saw something of exquisite beauty: “And as he turned the corner... Rieux was thinking it was only right that those whose desires are limited to man and his humble yet formidable love should enter, if only now and then, into their reward” (Camus, 1991: 301). In the very end, then, even though for him the end of the quarantine did not mean as much to him as it meant to those who had lived through months of separation from loved ones, or what it meant for those whose reunions would never come because their loved ones had been covered in quicklime and enclosed charitably in African clay, Rieux offers his own tiny celebration for those who clung to their hearts and were rewarded.

In the end Rieux knew a different, perhaps even more profound happiness than the happiness known by those who in the end wandered the streets orbiting their beloved in starry-eyed bliss. His lucid confrontation with the insensate and inhuman was to remain steadfastly and unabashedly human. His was the happiness of Camus’ Sisyphus, content for his condition because the gods had had to contend with him. Rieux had asserted humanity against the insensate and even if only for the moment, humanity had prevailed.

The meaning of the sea, streets, sky, and people around him changed with conditions, but were themselves a reflection of the single choice he had made to stay in the city and tend to his patients. This was a choice that is never heard; no evidence is given to this momentous choice. It is perhaps the most important moment in the book, but it occurred probably years before, perhaps as early as medical school. It is an epistrophic choice (DeValve, 2017b); the single decision was

followed by consequent ideas and decisions that ultimately led to a situation that pitted Rieux's lucid reason against the inexorable and pitiless world, of which the plague was a natural part. This single choice meant the difference between life and death for many, and thus an assertion that although the physician's charge means inevitable defeat, the time snatched back from the abyss was more than worth the effort and risk. It represented the capacity of humans to create love-honoring meaning through noble choice.

Choice: *The Holy Grail*

The legend of the quest for the Holy Grail has taken many forms over the centuries. For current purposes, Tennyson's poem from *Idylls of the King* (2017) will serve admirably. It is well known, concise, easily accessible, and offers a clear and powerful account. It is of particular value for our task because "it does not portray the quest for the Grail as much as it studies the various figures who respond to the Grail" (Staines, 1982: no page number).

Arthur, it would seem, inherited something of a mess. His lands had reverted to wilderness; wolves and boar predated children and stock, and the heathen were many and anxious to plunder. Worse, a declining Rome was no help; at his accession he rejected overtures for alliance from Rome. Now he was beset on all sides by those who would subject his people to oppression, even plunder, servitude and death. Arthur had been anointed into reluctant leadership, but he needed a team who believed in him. He sought not only to recover his lands from the wild state into which they had fallen, but also to square off against the heathen hordes and rump Rome: "Reign, ye... and make the world / Other... And all this order of the Table Round / Fulfill the boundless purpose of their King" (Tennyson, 2017: no page number).

Arthur seems the very personification of the idea of humble public service; riding to assume his new throne he did not distinguish himself from among his knights by any markings or garments. He was a reluctant soldier, almost nudged to martial greatness. Excalibur, the sword he carried while serving as king, was engraved on both sides: "Take me" is inscribed in the old tongue; "Cast me away!" is written in contemporary language. From the beginning, then, it is clear his office was one of stewardship, even though he was anointed thus by supernatural forces. His knights are themselves sworn to service; their collective commitment to might-for-right is what made the Round Table possible and powerful in the first place. King, queen, and knights all shared a common purpose: to right the wrongs done to those who could not right them for themselves. It turns out as we will see this charge meant different things to Arthur than it did to many of his knights.

Tennyson's Grail account is relayed through an aging Percivale in the months before his death from old age. We will join Tennyson's narrative partway in, at a crucial moment. After some drama involving Percivale's sister proclaiming she had seen the Grail in a vision, the pious knight Galahad sat in a chair that had stood in a corner of Arthur's hall. It was a chair fashioned by Merlin, which bore the inscription "No man could sit but he should lose himself" (Tennyson, 2017: 174³). Others had sat there, and to their peril. Galahad's experience was rather different; proclaiming "I lose myself to save myself" (Tennyson, 2017: 178) he sat without calamity. Hard on the heels of his reclining derring-do, a great tumult arose in the hall, complete with smoke and lightning. Galahad, probably having fallen under the influence of Percivale's sister, claimed he saw the Grail in the midst of the tempest. Others there did not see the Grail, but were shaken by the dramatic events. Many of the assembled knights swore an oath at this moment to various holy and ascetic endeavors until they too would be worthy of beholding the Grail, and to strike out to find the Grail and to bring it before Christendom.

Arthur had left only that morning in order to make a bevy of bandits answer for their rough treatment of an outraged maiden, "all her shining hair / Was smeared with earth and either milky arm / Red-rent with hooks of bramble" (Tennyson, 2017: 210-211). So it was as he returned that he too saw the smoke above his great hall, and he feared the worst. Tearing in, he is told of Galahad's

³ Quotations from Tennyson's *The Holy Grail* include line numbers, counted from "From noiseful arms, and acts of prowess done" as the first line.

vision, and that many of his knights had sworn to pursue the Grail on earth. Would it were than his hall had burned; indeed, it would have been less a calamity for Arthur. His sarcasm is more pointed than Excalibur: "...said Arthur, 'have ye seen a cloud? / What go ye into the wilderness to see?'" (Tennyson, 2017: 286-287). Perhaps, Arthur admits, that this quest is one for Galahad, but not for the rest: "But one hath seen, and all the blind will see" (Tennyson, 2017: 313). His knights now would take to their mounts and range the world in search of the Grail, leaving the royal halls empty, the work of leading a realm undone: "This chance of noble deeds will come and go / Unchallenged, while ye follow wandering fires / Lost in the quagmire!" (Tennyson, 2017: 317-320). Arthur prophesied that no more than a tithe would return to him, and in the fullness of time his dark predictions would prove prescient. And like an army of journalists and police investigators, Arthur's knights trundled off to find the Grail. Galahad, the one knight who *did* see the Grail pursued it, for a time joined by Percivale himself. Percivale and his sister watched as Galahad, Grail image over his head "In silver-shining armor starry-clear" (Tennyson, 2017: 511) boarded a boat that bore him away from the misery of this world unto the very bosom of God.

Unlike Galahad and many others, Percivale returned to Arthur's hall, there to find Lancelot, Bors, Gawain, and some few others. Arthur listens patiently to accounts of travels, and finally levels his lament for those who left and did not return at those who returned or remained. Those who followed their quests "left [Arthur] gazing at a barren board / and a lean Order" (Tennyson, 2017: 893-894), left "human wrongs to right themselves" (Tennyson, 2017: 899). The poem ends with Percivale admitting having lost Arthur's point: "So spake the king: I knew not all he meant" (Tennyson, 2017: 923). The precision of Arthur's foresight is cold comfort. Arthur is, like Shakespeare's Henry V, a warrior for the working day (*Henry V*, IV, 3). When work is done there is time enough to attend to visions, visions enough even to beguile one beyond recognition of air, water and earth. But visions are as much a mirror as a window; what we take from them is a truth, or should speak to truth. Cryptically Arthur concludes; "ye have seen what ye have seen" (Tennyson, 2017: 922). What was seen was each knight's own truth, with its own meaning. Sadly, that meaning was decidedly not the same as Arthur's. Perhaps this is why Percivale had such difficulty grasping Arthur: they were operating from opposing poles (e.g., Bennett, 1996).

And speaking of Percivale's credulous piety, Galahad, let me assert, is no hero. (I should enjoin here that Paddock and Whitman, then, are likewise no monsters). In fact, in the end, as far as the Round Table and its work are concerned, Galahad is about as useful as a licorice screwdriver. In Galahad we see a particularly egregious version of the general problem: the common purposes Arthur assumed to be shared among his knights was in fact not as widely shared as he had assumed. Many of his knights were motivated not simply by service, but by the self-aggrandizing piety public service could provide. Luckily for us, Percivale followed Galahad for a time on his quest, such that we have an accounting of Galahad's trials and what can only be described as his ascension to heaven. That Galahad's vision should cost him so dearly made Arthur shudder: "What are ye? Galahads?... 'Nay' said he, 'but men / With strength and will to right the wronged, of power / To lay the sudden heads of violence flat'" (Tennyson, 2017: 306-310). One can almost hear Arthur's mind, questioning which was more holy: self-serving piety or selfless service to those who suffer. Almost audibly Arthur sighs, shrugs, and concedes defeat: "Go, since your vows are sacred..." (Tennyson, 2017: 314). Perhaps Arthur's respect for Galahad was too great for him to say it, but I shall: for all of Galahad's piety-fueled strength, Arthur would have gleefully given a thousand Galahads for a handful of Gawains or Borses.

For each of the knights, the Grail meant something different, though it seems clear that there was something of an assumption that they all agreed with the meaning of seeing or pursuing the Grail. Some knights saw the Grail quest as a barometer of their worthiness in God's eyes. Galahad's meaning may well have changed over the course of events; at first, his piety merely gave him strength, but at some point, probably sometime between when Percivale's sister had her influence on him and the time when he assumed Merlin's treacherous chair, the pursuit of personal holiness became his primary focus. At the end, Galahad pursued the Grail all the way to God's embrace and

away from where he might have done something meaningful in God's name. Galahad's nobility, then, is a robustly impotent one. It is the nobility of the monastic hermit: he achieves wisdom in solitude, but that wisdom is thin fare indeed, unavailable to and even inapplicable for those in the trenches.

Choices made by Arthur and by his many knights evidence the nuanced meanings they carry; nobility, chivalry, service, holiness. The search for meaning for a heinous act is, like the Grail search, an individual one, where meaning is invariably one's own. The degree to which that meaning is shared is occluded from us, even despite active efforts to investigate it; we learn of the discrepancy only when choices are made. When Quinney (1970) and Young (2011) speak to us about divesting ourselves from the epistemic framework of the physical sciences, this meaning problem is a central reason.

Conclusion

First Insight into Human Truth

"I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it (Camus, 1991a: 51). Meaning, the sense of meaning of our lives in particular or the crushing sense of the meaninglessness of wanton violence's waste, operates like kerosene: it can warm a space and make it comfortable for a moment, or it can power a blowtorch and help make a robust structure capable of fending off the elements for decades. Rushing around the landscape chasing a grail that is neither real nor of practical use had it been real might give the sense of doing something, but it is a choice that pursues meaning where it can never be found; it may bring momentary comfort, but it offers little lasting benefit.

It is perhaps as much a rushing away from something as a rushing toward something; meeting the presence of the parent of a murdered child without defilement is in some ways harder than facing the hot barrel of the murderer himself. The courage to behold harm and simply be present with it is both extraordinary and manifestly present for each of us; it is a courage we must recognize, treasure, and continue to cultivate. This insight is the first contribution to human truth from our contemplations.

Second Insight into Human Truth

Meaning for Arthur proved to be far less robust as a firmament than he might have hoped. Galahad's idea of nobility became a selfish and impotent piety. For Arthur, nobility was almost the precise opposite. For Rieux, the meaning of some things changed with conditions, whereas for other things, like the meaning of his duty as a physician, were so well defined and unwavering as to sink beneath our wisdom like a stone⁴

Our hope in a context provided by objective, or even intersubjective, meaning to help us grasp the unconscionable choice is...absurd. Like Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon we would wait by what appears to be a willow until our teeth loosen and tumble from our heads. It is not a shared meaning in which we should place our hope, or in a meaning that preexists the grievous act, but instead in the idea that there can be meaning rescued from the choice for atrocity at all. Such a hope is not absurd, of course, because whether or not we can discern the why behind an unconscionable act, whether or not a why is woven into the fabric of the changing sea or sky, you and I can manufacture it for our healing purpose. This is our second insight into human truth.

⁴ I modified a lyric from Leonard Cohen's *Suzanne*, to invoke a comparison between Rieux and Cohen's portrayal of Jesus in the second verse of the song.

Third Insight into Human Truth

Decades before being introduced to ox herding engravings and the family farm, criminology was put on notice that logical positivism could not carry us into the future: "...what is it we pretend to separate ourselves from when we go about our observations? ...We cannot be certain of an objective reality beyond man's conception of it. Thus, we have no reason to believe in the objective existence of anything" (Quinney, 1970: 4). We have known, or by rights should have known, that the quest for certainty is also a fool's errand. The only certainty may be that there is no certainty, but we cannot be certain of that. The most grievous consequence of borrowing physical science's framework for the construction of social sciences (with scarce few exceptions, for example in the psychological laboratory), is that along with the empirical toolkit came its ontological baggage: "we must not use the causal construct as it has often been applied in physical sciences" (Quinney, 1970: 6).

Here, then, is the answer: the why we seek in response to grotesque violence is of the same species of that sunken feeling Arthur had; it is familiar to others as well. Sartre calls it nausea; for Camus, though, it is the absurd. For Camus and even to a degree for Tennyson here, either protagonist experiences a moment of crystal and almost timeless clarity where perceptions of the universe are heightened beyond perfection; the universe is seen for its constituent parts, the scrim fabric becomes transparent and reveals its weave. Such moments, though, come after choice is made. Arthur knew well his duty, and Galahad's choices eventually revealed his. Rieux was a capable commentator only because of the choice he made well before the events in the novel commenced. Sisyphus, Camus' quintessential absurd laborer, whistles as often as he broods in his stroll back down the hill. At times we must be willing to relinquish reasoned knowledge and simply accept the silence so as to see clearly choices we have and choices we have made already. That silence can be frightening beyond measure at first, but one soon can discern a gentleness, even a kindness to it. And once again, meaning changes. The final insight into human truth, then, is this: in that moment when lucid reason realizes its limits, when our eyes fail to pierce the blanket darkness, we have our own light. Reason carries us to a point, but the end of reason's capacity snaps our attention only momentarily to the perception of insensateness, but ultimately reminds us of the human capacity to love, to make meaning from our actions. We ourselves as constituent parts of the universe make meaning, and thus by definition the universe cannot be thought to be meaningless, for we, of the universe, create it. In this way, then, the absurd is rather more of a Socratic teacher, answering questions with questions, redirecting our capacity from reason to that in us which is far greater than reason: love. We as individuals, and criminology as a discipline, can spend our energy like a kerosene lantern and slightly warm the cold air with meandering desperation, or we can choose to take our many capacities and focus them like a welding torch to build meaning for loving use.

Camus died young; the thought follows: perhaps he accomplished what he had to accomplish, perhaps his work was done. But a central point in Camus' narration is that such a narrative is meaningless. There *is* no narrative says the lauded storyteller: imputing intention into events like Camus' death or the Las Vegas shooting is folly. Instead, the meaning we make, and more, the place where that meaning lives, is more liberating, more potent and freeing than painted on a backdrop scrim of cheap story. When confronted by the choice to destroy, all we have ever had or could ever hope to have is the choice not to be defined by horror, and the choice to heal self and others regardless of what the future may bring. In so doing, of course, we give our lives, and our deaths, true meaning.

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