

# You Can't Do It Alone

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it's very nice to see you. It's, I don't know, it's particularly, I mean, it's wonderful to have the responsibility of trying to make sense of something each week so that you can make sense of something even more important.

But I'm very, somehow I don't know how to say this, but I'm very grateful to you and for you all. And I wanted to, I don't know how to say that, or how to express it. I also don't know how to find my place. But it's here somewhere.

I, it's always, this is, this is Harper's Magazine for September. And it, there's an article in it, which I think is quite fascinating.

And I want to read to you a passage out of it. But in doing this, I'm being slightly deceptive. But I, just permit me, you hear it. I'm deliberately deceiving you in reading it this way.

[ 1 : 27 ] But it says, professional religion, it seems fair to say, is a primary expression of the American character at the end of the 20th century.

I think this guy's a really good writer. Like money, it is something we love. A first waking thought and chronic passion, as well as a vast sector of the economy, a wellspring for contemporary myth and totem, a media phenomena of the highest order.

Our religion can fend off the brute fact of existence, temporarily arrest the sadness of life, briefly shroud the inevitability of death, and provide the happy illusion of meaning through long enchanted afternoons.

The elation of religion can hold us spellbound until, finally, we are forced to accept our circumstance in the end.

And then we are spent and returned to life, rendered hollow or exuberantly fulfilled, but always afterward cognizant of the real world, with its bits of peanut shell under our shoes, and the dark hint of rain to the West.

[ 3 : 01 ] In short, nothing about our national life is quite so national as religion. It is a language we all speak. It is a mirror in which we see ourselves.

It is life. Through religion, we might know ourselves.

Now, the deception in that is that it's not talking about religion. It's talking about professional sports. Do you want to hear it the way it's written?

Listen to this. Professional sport, it seems fair to say, is a primary expression of the American character at the end of the 20th century.

Like money, it is something we love, a first waking thought and a chronic passion, as well as a vast sector of the economy, a wellspring for contemporary myth and totem, a media phenomena of the highest order.

[ 4 : 17 ] Our sports can fend off the brute facts of existence, temporarily arrest the sadness of life, briefly shroud the inevitability of death, and provide the happy illusion of meaning through long, enchanted afternoons.

The elation of sports can hold us spellbound until finally we are forced to accept their endings, and then we are spent and returned to life, rendered hollow or exuberantly fulfilled, but always afterward cognizant of the real world with its bits of peanut shell under our shoes and the dark hint of rain to the west.

In short, nothing about our national life is quite so national as sport. Sport is a language we all speak. Sport is a mirror.

Sport is life. Through sport, we might know ourselves. Now, I found this a very interesting article, and it's written by a guy who I think was a pro basketball player at one time, and I thought what he said was, there's a lot of other things he says there in the article that are helpful.

The reason now that I found it helpful was that I have the feeling that very often our religion does no more for us than sports does for us, and probably doesn't do it as well, because sports does a lot for people, you know, to, I mean, if you think, read again that, I mean, this is what people, I think, think professional religious types like me are for, to fend off the brute facts of existence, to temporarily arrest the sadness of life, to briefly shroud the inevitability of death, and to provide a happy illusion through at least one or two hours in the week.

[ 6 : 35 ] You know, that's what I think people expect of religion, and I think, I mean, I love the line about we're left in the real world with peanut shells sticking to the soles of our feet, and dark clouds forming in the West, you know, that, that, that, that, the, the enthusiasm, and the involvement, and the, and the illusion which was created, and which is, I mean, this, this article is called, uh, I mean, it's a money ball, you know, and it's talking about the highly developed merchandising of sports, so that, I mean, he gives a catalog of how much of it we watch, and how it fills, uh, the television screen, and, uh, and how it creates this illusion, and, and I, they, see,

I've spent my whole life in, in the business of religion, uh, I must tell you, I have a grandson who's five years old, and, uh, you know, and he, he says to me, about three times a day, at this point, you were a wrestler, weren't you, granddad?

Uh, now that's, uh, I was, yeah, about 50 years ago, uh, uh, and, uh, so that it's, uh, you know, it's, I don't want to disillusion him, but one day, and maybe he's, maybe he's trying to create an illusion, to escape from the reality he's confronted with, but there, but, uh, it's, it's, uh, it's this sort of, the feeling that, at, at this stage in life, for me, that maybe, the game's over, maybe, you know, everything's finished, and, uh, you know, I mean, there's nothing, you know, until the next broadcast comes on, the next car race, the next something comes back, then my life is going to be empty, you know, I'm going to have nothing but, peanut shells stuck to the soles of my shoes, and dark and foreboding clouds forming in the west, and, uh, where are you, at that point?

And, uh, you know, that, that, that, that sense, that, that we badly need something to distract us from the harsh and cruel reality of the world in which we live.

We need some kind of fancy, a fantasy to occupy our minds, some illusion to occupy us, so that we can't, because, in a sense, some of the, some of the realities of our world are so difficult to consider even.

[ 9 : 54 ] The powerlessness and the meaninglessness of being an individual in a world like ours is, uh, is, uh, is hard.

And he, in another article in this same magazine, he talks about, uh, you know, that we're called upon to love your neighbor as yourself.

But remember, that your neighbor consists now of something more than eight billion people. And, uh, to love your neighbor as yourself when there's eight billion of them out there doesn't, you know, you've got to spread the butter pretty thin to get, to respond to that kind of situation.

And so, you know, the, there is, I think, among us as a community and as people, a kind of, a pervasive meaninglessness, which sort of takes hold.

And, uh, and, and I think, I mean, I, I think sports is a great thing because it shows us a possibility. But if it's all there is, there's something wrong.

[ 11 : 09 ] Well, because you're left, you see, with peanut shells and clouds forming in the West and doubt and difficulty coming along. Well, all that is a kind of preliminary to get you to look at John 15.

because something, something uniquely different is happening here. It doesn't have the resume, it has of Indy weekend that, uh, in Vancouver.

It doesn't have, uh, doesn't have that. It has a very simple, it records a very simple encounter between 11 men and their master of three years with whom they have lived.

And a man who, on the day following, is to be crucified. And who, as far as his earthly life is concerned, it's over.

And the clouds forming in the West are closing in very rapidly and bringing with them a darkness at noon. Remember that?

[ 12 : 22 ] And he turns to them and says to them, I am the vine. Now, I'd like to take this almost word by word because the first thing that it tells us and that I think is terribly important is that there is somebody else there.

There's somebody else who confronts us by saying, I am. Because in the world in which we live, the only reality which is universally recognized by us is when we say, I am.

There is nobody else. And if there is to be any meaning, it's got to be by some penetration into the mystery of who I am somewhere down in there.

And I don't know how to understand that even. I know that counselors, that one of the sort of, and if any of you are in the business, come and correct me about this, but this is what it seems like to me. What your counselor will do for you is identify the wounded child in you who was hurt by the circumstances early in your life that you have never come to terms with and put you in touch with that wounded child so that you can talk to that wounded child and that wounded child can talk to you.

[ 13 : 54 ] And out of that conversation can come a measure of healing and a measure of wholeness out of that conversation with another and that other is really yourself in terms of the wounded child.

Or you can be put in conversation with your future self along the road that stretches before you. This is Gloria Steinem stuff. Around the road that stretches before you there is your future self fulfilled, happy, having achieved, having come to terms, and that future self talks to you in your present predicament.

And out of that conversation comes a measure of healing. And I don't deny that that happened. You see, what is being said here is that someone totally different than you, someone who has no dependence upon you, has no necessary relationship to you, you are someone on whom you have no claim, comes to you and confronts you and says, I am the true vine.

And suddenly you in your life come up against a reality which which is, I think, a potential relationship.

I mean, I think it is the relationship by which we are meant to live our lives. I think because God has created us, because God has called us into being, because God has created all that there is, that God confronts us in the person who comes to us and says, I am.

[ 15 : 50 ] And your life is the response to that introduction, to that person. That's what your life is about.

You don't have, I mean, the basis of your life. You can be distracted with the achievements and the attainments of life, but at the end, there's peanut shells in your shoes and dark clouds forming in the west and that kind of apprehensiveness until you are confronted by the God and creator of the whole of the universe who in the person of Jesus Christ confronts us and says, I am.

And that the meaning of your life ultimately on the day of judgment if you want is how you related to that person who confronts you in this way.

It's difficult. I mean, it's difficult for us, I think, because he says, I am the true vine. And the difficulty I find in that is that it's a picture.

It's a picture of our relationship to him. You know, I almost, I feel like I want to say, I don't want to talk about vines, I want to talk about you and I want to talk about me and I want to talk about our relationship.

[ 17 : 24 ] But he, in a sense, holds you a little bit at arm's length and says, if you want the relationship, look at the vine. I am the true vine and my father is the husbandman the gardener.

That's the nature of the relationship. That's what it's to be. Now you see, the reason he says that he is the true vine is because Israel, the people of God, are always talked about in the Old Testament particularly as God's vine.

God wanted to make himself known to the world through this vine. And so you have in the Bible stories of he cleared the land, he plowed the land, he planted the vine, he built a wall around it, he built a wine press, he built a watchtower to keep, and then he waited for the fruit to be produced.

That's the picture of how God relates to his feet. And the story of the Old Testament, and again it's repeated by Jesus in the New Testament, is that that vine, when the harvest time came, there was no fruit.

There was only bitter, hard, little grapes. The fruit that was then to be put to the wine press and crushed, and the joy of that wine given to all the people in the world, that joy was to be made available.

[ 19 : 14 ] But you see, the difficulty is that that vine failed, and that vine turned in on itself, and didn't provide anything.

And so, Jesus says, okay, you have had the expectation that you are the vine of God, but I'll tell you, I am the true vine. I am the source.

I, in my own person, am the one through whom God's life is made available to you. I am that person.

I am the true vine. And your relationship is now no longer because you have Jewish blood coursing through your veins.

Your relationship is because you have because you abide in me. If you look at that passage in front of you, you see that in verse 4 it says, remain in me and I will remain in you.

[ 20 : 28 ] It must remain in the vine. If a man remains in me, in verse 6, if anyone does not remain in me, in verse 7, you remain in me.

So that there is, what is to happen is that this one who has confronted you and said, I am other than you and different from you and not dependent upon you.

I am the true vine and you are to be in me, you are to be in relationship to me in such a way that you draw your life from me and because you draw your life from me, it is expected that you will bear fruit.

So that you get this sort of wonderful picture of that's what our life is meant to be. We are meant to live in that relationship to him as the branch does to the vine.

And some commentators have pointed out things like the fact that you can take a vine after it is produced and strip it back almost to the point where you destroy it and it starts to grow again and to bear fruit again.

[ 21 : 50 ] And I think that's the history of the people of God. That in a sense the vine of God becomes sort of covered with branches that bear no fruit.

And those that do bear fruit are in need of pruning in order that they will bear more fruit. And so it gets stripped back in order that it might grow again. And that becomes the kind of picture of how God means us to relate to him and how he relates to us.

He is the source of our life. We remain in him. As a result of remaining in him we are to bear fruit. And he is concerned that we should.

so that what it says if I can I mean I don't know whether I can illustrate this or not but what it says is that here you are and this is the source of your life.

I am the vine. you are to be you are the branches you are related to the vine and the vine is to produce something which is for the benefit of somebody else.

[ 23 : 19 ] So you come from a source that is not yourself to produce a product for the benefit of somebody else. And that's what Christ says your life is meant to be.

And you see the difficulty is that we tend to think that our life is to tap our own resources which for most of us are pretty inadequate.

We don't let that on. We know that. To tap our own resources and find our own fulfillment. And what Jesus is saying when he says I am the true vine and you are the branches he's saying I want to be the source of your life and I want your life to be lived in such a way as to provide for somebody else. For something else. You know because God loved the world. And you see he's not talking to he's talking to the disciples. He's talking to the people who are aware of the fact that whatever life is all about it transcends the narrow dimensions of their own individual existence.

They are dealing with the God who loves the whole world and who has provided a source, wants us to abide in that source and wants us to bear fruit.

[ 24 : 46 ] And that that's what Jesus is saying when he opens this passage. I am the true vine and my father is the gardener.

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, which is what he should do. I don't think there's anything vindictive or hard about that. Anybody would do that.

And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. And then he begins that chant which goes through remain in me, abide in me, remain, remain, remain.

This is where you're to live in that relationship. And so what I think is being said here to you and to me is that there may be the wounded child, there may be the self of the future and all those things, but the person who can introduce you to them is Jesus Christ.

He is the one that you need to know because you are to live in him. Like the Stanley Cup playoffs in Vancouver or the glories of Indy last weekend, whatever that is.

[ 26 : 04 ] And all that. That's wonderful. And it certainly fulfilled all your ambitions on Sunday afternoon. But by Sunday evening all you've got is peanuts in the soles of your shoes and clouds forming in the west and Monday about to break.

That's where you're left. And what Jesus is saying is I want this relationship with you. That you will allow me to be the source of your life.

That you will live in dependence upon me. That you will continue in that dependence upon me. That you will acknowledge and recognize and submit to that dependence.

And in that submission you will bear the fruit which it is my purpose should bring glory to God by your life.

Not fulfillment for the self but glory to God. you will well I spent two months getting ready to talk today. But I'm grateful to know that you're much wiser and you can see beyond what I'm saying by God's grace at work in you.

[ 27 : 29 ] So I leave that picture to you. Let me pray. Our God in the terribly familiar words of John 15 I am the vine and you are the branches.

Grant us grace and such passionate intellectual curiosity such profound spiritual hunger and such dissatisfaction with all that life offers apart from that that we might know all the fullness that you intend us to know in the relationship with you into which you seek to draw us that we may submit to live in that relationship and to abide in it.

In Christ's name. Amen.