

## **Reading books, examining life**

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SAN BERNARDINO - Eric Kessler leads the Wednesday- night plunge into the depths of existentialism.

He chooses his words carefully, slowly.

The vocabulary of a philosopher must be sharp and precise, like the tools of a blacksmith.

His disciples, like the young men who followed Socrates around the streets of Athens, listen closely, understanding some but not all.

"Kierkegaard is interested in rescuing Christianity from Christendom," says Kessler, a 47-year-old with a beefy academic pedigree.

"Kierkegaard divides into three distinct spheres of life: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious."

The group, 10 men and women, some young and some gray, but all bright-eyed, watch their guide speak from behind a stack of well-thumbed books and scrawled notes.

Tonight's group is smaller than usual - a fact Kessler attributes more to scheduling conflicts than to lack of interest in the great Dane of philosophy.

Members of the Difficult Book Academy meet monthly, a band of scholars gathering around an oblong table in the spacious offices of the Norman F. Feldheim Central Library director.

They are searchers.

Modern problems

At a time when people are more likely to skim through MySpace.com than grind through "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," the need for such a group was clear to Kessler.

"I can see this gigantic shift taking place from the aesthetics of book reading to a larger consumption of what I would call text," said Kessler, referring to electronically delivered information.

"And I think this coincides with the interesting times that we live in."

His point - which he makes between tangents on Nietzsche and his own theories - is that the ability to think for oneself is increasingly scarce.

Although, hopefully, not for those who come to the meetings, he said.

According to a posting Kessler put on the library's Web site, the Difficult Book Academy is for "anyone who finds a strange, uncanny pleasure in being involved in difficult experiences" and "anyone who can see the value in the maxim, Philosophy is meant to make life harder, not easier."

Not exactly a titillating marketing pitch, but that's the idea.

The group, its members ranging in age from 16 to 80-something, has met for six two-hour sessions so far.

They are students, retired city employees, grocery-store workers.

What they have in common is that they're not satisfied trading celebrity gossip, rote conversations about mortgages or the ballgames on television.

"I am interested in what others have to say about Kierkegaard," said Molly Bogh, a 55-year-old retired city planner with a smooth, placid face and salty dark hair. "It's important to see civilization today through a philosophical perspective. I mostly enjoyed hearing from other people, hearing other views on the readings."

The study list for the group is laid out months in advance. The big names are all there: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Marx, Hegel, Kant. More obscure scribes are also on the list: Cusa, Derrida, Barthes.

Many are existentialists. Nearly all are counted among the legion of venerable thinkers in the continental tradition - mostly Western European authors of modernity.

Kessler calls himself a "lifelong reader" of this brand of philosophy.

He did his master's and doctorate work at Claremont Graduate University, although he did not finish his doctoral studies. He earned his bachelor's degree at UC Riverside. He was born in Hollywood and lives in Redlands.

A constant challenge

At the meeting, a pile of crinkled yellow legal pads and hefty Kierkegaard anthology sit on the table, at the ready.

It is religion, Kessler says, that Kierkegaard believes conditions and enhances the other spheres of life.

Unlike Freud's largely self-contained id, ego and superego, Kierkegaard's highly complex meditation on how we see and react to the world focuses greatly on outside factors.

Most attendees come prepared, having read the assigned readings. On this night, it is Kierkegaard's "Either/Or," a fascinating pastiche of writings from wildly divergent perspectives.

As they sit around the deep mahogany table, their books bulge with notes and other scraps of paper are arranged alongside plastic water cups.

This is not a gathering for breezy reading and aimless chit-chat. On this particular evening, Kessler leads his disciples on a 90-minute, carefully worded exposition on the meaning of Kierkegaard's ruminations about what it means to be human.

The more daring members of the group lob their own questions, ideas and meditations.

Kessler gently obliges.

"I encourage anyone who has found meaning not in the overcoming of life's difficulties but in their encounter to come to our meeting and experience some of these authors."

Readers should not just receive and consume information. Kessler challenges his club to absorb it, interact with it in a dynamic way. He argues that Nietzsche - last month's philosopher - and Kierkegaard feel the same way, that the reader should not be subject to a godlike author, but rather be an active interpreter.

At one point in the discussion, members of the group take up the gauntlet Kessler throws down. Kessler asks the group for thoughts on "Diary of a Seducer," a passage in one of the readings.

"I think the point is that life is a series of moral choices," Bogh said. "The way you live your life is a product of your choices."

Art Hurtado, a 48-year-old grocery-store clerk from Redlands, chimed

in. "But there's an irony to what he's saying," Hurtado said. "It doesn't matter what you choose, but your choices create who you are. There's also an irony in that your externals don't have to determine your inward health, but your inward health, who you are, can be shaped by your outward world."

As for simple answers, Kessler has none. He is unceasingly opaque.

"It all comes back to the notion of what it means to be a human," Kessler said. "There is no 'I.' Part of what it means to be a human being is to be an indefinable, fluid figure."

Hurtado: "I think for sure he's a genius."

Heads swung from Kessler's end of the table to his.

"He talked around authorship, said he had no relation to the pseudonyms under which he wrote, no relation," Hurtado continued.

Kessler pondered. Stony silence stretched for five, for 10 seconds.

"I use the language of destabilization" to describe Kierkegaard writing aliases, Kessler said. "This, this is meant to destabilize us. He's breaking apart the notion of the author-God," Kessler explains.

Kessler continued, measured, describing the epoch in Copenhagen in which a prolific mystery man churned out multiple books per year that were consumed by the educated populace.

"He wanted to stir the pot."

'I'm not satisfied'

Later, after the clock hands of the room circled to 8 p.m., Hurtado stood outside the library elucidating some of Kierkegaard's finer points to two of his clubmates who had slightly less command of the reading. He soon bid them adieu, then stood looking out at Sixth Street. A police car raced by, sirens wailing.

"You know, a part of me was surprised that a group like this was meeting here in San Bernardino," Hurtado said. "But I'm glad ... I'm not satisfied, not satisfied at all, I never will be, and I suspect a lot of other people aren't either. ... That's why we pursue questions, greater understanding."

He fretted that no matter what words he uses, a listener couldn't

completely understand.

"In explaining, or exploring, Kierkegaard to someone, they can only misunderstand. You can't get at it directly."

Hurtado kept on. He talked about the "other people doing our thinking for us" and dashed onto other tangents. Finally, he came full-circle, as if remembering the original question: Why come here to take on a subject as mighty as life?

"As Socrates said," Hurtado surmised, his face hardening, eyes homing, "the unexamined life is not worth living."

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