

"ITINERANT AGE"

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Union Church of Manila

1969

We are living in the age of rapid change, of high mobility. There has never been a time when people were as much on the move as today: whether we travel as provincials seeking out the urban centers in hope of a better economic opportunity, or as tourists on a vacation, or as businessmen who are a part of the international division of a firm or as diplomats in the service of their country.

The question is: What happens to a person when he moves away from what was the familiar setting of his life, and travels to a place that is different or even strange to him? Two things come to my mind:

(1) Internally such a person may feel a sense of isolation. Whatever differences or insecurities that you or I may have had and which long time neighbors simply accepted or ignored are now heightened and appear in sharp relief, especially in our own mind. The result is a special kind of loneliness, rootlessness.

(2) The individual who is away from the familiar setting of his home also experiences an external change. He tends to lose some of the restraints and the former controls of obligation that were previously able to influence his behavior. In 1966 my family and I were in San Francisco during the Shriner's Convention. Shriners are all distinguished citizens, and they hold my very highest respect, but these men, armed with their Egyptian hats, were accused by some of "tearing up San Francisco." Take a man out of his local community; put him in the Palace Hotel for a week and I'll tell you something happens to him: "He tends to lose some of the restraints and the controls of obligation that previously were able to influence his behavior." The city took the whole experience, parades and all, in good humor; the critical comments only began to appear when the U.S. air line strike seemed to hint that the Shriners might become a permanent tourist attraction for San Francisco.

Man is not meant to live in isolation and he falls apart when he ceases to feel obligation. It was the French Philosopher Pascal who said in a warning to fathers, "to wish for a man to live at leisure is to misunderstand nature" to wish for a person to feel no entangling relationships and no binding responsibilities is to wish for his unhappiness.

The movie "Sand Pebbles" was a dramatic portrayal of the whole problem. It is a film about the U.S. Naval Forces that patrolled the rivers of China during the 1920ies and 30ies. The most fascinating part of the film is its relentless portrayal of the internal collapse of the gunboat officers and men of the ship San Pablo as they weather the winter months stranded in the low waters of the river, men who had become soft from lack of work, isolated from their fleet, thrown in upon themselves. A man cannot survive tourism for long, nor the advantageous position where he bears neither obligation nor values relationships.

The question then is this: How can an individual fulfill these two great needs,

healthy relationships and meaningful obligation in the place where he lives right now, whether he is itinerant or not? I believe that it is possible for the person on the move to be both happy and creative. Let me make a few suggestions.

(1) At every change in your location, let this become an incentive to raise the biggest questions of your life. It is a fact that the shifts which take place in the context within which we live may have the healthy effect of causing us to think through the major questions of life: who am I, what am I living for and what do I want most of all out of life?

I know from experience that everyone has at least one uncle who is a Methodist minister or a Jesuit Priest. A man said to me just a few days ago, "My brother is a missionary doing a great job down in South America so I guess he takes care of all the praying for me..." But such reasoning seems to have more force in your hometown USA than it does 10,000 miles across the Pacific. Over here all of our relatives whether rich or famous or pious are more remote and it's a lot harder to coast on their achievements. People in this city are going to judge us by what we do and what we say and by what we are.

(2) The second suggestion is this: Find the Christian Church wherever you are. Let me suggest a New Testament text for this address. It is the final chapter of the Acts of the Apostles where Luke tells of the journey of that great traveler Paul. Following a terrifying crossing of the Mediterranean Sea he arrives in Rome weary and discouraged, a political-religious detainee of the government and headed for an imprisonment from which he will never escape. Note the words of Luke: "And so we came to Rome. And the brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier that guarded him." (Acts 28:14-16) First of all Paul found and is found by the Christian Church, real people in a real place worshipping God. In this setting he is helped and through these friends he is able to continue his great work. Paul has set a wise example for each of us.

(3) Like where you are. The happiest and most creative people are those who are loyal to the place where they live; they like it. Wistfulness for the past and daydreams about the future always produce a feeling of rejection toward the present; and make no mistake about it, happiness in your family is established upon the present. Likes and dislikes are relative not absolute values, and we must always keep this fact in focus. It is natural and certainly not unhealthy to experience culture shock when you find that many things you like are missing in the new environment where you now live but it is decidedly unhealthy when an individual absolutizes likes and dislikes and in that way freezes his whole mental and emotional outlook on the basis of that which should have been of relative importance. These are the inflexible, easily disillusioned people who have in very simple terms made the error of taking likes and dislikes, immediate impressions, first disappointments, etc. too seriously. "Likes" are relative values and with an open, curious, positive frame of mind an individual can discover that he is able to like, really like, what at first to him was hard to even understand. Many people insulate themselves from involvement when they live abroad by means of the "I'm only going to be here in Manila two years" defense mechanism. A few months ago I heard a speech by a prominent Psychiatrist Dr. Anne Kraemer who has for 15 years practiced Psychiatry in Tokyo primarily among the foreign community there. She said that when a patient would say "I'm only going to..." she would always challenge the patient's logic. Think of it, two years is 10% of your very best adult years, are you going to write off so long a part of your life? No! My advice is that you settle in and consider

your Manila house your home. Live in the real present rather than in the misty eyed past or the dreamy future.

(4) Keep in touch with your origins. As it is important to feel at home at the place where you are presently living it is also important to possess a genuine sense of identity and from that context to relate to each new experience. There are people who quickly accommodate themselves to every situation but in such a way that they bring very little that is creative to the new setting. It is something like the person who is tolerant of all ideas because he has no ideas of his own. Such tolerance is not worth as much as the person who is open and generous toward others but from a deep reservoir of convictions that mean something to him. In fact one very substantial problem of the urban situation today is the crises caused by people who drift into the city not knowing who they are or what they believe. Oscar Lewis, the sociologist, has coined the phrase "culture poverty" to describe such itinerant people who for one reason or another have a very minimum sense of tradition or value structure, and who consequently become the victims of the city. The most creative itinerant individuals are those who have a healthy sense of identity and within this context an openness toward each new situation and opportunity. I heard a true story from a highly reliable source which in a way illustrates this. It seems that the British Ambassador was walking sometime ago along Roxas Boulevard at sunset, and a bandit approached him, held a knife in a threatening way and then demanded his money; according to the story I heard the Ambassador said, "Nonsense, I'm the British Ambassador" then he brushed the bandit aside and the molester ran away empty handed. Here is an example of a man who has a sense of identity and inner self confidence; he had no intention of being robbed during his sunset walk on Manila Bay.

(5) The fifth suggestion is: Be friendly at once and a friend as soon as possible. When you live as an expatriate in another country it is true that interpersonal relationships tend to stalemate at the "acquaintance" level. There are countless reasons for this but it is still true that a sincere attempt to establish more than the superficial kind of relationship is always rewarded. Our friendships with people are what give the deepest kinds of impressions and understanding. In the Philippines interpersonal relationships mean a great deal, therefore to know this nation an individual must be interested in knowing people in more than a superficial way.

(6) Finally, do something worthwhile wherever you live. Make the effort to put your shoulder to the wheel of some concrete task that serves others. Several months ago a U.S. Destroyer put in at Manila Bay and an officer called me on the phone to ask if I knew of a hospital or orphanage where twenty of his men could spend a day painting and working. I called Charles Mosebrook who arranged for a day at Children's Garden; the U.S.O. lined up a bus and these seamen had a terrific experience. They repaired a storm damaged bridge, they painted several cottages, the children sang songs to them in the afternoon and I have the feeling that each of these American men learned a whole lot more about the Philippines than had he taken the circle tour.