

46. Fastenings of Kind

People know surprisingly much about the life of 16th Century Italian philosopher (Filippo) Giordano Bruno di Nola (1548-1600), a life that has more meaning today than one probably realizes. At age 14, Bruno became a cloistered Dominican, educated but shut away from society until mid-life. Too outspoken, service as an ordained priest didn't last. Like anyone with a broken plan, Bruno surrendered to Plan B, becoming during next 2 decades an itinerant lecturer, always controversial and soon dismissed, a defrocked ex-communicant, dubious author of at least 20 books, and generally a shabby outsider struggling for another meal. The Nolan devoted 52 years to questions for which few cared to know the answers, last 8 tortured in a Papal dungeon, and probably would have been forgotten completely according to scheme had they not ordered death by fire over 400 years ago, the last such victim of church's impeachable history of inquisition.

Such a terrible end only incites curiosity and invites speculation. Nowadays, they don't publish heretics, nonconformists, and those so hopelessly confused they slip into the same intellectual crevasses. Still an unrepentant to Catholics, Bruno has become for atheists a shining example of humanism, for liberals the father of free thinking, for mathematicians a martyr in the cause of rationality, for novelists a shadowy allusion, and for philosophers a final symbol of Renaissance audacity. Heretics of a previous age can become heroes in another. It's hard to decide which is more interesting, the facts of Bruno's life or the unfolding myth.

Bruno was brilliant yet naïve, definitely a complex character, own worst enemy. At a time landscapes of new continents were being charted, Bruno stuck to an older school of exploring mindscapes, tracing threads of many ideas both advanced and ancient, pagan and radical: causality, cosmology, memory, perception, and proceedings scientific. Quality was important; had a metrologist's disdain for anything unmeasured and unrefined. Gained acceptance with an excellent system of mnemonics, and condemnation for promoting a concept of universe practically as thought of today: many worlds, some inhabited by bright minds, possibly superior, way out ahead of anyone. There may be no big-eyed beings from Venus, but, certainly, there are single celled creatures from some icy moon, and, more likely, aggressive alien insects from across our galaxy. Championed and surpassed Copernicus, as detailed in *Ash Wednesday Supper* (1584), among

Bruno's more noteworthy books, since few survived intense censorship of book burning. Even farther ahead, Bruno divined a form of relativity credited to Einstein nearly 4 centuries later. Raised issues still hotly contested on morality of science. For Bruno, the logic of infinite space contradicted and therefore negated long held dogma.

Unable to settle respectably in Rome, Turin or Venice, Bruno managed as best could abroad, Geneva, Toulouse, Lyon, Paris, London, Frankfurt, places of industry today he also visited. While in Turin, had he known, he'd have climbed hill near Lake Como to shrine of Madonna del Ghisallo and its museum with Casartelli's crumpled bicycle fatally crashed in the Tour de France. Despite language obstacles, Bruno's lectures left the greatest impression. Books were suppressed and those remaining now only offer a glimpse; nevertheless, they made people think and opened doors.

St. Augustine had said, "Truth, wherever it may be found, must be avidly accepted." Bruno was determined to heed him in every sense. Out of an erratic mix of input and isolation came a belief that "deciding what the Truth is is the prerogative of every careful and wideawake intelligence", very origin of the obsessive, self absorbed *brown study*. What were people to do with all this expanding input, then or now? Nothing would defeat this conviction, not even immolation on the day after, fittingly, Ash Wednesday, February 19, in Rome's Campo di Fiori. February will always be a month of purging. Some Thursday evening during February the hammer will fall and this World will surely end. With this prophesy, you'd think people would party hard half way through every February.

Bruno abided a World in turmoil. Catholicism had been shaken by Protestant reforms. Wars of Religion raged. Foreigners were mistrusted, often abused. Inquisition was intent on quelling every idea that didn't align with doctrine. Wasn't best of times to unleash progressive idea. Bravely or madly, Bruno was one of those rare people who can't help but subvert convention, those who sacrifice themselves for the sake of truth. Advice as, "Never write down something they can use against you," would have been ignored. It's true, unless, of course, you're dying or want to die anyway, then what does it matter? Very observant and thoughtful souls can't help but speak their minds. By asserting as an individual—capable of lofty thoughts, valuable advancements, or worthwhile discoveries—others also dared to.

Then as now, intellectual independence was loathed by those who rule. They'd rather have everyone blindly accept artificial precepts. Ideas were agents of change, a career step for inquisitors, and a threat to monarchs. Bruno—a modern voice in middle of the

2nd Millennium, pre-Enlightenment Voltaire, rebel poet, and uncompromising critic—had to be silenced. They didn't know then that you can't protect people from themselves or that penalties should match mistakes. To those who kindly advise or simply isolate transgressors, disobedience hardly seems a capital offense. Officially, Bruno didn't die for science but for willful disrespect of despots and dogma, a distinction few now get. More likely, this expanded mind couldn't bear the hypocrisy of a prison cell and forced their hand. Idle minds chafe in chains and crave challenges.

By enduring a few steps more, Bruno might have joined elite of The Age of Reason, famous for their scientific contributions: Bacon's scientific method, Descartes' applied algebra, Galileo's distant moons, Leibniz's Calculus, and Pascal's probability. But this wasn't likely. The intellectual standard shifted from logical speculation to facts derived from direct observation. Bruno was left behind, bound by unfounded opinions, fastened to a kind of thinking that opened eyes to what could be but denied actually bringing it about, an inquiring mind without tools of proof. A passion to be right might exceed the duty to be useful. One can only mourn what might have been. In the end, Bruno's energies were dissipated by a twist of fate, a forced exile, and a tragic journey home. Homesickness can surely kill; best to press ever onward, call wherever you are *home*, "don't look back" as sung in "Bike Messenger Diaries".

Does *place* matter? Certainly, you can do a lot of productive things if you're situated well. Mills straddling strong rivers became foci for industry driven by cheap energy from waterwheels. In an information society, location means little. A laptop carried anywhere replaces an entire mill. Getting into a frame of mind that works wherever, adapted to hazards of not knowing, makes place irrelevant. The best and brightest simply give up homes for more mobile arrangements. Modern nomads have their own magazine and website. It's a military principle to displace enemies, known or potential, get them moving, throw off their base of power and supply. As a space in which to operate, America had become a nasty nightmare. Could be it deserves to collapse. A global governance might be better, less likely to interfere with your life since it's more remote. Let everything be built in China, who cares? Americans could pursue their aspirations to become World's think tank. This would appease its inflated ego, for sure, except there's nothing to think about if you let all industry slip away.

Why reconsider a heretic? There's much to learn. Bruno paid the price for a privileges you take for granted. Society revels in tabloid scandals of egocentric celebrities and seldom wonders why.

Instinct for self preservation may tell you that it's better to be able to make your own decisions, not grovel humbly or serve automatically. Why do you think Norsemen gradually gave up their merciless gods and rule by fate in favor of Christianity and free will? People would rather call the shots for themselves. They can't thrive under domination. Accordingly, one idolizes those who exemplify excess and privilege. Society irrationally expects freedoms Roosevelt back in 1941 sanctified and United Nations expanded in 1952. Democracy, diversity and fairness are embraced; censorship, repression and tyranny are abhorred. Whether or not it's understood, that's America's current cultural subtext.

At last, it's an age of individualism where truth is for each to decide, as Bruno hoped. Think whatever you want. This concept pervades art, day-to-day living, media, science. It polarizes government, liberal vs. conservative, proactives vs. reactivities. Industry caters to it: cell phones, DVD and TIVO recorders, private transport, self-serve sites on World Wide Web, a vast array of choices for things to experience, whatever is available, whenever you want. You're thought foolish if you don't ask, "What's in it for me?" The Me Generation's theme song may well be "My Way"! Today's top priority is an exciting, long, prosperous life, damn everyone else. In medieval Europe, by contrast, it was service to some king unto death. But how practical is either? Others may reason otherwise. Needs diverge. Personal ambitions supersede communal advantage. Tensions mount. With prisons populations at record highs, has unrestricted freedom become a philosophy run amuck?

Unless you're controversial, nobody listens. It's easier to get noticed if you're bad. You loathe to hear some individual's criticism, yet you'll pay over 50% of your taxes to wholeheartedly support armies and police to enforce those exact same opinions as well as tolerate institutions and religions that likewise cram mere opinions upon you. Then, out of fear or ignorance, you neglect to exercise your rights whenever next incident arises. If you listen to your conscience, you'd do well to keep it secret. A disgruntled school teacher who casually suggested that the Columbine killers might have been somehow justified was summarily fired and faces imprisonment. Stockhausen argued that the WTC disaster was the greatest work of art in history, and was vilified. Once officially closed and spun by media, facts, whether false or true, cannot be challenged without recrimination.

When common good isn't the highest priority, codes lapse and shortcuts are taken. Catastrophes result. Life is devalued. Too many, like rap poet Tupac, die too young and what for? The anti-

dote to low self esteem is not false pride but confidence built on accomplishment. Whatever your individual truth holds it must include respect for others. Unless you take responsibility for your actions, freedom is jeopardized for everyone. When you don't restrain yourself, you invite decisions made for you, drastic penalties, erosion of civil rights, new regulations, witch hunts, and worst tyrant of all, a bad body of laws beyond anyone's comprehension, and, thus, a tool for tyrants. Gross excesses urge external regulation. Anyone with the upper hand—CEOs, monarchists, robber barons, World leaders—is all for totalitarian plutocracy. They damn democracy and dismiss those who seek consensus as rabble. Freedom today is under massive attack from fundamentalists, both Christian and Moslem, growing financial oligarchies from boards of directors to individual billionaires, repressive states, such as China and Korea, and whoever else puts personal motives before common good. You'll never be free unless you fire these bosses, yet their loss might temporarily destabilize systems they take down with them when they fall. Somehow, people will survive to flourish, because better leaders will arise. Most people acknowledges these notions, but, out of fear or laziness, elect and support bad leaders anyway. If you so value self determination, why not honor unique characters? Really, only parasites repulsed him, that short lived roommate who borrowed his paste and toothbrush and left cap off.

Society forces you to remake yourself for others to enjoy, or to live quietly apart, starve and suffer, not that either is so desirable. Somewhere between would be better. Like a Rasta man, "Lively up yourself," for sure. If you hide your individuality and talents under a bushel, devoid of fresh air and sunshine, they will gather mold and rot. Can't have independence without absolute expressions of it, not just crazy punk rock, but delirious novels, paintings, poetry, stories on film or stage. Music is wonderfully egalitarian. No wonder it's forbidden in repressive regimes. Leaders will be judged on how they treat dreamers, iconoclasts, and rebels. After all, this is tantamount to how parents treat teenagers, acceptable care or criminal child abuse. Without kindness and tolerance to suffer fools, all you have is a stagnant police state. You must encourage flexing mind and sinew for growth, but you can't reward dangerous experimentation, rowdy enthusiasm, or thoughtless cruelty. As Tami Hoag wrote in *Kill the Messenger*, "People in suits and offices tended to look at bike messengers with wary suspicion. They were rebels, road warriors, fringe citizens in strange costumes invading the orderly, respectable world of business. Most... had tattoos all over their bodies, and more piercings than a colander. They were

walking billboards for life on the edge, their individuality screaming from their very pores.” Bright, spirited, unique, and vigorous are all virtues, but how do you live them under repression? It’s not hard to suppose. Practically all artistic or scientific breakthroughs come after you’ve given up all thought of pleasing audiences or practicing previous belief systems. You must literally *become the change* you wish would occur. What are you going to with your freedom?

Saying things nobody understands, so as to leave them scratching their heads, is essential to any mystery story, as well as foreshadowing, neither of which are reasonable, just devices designed to goad you into inappropriate actions through an illogical suspension of reality. Logic and mathematics were invented by philosophers, not scientists, who conveniently apply them for their personal gain. St. Anselm’s *Proslogion* successfully defends God’s existence through logic. Through logic and reason men have done remarkable things, but also through brute force, practiced finesse, and quiet observation, none of which have anything to do with logic or religion, more instinctual and intuitive. Wars were fought for better genes, mere selection of fittest. Is mankind now smarter? Reason resides between fact and fantasy. All great scientific advancements, everything from evolution to gravity, relativity, structural chemistry, came as sudden revelations—as if Prometheus giving fire to lowly mankind—by sleepwalkers suddenly awakened.

Character is a golden vessel; if caked with filth, it shines again when rubbed the right way. You have to make a leap of faith that people’s better side will prevail. A World of peaceful commerce demands determination to see things through, honesty to dispel ignorance by exposing facts, humility to admit and rectify mistakes, integrity to deliver what’s been promised, a knack for defusing conflicts, patience to build relationships, perseverance to endure setbacks, tact in expressing ideas, and trust that these actions benefit everyone—all the virtues fate denied Bruno. Giving in to the very things he reviled, Bruno never learned to get along, so this legacy lies frozen in history’s indifferent landscape. Bright and smart get you nowhere without loving support. When you scout far ahead of everyone else, you can’t expect immediate recognition from them. Be happy they protect your nomadic rights.

No matter how inhospitable World may seem, it’s well to remember that the glowering browns and grays of Winter inevitably yield to the gentle green promise of Spring. Never give up.

