

Saying Nothing (1974)

Theme: *I've Got Plenty of Nothing* Gershwin's Porgy & Bess

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.* –Dylan Thomas

Leon was a psychiatrist at San Francisco's Center for Special Problems (CSP).

He wasn't viewed as belonging to the group of psychiatrists working there.

Instead he was a member of the group of individuals that belonged to no group (mathematicians' paradox).

Not particularly friendly, this elder man with the trim goatee radiated individuality. That was exemplified by his staunch refusal to ever prescribe damaging psychiatric medications.

His prescription pad might otherwise contain a behavioral prescription ("*Buy her flowers and apologize*") or important notes to himself ("*Fishing with grandson this Saturday: Bring treats*").

Staff usually just left Leon alone. So naturally, we became friends.

I slouched past his office one morning, feeling the weight of my five part time jobs. And the struggles of the patients there at the clinic, plus my own.

Leon yelled: "*Hey Atlas! Put the earth down and rest for a while.*"

Strange maybe. But that memory always helped me do just that. Sometimes there is a perfect thing to say.

In the 1970s the city was over-loaded with special problems, known also as unique individuals. Governor Ronald Reagan had closed major state mental hospitals. They had been unhelpful at best, so good as far as it went. But Reagan failed to pass the financial savings on to us at the community clinics.

Many liberated mental patients expanded the homeless ranks in the streets. Some kept from starving by getting arrested. One tried to take a shower in one of our clinic urinals. Many walking along in busy tourist areas were continuing loud conversations with themselves. (If only we had fake cell phones to give them back then, nobody would have noticed.)

Many of these newly lost on the streets just, actively or passively, took the option of leaving their life.

In mornings, the sidewalk in front of a nearby McDonalds was a favorite spot where their remains would be found.

CSP staff were often regarded in more traditional mental health centers as special problems in their own right- creative, effective, famous pioneers, and very hard to categorize.

CSP took on clients the regular centers preferred not to see, even in San Francisco: the newly homeless delusional or suicidal refugees from the defunct mental hospitals, addicts, sexual life style pioneers, and even much sought felons.

And while the five other county centers left their empty offices to do community outreach, our CSP was the one that still gave face-to-face psychotherapy to the city's citizens.

Leon's reputation rested more than anything else on his evening *contact groups* with self-selected suicidal walk-ins. A contact group was a gathering of people without cost, record, or paper.

In fact, CSP was proud to be the last such center in the country to give clients the option to be un-digitized.

CSP Director Gene Turrell, formerly with Kinsey's group, specialized in transforming felons wanted by the law, including killers, with belief that doing so in absolute confidence he was saving more victims. Without that, they naturally would not come in.

When law officers sat in his office demanding information on any of these, Gene, a chain smoker, would shut his office door and then fill the room with smoke.

Gene looked like 'Lurch' from the Addams family, wore size 18 shoes.



Law would retreat without what they came for, smoke blown up their visit.)

Leon let me sit in one night with his contact group. One of the 13 people there said:
"I have nothing to live for!" Leon: *"Yes! That's your reason."*

Some were confused, other contact group regulars smiled.

Leon went on to explain that finding your individual purpose in existing on this earth was the most important thing you can do.

"Start looking" he said. Then others reported their progress.

Yes, Leon was very existential in his approach. It worked.

Our staff gathering place was Ernie's, a Chinese restaurant on Polk Street, a block from work. One day I walked in to see something I had never seen before.

Leon sat quietly alone in a corner table with tears streaming down his cheeks.

A waitress we knew whispered: *"His grandson had an accident at school and died yesterday. Very sad."*

Leon's grandson was the happiest part of his days. Whenever he spoke of him, he would transform into smiles. Clearly, his grandson was Leon's purpose in living. And now...

I sat next to Leon. He acknowledged me with a nod but said nothing.

Whatever could I say to this good man that would help him through this trauma?

I could think of nothing.

So I just put my hand on his forearm and sat with him in silence.

Leon eventually pushed his untouched plate of food away.

Quietly said "*Thank you Atlas. I appreciated that.*"

He left the restaurant and wasn't seen at work for a few weeks.

When he returned, his contact groups re-commenced.

Leon seemed to have found there another purpose for his existence.

And I had learned this:

When you can think of nothing helpful to say, nothing is what to say.