14th October 2022

Alert

"You little girls, when you grow up, must be on the alert to recognise your prime at whatever time of your life it may occur."
Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Bananaman was a children's animated TV show in the 1980s. At the beginning of an episode, a narrator would say: "This is 29 Acacia Road, and this is Eric the schoolboy who leads an amazing double life. For when Eric eats a banana, an amazing transformation occurs. Eric is Bananaman, ever-alert for the call to action!" Our dog has just stolen a banana from the fruit-bowl in our kitchen. Whether she turns into *bananadog* or not, *I'm* the one who'll have to be ever-alert to the possible side-effects on a recalcitrant canine's digestive processes.

Muriel Spark had her eponymous schoolmistress, Miss Jean Brodie, focusing on alertness too, and not of the digestive kind. It was her task to encourage her "little girls" to be on the alert to their "prime", to recognise when the greatest opportunities arose for them so that they could make the most of these. Alertness mattered when you were growing up.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, and a Holocaust survivor. In his best-selling book *Man's Search for Meaning* – which had a big influence on me when I was a student – he chronicles his experiences in a concentration camp and the importance of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even the most devastating ones. It's powerful and enlightening. In the transcript of a lecture in 1984, he wrote:

[We] … refer to decent people? It is true that they form a minority. They … will remain a minority. And yet I see therein the very challenge to join the minority. For the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless each of us does his best. So, let us be alert, in a twofold sense: Since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of. And since Hiroshima we know what is at stake.

Therein is true alertness – and true meaning too – above and beyond what Bananaman can achieve, or, indeed, what pubescence girls have to look out for. Here is alertness which is open to us all: to learn from past mistakes: be aware of present needs: give ourselves to do our best to create a better world. "We know what is at stake," Frankl tells us. So, as the decent people he expects us to be, let's keep being alert.

A prayer for today

"Watch and pray," Jesus said. Am I as alert with my God as I need to be? Amen

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