30th July 2024

Discontent

"I see your brows are full of discontent,
Your hearts of sorrow and your eyes of tears."
William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

Picking up on some feedback on my piece on "contentment" a few days ago, let me make it clear: seeking contentment isn't about complacency, giving up on the needs of the world. The contentment which both St Paul and William Wordsworth espoused was an *inner* contentment, a "stilling of the troubled soul", finding peace in whatever set of circumstances you find yourself. And paradoxically, it's often when that kind of contentment is at the heart of who we are, that we can give ourselves to a *dis*-contentment towards what's around us.

"I see your brows are full of discontent, your hearts full of sorrow and your eyes of tears," Shakespeare has the Abbot say to Edward of Langley, the Duke of Aumerle, in *Richard II.* We need people whose brows are furrowed with discontent because of what causes distress in our communities, nation and world; whose hearts are full of sorrow for those who are disadvantaged and dispossessed; whose eyes shed tears when faced with injustice, warmongering and discrimination. In truth, the more I find contentment with my own lot, the more evident *dis*-contentment is to me, stimulating the need for appropriate social action.

William Watson was an English poet whose life and work straddled the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th centuries. Much of his output was a political commentary on the society of his day, in an era of immense turmoil prior to World War II. In *Things That Are More Excellent* he wrote:

The thirst to know and understand,
A large and liberal discontent;
These are the goods in life's rich hand,
The things that are more excellent.

Therein is the discontent of which I am more and more aware, large and liberal, "more excellent" than all the goods and riches of life from which I might draw my own pleasures. Pray God I might continue to have a thirst to know and understand that kind of discontentment.

A prayer for today

Lord, as I find an inner contentment, encourage an outer discontent in me too.
Help me not to be content till a "more excellent" balance is found. Amen

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