

Chapel Talk
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May 5, 1995

In the current movie "Priest", a young Catholic minister in England, upset at his inability to counsel and help a parishioner raped by her father, storms back into his office to pray. There on an otherwise blank wall hangs a small Crucifix. He stares at it momentarily, then explodes, yelling his prayer at the Crucifix: "Do something--don't just hang there!"

This scene, as you can imagine, has ignited a fireball of controversy, and the movie has been denounced fervently by the Catholic Church, especially Bishop O'Connor of New York, as antireligious, anti-church, anti-God. The character of Father Greg has other complications in his life, but at some level I find his anger a manifestation of his faith. Father Greg cries out in anguish at the evil in his world; even as he yells at his God, Father Greg needs that God to help him confront the darkness. His cry is for action: "Do something!"--"do something for me, give me strength, hold me up." It is not, despite the anger, a condemnation of God. Those who reject this movie, and this scene in particular, miss I believe what commentators have misread about the Book of Job for over 4,000 years: Job is not primarily about the nature of evil in God's world, or why there is suffering--why events like the Holocaust or Oklahoma City or Amanda Leyon's death take place: Job is about faith. It is about an intensely personal and intimate and active relationship between Job and God, between the human and divine, between Job and his life source.

Job can't understand why life has become horrifying, why the God who seemed to bless him now allows destruction to haunt Job's life. Yet in all his laments and spiritual explosions, Job never abandons God. In fact, as the book develops, he insists on a greater relationship with God, an intimacy which his counselors and some later commentators find brazen, foolhardy, even blasphemous. After all, who is Job to demand a meeting with God, or an umpire to judge between the two? However, at the end of the book, God rewards Job for having "spoken right." Job was angry at the injustice in his world, much the same way Father Greg was, yet the cable of his anger was his faith, a faith he grasped vehemently and furiously throughout the chaos and pain.

Dostoevsky wrote that the person who gets "angry at his pain is sure to conquer it." Strangely, there is a growth, a salvation, a healing process which comes through releasing feelings, through the sometimes violent exercise of our emotions. I'm not talking about anger borne of insecurity, selfishness, disrespect, hatred: I can bark when Luther asks once again if I've graded his paper, a paper I've been "grading" for two or three weeks; I get vexed at every loss to Tower Hill and Tatnall; I snap when my children act too much like children--but these are not moments of healing, but instead instances of my own frailty, impatience, disorganization. There was a small scene over Parents' Weekend some of you may have witnessed: the boys varsity soccer team was getting ready to play Hill School on that beautiful Saturday afternoon. Five minutes before kick-off, James Pipes' back convulses in spasms, and he's carried to the bench. The trainer comes over, and soon tells James he can't play in this game --a game in front of parents, alums, against a big team, a championship-type game for a starting senior, a starting senior who just overcame these back problems which had kept him out of the first five games of the season. I remember watching James clench his fists, slam them down on the bench, and spit out vindictives. He could have left the field quietly, walked in slowly to the gym, taken it like a gracious athlete, which if truth be told I'd wished he'd done then. His anger and expression made me uncomfortable. But James was ticked off at a larger issue--not a Job-like event to be sure, yet still he tried to say "No!" back to "No!" That defiance is at the heart of our humanity, of our need to claim dignity in the face of maelstroms and uncertainty. Seniors will recall that King Lear, at the moment of his daughter's violent death, bellows out "No, no, no, no, no"--not as a denial of life itself, but as a challenge against what he has been denied. It is a voice which calls upon his greatest reserves of strength and fortitude, a battle which ultimately exhausts him, but does not defeat him.

It does take effort to express yourself, to move beyond the mild acceptance of fate and circumstance, to wrestle with our faith and the furies. We could all be like those pathetic fraternity brothers in Animal House who exclaim, "Thank you, Sir! May I have another!" Yet what kind of life would we have in such complaisance and emotional apathy? For us to earn any tangible or especially intangible significance, we willingly have to take on our parents, teachers, the administration, management, City Hall, the Church, Washington, Mount Olympus. These sometimes entrenched establishments require more effort from us to preserve our humanity and

sense of dignity. That strange time in the past called the 60s, when all the rules of society were questioned, ignored, torn down, reshaped, had at its heart an anger at the way the world operated, an anger driven by a sense that what was, was not right.

There was much wrong with the 60s--both by those in the counter-culture and those in the Establishment--but what the 60s had which we may lack was the almost accepted creed of protest. That "generation gap" made the young question, even fight against the model of how to live which the older generation offered, especially its values of money, stability, status, compliance, homogeneity. Those primarily young people had the Vietnam War and the growing Civil Rights movement to fuel their passions. Some of their means were violent, but at least they questioned, they didn't accept pat answers, and they continued to oppose. By questioning what has not been questioned, they, and we, learned.

Their anger made them bigger, helped them grow to meet the challenge--just look how long some of those causes have taken, still take: think of the protests that Mrs. Mein told us about when she picketed for civil rights in college or against nuclear war, or Mr. O'Brien's rejection of the establishment profession of the law. Only when we struggle, only when we acknowledge the unsettling voices within us, only when we recognize that our passion, our conviction, our demand for justice may put us into battles which will scar, even alienate us--only then, do we really exist.

We can't lose that ire: sadly, many of the rebels of the 60s copped out, joined the easy life, became lobbyists for wealthy corporations. Their commitment was hard to maintain. My concern is that I don't see enough anger today: there unfortunately, clearly is hatred and violence in our world, as the bombing in Oklahoma City tragically illustrated, as the random killings in our streets exhibits, as the civil wars in Europe, Russia, Africa and the Middle East show us every day. But President Clinton, at the moving memorial service for the bomb victims, urged us not to live in fear; anger allows us not to be a victim of these events. Rigorous passion can rebuild, heal, edify.

What does this all mean? I think what I'm trying to get at is that if you are not aroused about something, if you are not more than casually bothered by some aspect of your life, your community, your world, then you've begun to decay. You'll still be happy, go to college, marry, have kids and a station wagon, relaxing weekends, good presents under the tree at Christmas,

colorful family portraits on the wall; but there won't be much dirt under your fingernails, there won't be much fiber to your soul, there won't be many heroic wounds in your being to strengthen you for the dark nights, for the unforeseen moments, for the calls for help on the sidewalk or the room down the hall. Doris Short said in her speech to the V Form: "I'm headstrong because I care." There are times when Doris is the last person I want to see again at my door, because she has another question about school policy or another innovative form project to discuss: but that's a signal I'm atrophying. Doris and others of you who question, even pester, are not anarchists but rather committed servants trying to make St. Andrew's or your world better. The exhaustion of being a parent is that young children ask "Why?" all the time; they question, argue, debate, disagree. Alas, when we grow older, we begin to lose that edge, that nerve to question, that fresh perspective.

As we prepare for a well-deserved vacation, I have two challenges for us, even for those who will leave and not return in September. One is to give validity to that passion, that anger which sustains faith and cables you to a source. If you cannot find a cause, a belief, a battle which you believe in, find out why. During my sabbatical over a long, cold New Hampshire winter, I too will dust off, explore, scratch. I also charge each of us to think how these passions and constructive angers can be enacted, both at St. Andrew's and away from St. Andrew's. In August, ask yourself what you've grappled with to justify three months of vacation. There is so much time this summer to do more than read great literature, travel, make money, get a tan, go to soccer camp--all the activities which will fill your summer happily, even purposefully, even somewhat beneficially. But where is the edge in those moments, where is the fight, the question, the exhaustion of reconstruction? In my own mind, I've described my own ideal summer by our lake in New Hampshire, with mountain hikes, children, family, friends, a lot of books and time alone with my wife. But as I speak these words, I'm nervous because I can't remember the last time I was really angry, when I was willing to put aside those worthy objects for something which let me "Believe [my] pain." In that ultimate exhibition of all our faiths, in that freedom to say "No," we will rediscover the sinews and marrow within us so that we will not "go gentle into that good night," but will "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."