

Column

Achieving fame and fortune does not necessarily mean achieving happiness and finding meaning in life. The 20th century writer Ernest Hemingway stands as an example. Though possessed with extraordinary ability, though a master of much-praised clipped prose, though a recipient of the Nobel Prize in literature, a dark cloud hovered over this great literary genius' life, which ended abruptly on June 2, 1961, of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

I recently read or in several cases reread five of this author's books. His way is not to tell you about his characters but to allow them to open the door to their personalities by way of dialogue with themselves and other characters. The lives of many reflect the disillusionment that set in following the First World War. They are members of what another literary figure of the time, Gertrude Stein, called the "lost generation."

This "lostness" manifests itself in cynicism, aimlessness, hedonism, loss of religious faith and a

rejection of traditional morality. Of the later, speaking for himself, Hemmingway wrote in 1932, “I know only what is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.”

While many of Hemmingway’s characters have heroic characteristics, they share the author’s nihilism (rejection of religious and moral principles). They seem to cover the resulting loss of direction and inner emptiness with excessive drinking, sexual encounters and the quest for new experiences.

This aimlessness is especially seen in Hemmingway’s first novel, “The Sun Also Rises.” A group of American and British expatriates travel to Spain to fish and watch bullfights. There is much partying and socializing, but their holiday ends with emptiness and debt. Put another way, there is seeking but no finding. This novel might be described as a dramatization of the writer of Ecclesiastes’ words: “All is vanity.”

The sad thing is that many in our own day continue to follow the path of those of the Lost

Generation by pursuing things that don't satisfy, things which in the end yield misery not meaning. These things might be compared to soap bubbles children blow. In the sunlight, these bubbles glisten and excite, but when a tiny hand goes out to latch onto one, they go away.

What is the answer? Hemmingway himself hints at it when he says: "In our darkest moments, we don't need solutions or advice. What we yearn for is simply human connection — a quiet presence, a gentle touch."

Actually, Hemmingway's prescription for human happiness needs tweaking and amending. It is not JUST human connection we need, as important as that is, it is divine. We need to be reconnected to the One in whose image we are made. Or, as another writer, Augustine of Hippo, wrote many years earlier: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

Jesus, who puts a human face on the invisible God, takes us one step further on our quest towards finding happiness and lasting meaning in life. He

identifies this state of mind and heart with Himself, as seen in John 10:10: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” And likewise in Matthew 11:28: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Hemmingway puts the spotlight on the human condition, its misery and longing. Jesus provides the answer. Read and enjoy Hemmingway but follow Jesus.

O GOD, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen. (Collect for Whitsunday (Pentecost), Book of Common Prayer)

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