In Praise of Lying in Bed

Essay · 4 min read

"...lying on my back in bed. Then the light of that white heaven broke upon my vision, that breadth of mere white which is indeed almost the definition of Paradise, since it means purity and also means freedom." G. K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles

Tremendous Trifles, written by G. K. Chesterton in 1909, is a strange book made up of many different subjects. As the title suggests, it is a set of short pieces on things people do not see in daily life, never have to think about, or consider entirely trivial and unnecessary. Leafing through the pages and looking at the subjects, at first I thought reading the book would be a real waste of time. But when I came across the piece *On Lying in Bed* among the chapters, I would realise how wrong I had been. I dove in between the lines expecting to read a series of didactic arguments about how the author would refute such a pastime and why we should get up early and start the day. It did not take me long to notice that the words were not lined up the way I expected. Against common opinion, Chesterton was praising time spent in bed, breaking every rule to describe what a marvellous and incredible experience it is. So was Chesterton really right?

Lying stretched out in bed brings with it questions about how time should be spent. Should time be productive, or can we never hold on to the time that flows past us, whatever we do? The thought that has been nagging me for a long time, the one that orders everything I do in my life, now meets me again in this piece about how noble and perfect it is to lie in bed.

G. K. Chesterton's real aim in the piece is to explain "the state of lying in bed," which he says society sees as an empty, unhealthy and hypocritical act. Yet he stresses that small acts like this in a person's life (lying in bed, for one) should be free, flexible and creative. I think this idea can be read in two ways.

First, activities that look pointless and useless in the eyes of society may well have creative and free value for the individual. The communities we live in always insist that we, as individuals, must be useful to society in how we behave. In such a society a person gets squeezed between moulds and has to shape their own behaviour to social norms. Because being accepted matters to the individual. We should go a little deeper than the physical value of personal experiences, and so of our acts, and focus on what they mean in thought. Only then can we become aware of our own consciousness. And so we can go beyond the moulds and watch our small acts set us free. No one should be expected to give up acts they feel are useful and creative for themselves only because society sees them as unnecessary.

Second, what does it mean to spend time productively? Society's judgements about how productive time should look are, of course, set up to praise and raise society itself. The time an individual (a word that can only exist within a society) spends productively counts as useful only if it is useful to the society they live in. That is why the time G. K. Chesterton spends lying in bed is seen as useless. Yet this act should be seen as a critique of the individuals of society who live every day the same way, who do not, or cannot, bend or break their smallest habits and routines.

How much freedom to live there is for individuals who do not even have the freedom to stay in bed past the usual hour should certainly be questioned. What an individual treats as fixed and unchangeable should not be their behaviour, in its material simplicity, but their thoughts, in the greatness of the mind. But what we see today is the very opposite. Everywhere we look, our moral ideas change while our behaviour we treat as never changing. That is why we have the habit of judging people not by their thoughts but by their behaviour. This is exactly where the hypocrisy of society, and of the individual in particular, begins. It sees a simple, free act like lying on one's back as hypocrisy, does not see its own norms, blames the individual and dictates that they must not waste their time on unnecessary activities.

Only analytical minds can find the social critique beneath this truly, tremendously trivial act. That he sees the white ceiling he studies, lying on his back, as equal to the grandeur of the Sistine Chapel, and yet that this ceiling, like the blue of the sky, stays beyond the reach of his

body, is proof that G. K. Chesterton had such an analytical mind. He draws his critiques from a subject like this, shapes them, bends them and sets them before the individual.

Still, when the reader finishes this piece, one question comes to mind: was Chesterton really right?

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Translated from my Turkish original for this site. Chesterton is quoted in his own words, from the Project Gutenberg edition of Tremendous Trifles.