

September 1, 1985

About two weeks ago, I returned from travelling in Mexico to learn that a person with whom I was, in fact, only casually acquainted had taken his own life while I was away. This person was in the early vigorous years of retirement, and had no apparent physical illness. He was reputed to have an excellent retirement income, and at any rate maintained a summer home on the Long Island shore and a town house here in the city. Nevertheless, a deepening despondency which could not be reversed overtook him.

One cannot travel in a place like Mexico and help but be aware of the tremendous scramble that so many people make just to keep themselves alive. Yet, interestingly, Father Henri Nouwen discovered when he went to Latin America to help people there that indeed there was very little he could do to help, but that nevertheless he himself was greatly uplifted by the tremendous resources of spirit that often exist among people in very desperate circumstances. He wrote a book about his experiences called Gracias!. In my own life I remember being touched in this way when seeing that dwellings made of found objects and situated atop a garbage dump in Manila were nevertheless gaily festooned for a festival.

There would be no point in sitting in judgement upon a person in apparently comfortable circumstances who takes his own life. No one can know what a particular life looks like when viewed from within, so to speak. But the paradoxical contrast between the deceased person's situation and the condition of the people I saw in my travels offers much food for thought: their makeshift shanties and his two houses; their relentless scramble to stay alive and the leisure of his retirement; their love of life and his fatal mental depression.

It raises the question of what responsibility we have for our own moods. Is it not true as we look around us that a person's morale often seems to have little to do with the objective circumstances in which they find themselves? If free will is to mean anything at all, surely it implies some ability consciously to choose our own moods and emotions.

There are indeed pitfalls to our affluence and leisure. Friends know that to practice the right use of things and the good ordering of time and energy are themselves a help to the growth of spiritual consciousness. So perhaps there are ways in which the simple need to work for survival may bring with it a special kind of grace.

We are bathed in an ocean of love and intelligence and creative energy. This creative energy is so close to us and so intimate that it can be called Father, or Mother. Yet it is also so universal it can be called pure spirit. By releasing ourselves to its guidance we will find that whether we are caught up in what is wholly necessary, or whether we have the advantage of a holy leisure, it will make us organs of its activity and instruments if its divine and joyful purposes.