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## A Meditation in St. Ives

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# A MEDITATION IN ST. IVES

BY WILLIAM J. REWAK, S.J.

A chance encounter prompts some thoughts on the essence of work.

(Excerpt from a travel journal)

**Saturday, July 22, 1984**

When the train chugs into St. Ives, on the north coast of Cornwall a few miles east of Land's End, you see first a crescent-shaped white beach, filled with vacationers from York and Durham and the chillier parts of the Scottish Highlands. Not your usual English scene: there are hibiscus and bougainvillea; "chemist shops" selling Coppertone; bikinis of both sexes lying in a baking sun. It's July in southwestern England.

Around the western tip of the crescent is yet another crescent, this one filled with fishing boats and outlined by a busy boardwalk. And out at the end of the boardwalk, on the top of the hill, is an ancient stone chapel, dedicated to St. Michael and commemorating a spot of ground that has been sacred to the fishermen since the early Dark Ages.

And between and behind those two crescents, on a steep hillside, are winding, narrow streets with San Francisco-like, Victorian homes, hugging one another as if in delight and pride.

This is going to be a nice three days, I thought. A lot of walking, a lot of sun-worshipping. And several forays into those streets to look at the small art galleries scattered and hiding, afraid of pretension, in the shadowed alleys behind the more garish restaurants and jewelry stores. Barbara Hepworth's gallery, once her studio and now part of the Tate Gallery, is stuck in one of the more picturesque corners, its white painted walls covered with a purple-blooming ivy.

A good break from the reading schedule I had arranged at the Jesuit house in London. (As if I needed a break from London!)

After a quick shower in the hotel, I wandered down to the

waterfront for an early dinner and found a small restaurant that didn't look too crowded. But as soon as I sat down, a number of people came in and took all the other tables; so that a young lady, about twenty-three years old and wandering in a few minutes later, had no place to sit. The waitress asked if she could sit across from me. I tend to be somewhat hesitant in such matters, but I said, sure, why not.

I said hello, but she seemed preoccupied. She fidgeted a lot: leaning over the table, leaning back, sighing. She ordered her fish and chips as if she didn't really care what she ate.

She finally looked at me and said, "So, you're an American. Are you on holiday?"

I said it was partly business, partly pleasure, that this particular leg of the journey was pleasure.

Well, the ice had been broken, and now she clearly wanted to talk. So I got the whole story, in fits and starts, with a few questions from me here and there—for as the story developed, I didn't know how to respond except through questions.

She had just been released from the Bristol prison for women: "Packed in there tight, they are."

I asked her the obvious question: "Why were you there?"

"The coppers picked me up for drugs, but I had no drugs, I was just drunk, coming home from the disco, I was. I hate the coppers, I do."

"But if you had no drugs, why were you in prison?"

"I hit two of them, right there in the courtroom. They lied about me, and I wasn't going to take that. Knocked a tooth out, I did. And gave one a black eye."

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I began to feel a certain amount of sympathy—though somewhat unconsciously, I think, I edged my chair back an inch or two. She smiled easily, and beautifully. And told the rest of her story.

She never knew her father—her mother probably didn't, either—and her mother was thrown from a hotel window by some man just two years before. "Murdered, she was. Yes, life is hard sometimes. But you have to keep going, don't you?"

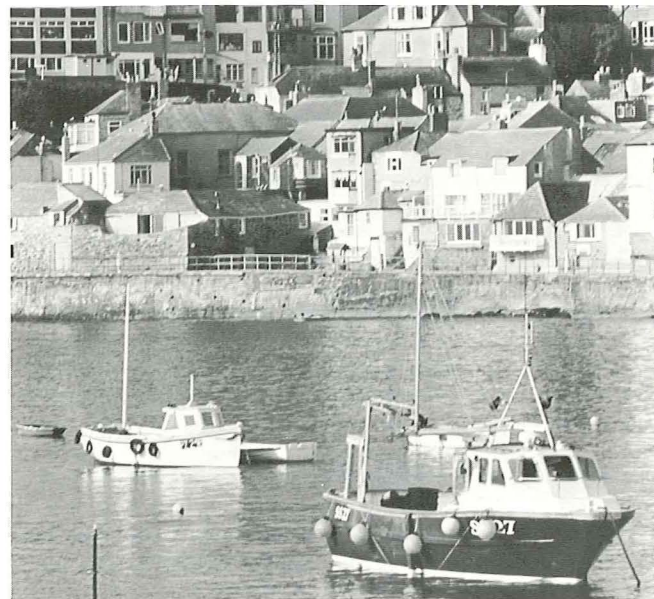
She spoke of her personal tragedies as if they were run-of-the-mill events everyone has to put up with. She lived in an orphanage until she was eighteen, so she knew her mother only from visiting hours. She has a boyfriend she sees once or twice a year when he comes into Plymouth port from Canada. He's married, but he's going to divorce his wife and marry her. She says.

She paints; she showed me some of the watercolors she had folded in her purse, watercolors she had done in prison. They were pretty bad, but she was proud of them. They were all of birds.

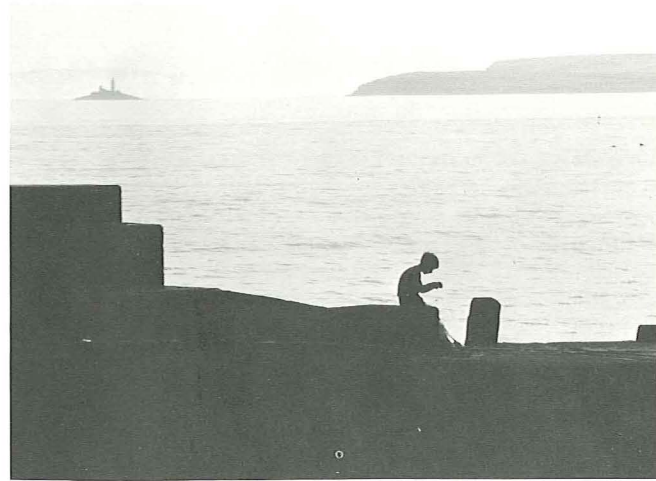
Then I asked her what kind of job she has.

"Oh, I don't work. I haven't worked for five or six years. No, it doesn't pay. I can only earn fifty pounds a week if I work, but on the dole I get sixty-three pounds a week."

That surprised me. I asked her if many people do the same thing. She said yes, of course. She has to pay thirty-five pounds for her flat, the rest is for food and expenses. Not much, but she seemed content with that amount and certainly



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had no intention of going to work for less.

We had our tea and biscuits and she left, waving her hand and saying, "Ta."

I left the restaurant myself and walked up past the old St. Michael's chapel onto the path that leads along the Cornwall cliffs all the way to Land's End. I walked for about a mile, watching the sun setting, slowly, in a bank of red clouds. It was a winding, narrow path, with deep cliffs and gorges on my right and pastureland on my left. No trees, just short shrubbery or ferns, and grass that grows only about half an inch—like a soft carpet, covering, it seemed, the whole world.

(I couldn't help thinking of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," in which the image of grass is used to show the eternal freshness of the world: no matter what horrors civilization witnesses, no matter how much blood is absorbed into the ground, all is transmuted by nature's energy into the new "leaves of grass": "I am the grass./Let me work.")

Everything was green and lush. Seagulls flying around and screaming like hurt puppies. A late fisherman here and there standing out on the rocks far below, and a few young people camping out on convenient, grassy and secret ledges. Not a bad place for a free night's lodging.

I sat down on a slope and watched the birds circling around the bright, clear green surf as it broke against the cliffs. A good testimony to God's first six days of labor.

Interesting, this business of the dole. It's one aspect of the socialization of Britain. We in America have welfare, of course, and we have unemployment, but we've set conditions. And a job usually pays more than either unemployment relief or a welfare subsidy. In Britain, however, the government provides a financially acceptable substitute for work.

**"Everything was green and lush. Seagulls flying around and screaming like hurt puppies."**

But doesn't this destroy the desire to work? And if we don't work, we're aimless—nothing to run toward, nothing to fight for, nothing to build or create. Nothing by which to define ourselves as part of that creation which is laboring, as St. Paul says, toward the one great act of giving birth to the Spirit.

For work really is sacred. Genesis might imply it is a punishment, but doesn't the more traditional Christian attitude consider work a way both of humanizing one's environment and of directing one's energies toward a goal? Isn't St. Joseph the Worker someone to be emulated?

Work should provide fulfillment, a sense of purpose, a way to accomplish one's dreams. It is an avenue toward self-assurance and self-identity. It encourages self-respect.

Work done in concert with others creates community; it enables us to make contact by means of our sweat and our imagination and builds an ever-expanding network of permanent, human endeavor. It builds a world that, in Teilhard's vision, is becoming increasingly more complex and increasingly more human. A dynamic world reaching out in its energy toward Christ.

But it also enhances the feeling of individual self-worth—and that is essential if we're not to lose ourselves in a mass society. How unfortunate that much of the work in our society is accomplished through the mechanization of human effort and human creativity. The de-sacralization of work is one of the constant temptations of mankind and, I think, one of the most obvious and pervasive proofs for the existence of what has theologically been called original sin.

Work should be the glory of mankind—seen clearly, but too briefly, in the liquid marble of Michaelangelo's Moses or here,



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in St. Ives, in the heavy, rectangular, but soaring stones of Barbara Hepworth.

But it's not often so glorious. For not everyone who works is doing so out of a sense of commitment or fulfillment. Some must work simply for survival. Some work merely from habit.

I thought: I'm fortunate. And so is everyone else at the University. As a community, I do believe we have a sense of purpose. We know we're at Santa Clara for a specific reason, the education of young men and women, and all our paper-shuffling and impassioned rhetorical flashes in the classroom, all our daily judgments and long-range plans—it's all to create an environment where consciences can grow and minds can wander and jump with ease.

And within the community that is created by our work, there is a deep, grateful satisfaction that defines the individual. The secret of freedom: to be an individual in possession of oneself, but working within and for a community.

I hope that's what we teach the students; I hope we try to communicate to them that they're at Santa Clara not simply to acquire skills for a job but to learn how to make their work an integral part of their lives and of their community. Work should make them happy, creative and generous.

I'm reminded of what Garson Kanin said once: "The best part of one's life is the working part, the creative part. Believe me, I love to succeed. . . . However, the real spiritual and emotional excitement is in the doing."

I got up and walked back along the path toward the town. The grass looked almost black, curling in on itself as the fog rolled in to give it moisture and the night rolled in to give it rest—"I am the grass./Let me work"). St. Michael's chapel, standing sentinel there on the point, had a small red flame burning in its single window as an ancient guide for the tired but relaxed fishing boats that were moving through the waves toward the harbor.

And the lights up ahead were brighter now against the dark sky; they formed ribbons of blue and yellow and red, stretched back and forth across the hillside. Music was coming out of the pubs and large crowds of vacationers were outside on the boardwalk, lifting the evening's first pint of bitters.

The young woman I had met in the restaurant was probably in that crowd, looking around for a disco partner. I hoped she was getting something out of life—if only a few days in the sun and sea at St. Ives.

*William J. Rewak, S.J., president of the university, visited St. Ives during a trip to England last summer. This article is excerpted from a travel journal he kept during that trip.*