

The Moon and Sixpence
By
Daniel E. White December 30, 2024

As many of you know, because I have told you so, Judy and I kept a few of the collected works of favorite authors when we moved. Wallace Stegner, Bill Bryson, Barbara Kingsolver, Louise Penny; these are authors we have read and re-read. Judy also collected the Brother Cadfael series by Ellis Peters, and she has lent the series to several friends.

Somerset Maugham is the author-collection to which I keep returning. Though his works span the early parts of the 20th century, are set in England, Southeast Asia or the South Pacific, and use a form of the English language that, to most, seems quaint if not outdated, Maugham wrote about themes and characters with which I have connected in that hard-to-define manner many who love to read will recognize. Consistently over the years, when I am asked my favorite book, I have replied, *The Razor's Edge*.

I finished *The Moon and Sixpence* for the third or fourth time recently. For the first time, however, I looked up what others have said the title refers to. Wikipedia has this to say: "According to some sources, the title, the meaning of which is not explicitly revealed in the book, was taken from a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* of Maugham's novel

Of Human Bondage, in which the novel's protagonist, Philip Carey, is described as being 'so busy yearning for the moon that he never saw the sixpence at his feet.' According to a 1956 letter from Maugham, 'If you look on the ground in search of a sixpence, you don't look up, and so miss the moon.' At least twice, then, the sixpence and the moon were used as metaphors to contrast the realities of daily life and aspirations, realistic or otherwise.

The plot is simple: a respectable English stockbroker suddenly leaves his family and his comfortable life to pursue painting. Others find the man despicable, both for his abandonment of his wife and children and for his complete indifference to social niceties in his personal relations. His art is regarded as pedestrian, amateurish, in short, badly done. Not once has he ever attempted to sell a painting, so he lives in continuous poverty in Paris.

The man eventually settles in Tahiti. He marries a local woman who caters to his every whim, the overriding one of which is to leave him alone to paint. He contracts leprosy and eventually dies. Somewhere along the way, influential people in the art world decide that his work is actually genius, and he is recognized as having changed the world of art, in the manner of the Impressionists. Even so, he never sold a painting before he died.

Early in the novel, the narrator, a newly published author and Maugham's voice, reflects on the myriad books that are written, a percentage of which are actually published, with fewer still finding a wide audience. He writes, "The moral I draw is that the writer should seek his reward in the pleasure of his work and in release from the burden of his thought; and, indifferent to aught else, care nothing for praise or censure, failure or success."

When the narrator gets the artist, named Charles Strickland, to talk during his Paris days about why he paints, Strickland replies "because I have to." Though the narrator is upset with himself for having a fascination with a man who is so dismissive of other people, he understands what Strickland is saying. He writes because he has to, even if only for himself.

People of a Certain Age, are any of us afflicted with such a burning need to do one thing or another that we have forsaken trappings of a normal life? Do we know anyone like that?

During the Olympics, a hurdler from the United States was interviewed after earning a spot in the final race to determine the gold medal. The way he described the time and energy he had committed to perfecting his technique and developing his body to be able to withstand an extraordinary expenditure of strength over a short period of time to gain a gold medal made me wonder, at what point in his life did "because I have to" take over.

Fact is, our lives have led us to focus on the sixpence. For the sake of a stable family life, career advancement, social respectability, that has been a good thing. Collectively, we as a society have worked hard to ensure as much predictability and consistency in daily life as possible. For most people, and I include myself, the default position in life is stability.

In some way or another, though, I suspect that those of us who have collaborated to create a dependable environment in which to live have snuck a peek at the moon. I hope so.

Judy and I once described students in our school as 90-degree angle thinkers and 45-degree angle thinkers. We were both 90-degree. We determined what was expected of us and, often I think, fulfilled those expectations. The 45-degree angle thinkers questioned those expectations. They could seem like misfits and, to 90-degree angle thinkers, they were.

90-degree angle thinkers sustain the world. 45-degree angle thinkers change it.

Charles Strickland disrupted. He said he did because he had to. In doing so, in searching for the moon, he changed the world of art.

Of course, *The Moon and Sixpence* is just a piece of fiction.

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