

## Dichotomy and Quandary

When I was approached by Timothy about joining this project, I hadn't the slightest clue who Dietrich Bonhoeffer was. As someone who is a bit of a history geek even outside her vocation, and who holds a deep fascination with Germany, I thought I'd run across all of the WWII resistance fighters. Anyone else, I assumed, was either complicit or a child innocent drawn into a horrible situation. I certainly didn't assume I knew everything, but I thought I would have heard of another resistance movement at this point. Bonhoeffer's story, at first glance, looked like something of a modernized morality play, a childhood fantasy of black and white that I missed in the past for a reason.

That was corrected for me with immediacy. Upon reading Nancy's rendition of his story, upon further research, upon collaboration, there are two words that come to me about this story and this play: dichotomy and quandary. Notice I don't use "duplicity." That certainly is an aspect of Bonhoeffer's story and of those he worked with, but the core truth of this play is, to me, of balancing the dichotomy of oneself against evil, and of learning what true evil is versus the morally grey.

Even before the curtain rises, the characters of *This Mortal Life Also* are facing an externalized dichotomy of their world. Dietrich, Hans, Christel, and Sabine all came of age during the Weimar Republic: an era of national political turmoil and economic strife, to be certain, but an era, nevertheless, of progressive thought, human rights, and subversive artistic creation. Berlin, the city of their childhood and college years, was the most socially liberal, vibrant place in Europe, possibly in the world. Dietrich and Hans fed their brilliant minds with the spreading concepts of equality and equity.

Contrast that with the Third Reich. Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, and the changes to their beloved country began soon after. The majority of artistry was outlawed: known as "foul theatre" and "degenerate art," anything crafted by those deemed non-Aryan was destroyed. Progression became militancy, with required military service for men and women not considered citizens until marriage. A nation proud of its culture and heritage became, rapidly, a nation of closed-minded aggressors. Hans, in Nancy's play, decries this shocking shift: "I'd rather be raising my children in the liberal, intellectual country that nurtured us instead of being surrounded by propaganda and...men with no conscience or principle..." The unwelcome dichotomy of acceptance and persecution, of creation and devastation, of democracy and dictatorship, provide an externalized turmoil that then becomes internalized.

We see this with Hans and Dietrich within the first scene. "I serve my God, not the country," explains Dietrich, when he talks of fighting for church autonomy. "Social institutions need a country to defend them," comes Hans's retort. Pastorate meets politic in these brothers-in-law. Hans, to Dietrich, is too focused on the unfeeling logistics of government and judiciary; Dietrich, to Hans, is within the clouds of a daydream when he should be opening his eyes to the dangerous ground. Hans and Dietrich are two sides of the same coin, both inherently fighting for justice and acceptance while denying the other's point of view. The two exist within a familial dichotomy that continues until their situation comes to a head, until the Abwehr has cemented itself in both of their lives.

The Abwehr itself is dichotomy and quandary. Founded in 1921 following the disastrous Treaty of Versailles, the Abwehr (German Military Intelligence) was externally, for all intents and purposes, loyal to its Nazi overseers. They were expert codebreakers, deciphering Allied coded messages to deadly effect. They provided information on military movements and had bases in tens of countries. However, internally, they shielded the greatest resistance network within Germany. Providing Abwehr positions to numerous non-Aryan Christians and Jews created a bureau that was essentially exempt from Aryanization. They misreported military movements, protected and secreted Jewish citizenry out of the nation, and plotted to unseat Hitler. Admiral Canaris, their leader, is still, today, known as Germany's "number one mystery man" of the time, and we still don't know all the Abwehr did.

Therein lies the quandary. The Abwehr supported Nazism, was the reason the initial Soviet push was so successful, provided information that led to hundreds of Allied deaths. They also saved hundreds, both within and without Germany. They were and are a living dichotomy, and prompt the question: were they good, or were they bad?

Dietrich ponders this himself. As he becomes more deeply involved with Abwehr plans, making choices he believes will protect and better his beloved nation, he realizes: "I can't defend any choice I make. I'm guilty, no matter what I do." There is no right answer, especially when considered in a theological sense. Dietrich, his family, and his co-conspirators are forced to play God. Dietrich must decide if he can support the killing of one man to save others, if he can encourage another to commit said suicide and murder. Hans must decide if he can choose who is entwined with the Abwehr, who can put their life on the line, especially when it's his darling wife who volunteers. Christel and Sabine, too, have choices to make: does family or country come first, or are they one and the same? These people are dichotomies unto themselves, presenting intense moral quandaries that they then have to live through.

The Bonhoeffer and von Dohnanyi families are fascinating in this regard in one other way: they give us an idea of privilege and sacrifice. At this point in history, the Bonhoeffers and von Dohnanyis were prestigious families. Their place in German society is difficult for modern-day Americans to comprehend: the closest we can get are the Rockefellers or the Kennedys. They were well-educated, progressive, wealthy, patriotic, coming from noble legacies stretching back generations. Dietrich, Hans, and their families would have easily survived Nazism and the war had they done nothing. Yet they couldn't do that. Their educations, morals, and upbringing decreed that they needed to do something, and so they sacrificed everything. It is a wrenching dichotomy of altruism, one that provokes query and awe in even the most cynical of minds.

This is what drew me to Dietrich and this play, this idea of internal strife and an intense need to help others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a renowned theologian who preached ecumenism (unity among the Christian churches) and equality; he was one who advocated for the intrinsic worth of every human being. Then, in 1943, he became an assassin-by-proxy. How does one so faithful and vocal walk that line? How does one who has spent their entire life fighting for equality under God support murder and espionage? What goes through a person's head when they are forced into that position? Can we ever know?

That may seem like a lot of questions, and it is. Within some 1200 words, I posed numerous queries with no answers to accompany them. In truth, I don't think there are answers, and we shouldn't necessarily go looking for them. Instead, we, too, should ponder, and attempt to answer, and accept that there is not one that results in undeniable triumph.

But not all is lost. We shouldn't despair. *This Mortal Life Also* tell us that, too. Nancy provides wondrous levity in Maria's joviality and Dietrich's affection for her. She provides hope and strength in love and family. She provides the promise of a legacy continued simply by the writing of this play. She does not—we do not—provide answers to these quandaries of morality and dichotomy, but there is hope. There is fight. There is love. There is unity under the most terrible of circumstances.

This is what I hope carries into the world following this production. In a global and local nation so divided, I hope we allow ourselves to feel every dichotomy, to understand that heroes are just people, to realize the worth of every human. I hope we listen. I hope we allow ourselves to ask the same questions: what are good and evil? What defines goodness and what defines cruelty? How can we stop the latter? How can we react in a way that helps our world, not hinders it?

Dietrich, Hans, Christel, and their families did just that.

There is no easy answer in these dichotomies.

But there is hope.

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