

ANSWERABILITY: THE CLOUD AND THE LIGHT

I haven't seen the movie, Billy Jack, but I am told there is a line in the movie that goes, "The problem with the white man is that he doesn't know about the Other World that's in the midst of this world." When I was in West Australia, out on the desert, I met an old black Aboriginal; I suspect he was seventy or seventy-five years old. Being a wise old guru, he said, "You know, the white men are lost." I was lost at that moment; we were out on the desert and I did not know how to get back. He said, "They are lost because they don't know their relationships." He began to point out to me, "See that rock over there? That is my father's brother. See that tree? That tree belongs to my uncle's parents. That is my cousin. See that bird? That's my mother." And he went on. You could see that the Other World got held for him through relationships. He had a story about the relationship between him and each object, so that whatever he touched--a rock, or a tree--was his relationship: alive and dynamic!

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If you do not have a sense of humor, you will never understand the Scripture, because our fathers had a great sense of humor:

Later on, Jesus showed himself again to his disciples on the shore of Lake Tiberias, and he did it in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the twin), Nathaniel from Cana of Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples were together, when Simon Peter said,

"I'm going fishing."

"All right," they replied, "we'll go with you."

So they went out and got into the boat and during the night caught nothing at all. But just as dawn began to break, Jesus stood there on the beach, although the disciples had no idea that it was Jesus.

"Have you caught anything, lads?" Jesus called out to them.

"No," they replied.

"Throw the net on the right side of the boat," said Jesus, "and you'll have a catch."

So they threw out the net and found that they were now not strong enough to pull it in because it was so full of fish! At this, the disciple that Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

Hearing this, Peter slipped on his clothes, for he had been

naked, and plunged into the sea. The other disciples followed in the boat, for they were only about a hundred yards from the shore, dragging in the net full of fish. When they had landed, they saw that a charcoal fire was burning, with a fish placed on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring me some of the fish you've just caught."

So Simon Peter got into the boat and hauled the net ashore full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three altogether. But in spite of the large number the net was not torn.

Then Jesus said to them, "Come and have your breakfast."

None of the disciples dared to ask him who he was; they knew it was the Lord.

Jesus went and took the bread and gave it to them and gave them all fish as well. This is already the third time that Jesus showed himself to his disciples after his resurrection from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others?"

"Yes, Lord," he replied, "you know that I am your friend."

"Then feed my lambs," returned Jesus. Then he said for the second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," returned Peter. "You know that I am your friend."

"Then care for my sheep," replied Jesus. Then for the third time, Jesus spoke to him and said,

"Simon, son of John, are you my friend?"

Peter was deeply hurt because Jesus' third question to him was "Are you my friend?" and he said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I am your friend!"

"Then feed my sheep," Jesus said to him. "I tell you truly, Peter, that when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you liked, but when you are an old man, you are going to stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and take you where you do not want to go."

. . .

Then Jesus said to him, "You must follow me."

Then Peter turned round and noticed the disciple whom Jesus loved following behind them. (He was the one who had his head on Jesus' shoulder at supper and had asked, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") So he said, "Yes, Lord, but what about him?"

"If it is my wish," returned Jesus, "for him to stay until I come, is that your business, Peter? You must follow me."

(John 21:1-22)

We had a great time around here with the priors, and colleagues of the Continental Auxiliary, the BTS, and the Presidium, because you can stand at the door almost any hour of the day or night, and just greet people. You can look somebody in the eye, and ask him how he is, and especially if he brings his wife, you can "buss" her on the cheek, or give her a little squeeze. Well, I got through working on the monotony of planning and setting things up the other day, and people were coming in that Sunday night, so I went and took my turn there. As I was shaking hands, and squeezing people, something began to happen to me. It was kind of like a click, or a blink; I noticed that what was happening to me was that for that moment I was losing consciousness. I began to think maybe I had a tumor of the brain, and was about to pass out. My stomach began to churn a bit. Then I got a little worried. But it was so much fun, you kind of got engaged. But every time, I noticed that it came at a certain time: when I shook hands, when we exchanged names, when we asked each other how we were. Somewhere in there was that blink--just like that! In the midst of that, somebody came up, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "You have a phone call." For once, I was really glad to have a phone call and get out of there. By the time I got there, the person had hung up and left a message that he would call back in about ten minutes. He was one of the fellows in Uptown, so I needed to sit by that phone and receive his call.

That blink kept coming to me. I tried to trace it down. Where did that come from? I remembered a time when I was on a bus in Djakarta, when I got my passport lifted out of my pocket. There was a time there, a blink; I remembered it as the same kind of moment. If I could go back now and reconstruct in my memory, perhaps in some way I could get jostled. But I couldn't then. A blink, a black-out. It was like in those censored pictures, where a little black strip covers people's eyes. A little black strip like that began to show up in my imagination.

Then it turned into a black box. I got curious, because I wanted to get inside that black box and see what was there that had been blinking on me. So I opened up that box and I got in. There wasn't any bottom, and I fell. As I began to fall, it was as if I passed by billboards. They were little signs announcing to me every time I had failed in life--one right after the other. Here was that speech I tried to make one time, and

fell flat on my face. Here was that time I was with my parents-in-law and messed up the whole thing. I then got in even deeper, recalling things: a failure as a husband, a joke as a father, ridiculous as a son--the whole life: just one pile. And I just kept falling through. Then I got down to those times when I really did a great job.

I noticed as I fell, things got dark, and by the time I had gotten down to really falling, it was as if my whole body would begin to collapse, though I was sitting upright in the chair. It was as if my whole life just went out through my toes; it just leaped out, and it was nothing but a great big cloud. I began to fidget, and kind of twist around in my seat; all that weakness and humiliation there. When I could see, one thing got clear to me (and it was strange, because I couldn't explain it to myself): that that cloud and I were not two; we were one. We were one. But I couldn't reach it.

Something began to appear across that cloud. It seemed kind of strange to me, too. And on that cloud was written, "I have cared for the world; I care for the world; and I will always care for the world." Then the electricity started coming out of that cloud. It was saying that any time you relate to life, you relate to life through that cloud, and any time life relates to you, it relates to you through that cloud.

I began to recall those humiliating moments in my life; it was something to remember that that was my care for the world. I and that cloud are one. My mother died not long ago. That came back to me then. I have not been able to talk much about that, because I was a mother's boy. And in some ways I never grew up until she died. I was always her boy. For years, I had been trying to convince my mother that I was on the right track, doing the right thing. Mother got sick a few years ago; and became just a shadow of herself. Her voice, once low and beautiful, was now a low whisper, her breathing was sporadic, she had to stay under a tent a lot. I knew when I went in once that it was the last time I would see her. Somehow she had gotten hold of an article (I don't know where from). She had always thought we were a bunch of Communists or something; but what she did at that moment was to say she understood what I was about. She gave me her blessing. It had been a long time since I cried like that. I went out, and then she died. The strange thing about it is, to think after all these years you had been working trying to convince your Momma that you were right, she blesses you. All you are left with is that cloud. Just that cloud.

Some of us have been hoping that when you got through that Dark Night, on the other side of it there would be something. You go through the agony and pain; you get through the Dark Night: and you find that what happens is that there is the Dark Night. The agony and pain intensify, the darkness gets darker, and your sight gets faint. All you have is this humiliation, this weakness, and this cloud which you cannot touch. Yet, you are one. Not two, just one, with no way you can go away from it. It follows you wherever you go, with no way to divorce yourself from it; you are one with it. It doesn't matter what you do, it is just there.

Two strange things began to take place in the midst of that. I was still sitting in this chair. The first one was that this dark cloud, which by that time, you can imagine, had become a weight on me, suddenly became light.

The cloud that was there became light. Either I could bear it, or it was bearing me; I could not tell the difference. Someone, I think, probably got close enough to it when he came in. He was talking about the fact that last quarter, one of the members of his House just got up and left, some key clergymen didn't come through, and his wife kicked him around a bit. He said, "You know, a year ago, I would have collapsed. I would have probably had to go see a psychiatrist or something. But it didn't bother me a bit. I just kept on going. It would not have mattered if my wife had left."

That cloud is light. But you have to add that the darkness is not removed; it gets darker. The pain does not go away; it gets deeper, more intense. It is every day of the week; every time you wake up it is there.

The second strange thing is that it is as if your life was unburdened. If someone tells you things have really fallen through, that is fine. If someone comes and tells you that you had a great success, that is fine. There is excitement, and there is disappointment, but it does not rock you. Someone says, "We want to have a two-hour conversation now on getting ready to leave the movement, or getting ready to leave the Order," and you see clearly what is going on. It would not take any two hours at all. Give me three minutes and I will tell you exactly what is going on with you. You pour out your wisdom. It doesn't bother you. It is very, very strange. You just give your wisdom to them and they decide. I guess you would have to say that you are not distraught. But the pain is still there; it does not go away. But in the midst of that, that cloud of light; you are not distraught.

The last thing, and this was probably the most difficult to state: was saying the other day he did not have any questions anymore about whether and his family were going to take another year, or do something else. When the assignments came out, they just did not have the question of whether or not they would accept the assignment or turn it down. There is no longer any question if an RS-I does or does not come off, or if the kids get sick, or if we run out of money. Not even a question. When they arrived, they said that when the next assignment came around the corner, they would meet it. And they knew the rest of their lives were going to be just like that. In the midst of that is pain and the darkness, and the cloud and the light.

Some people think that when you talk this way, you turn people into robots that don't care about anything, or raise any deep questions about life. They just stumble through like, like a robot. Well, I just want to say NO! There is glory in finally stepping out of your adolescence and beginning to live your life, rather than having some sort of conversation every time the bird twitters--raising all the deep, valuable questions of life, and then kind of moving sideways. You just do not know the glory of that stepping out. The pain is not gone, nor is the darkness any lighter.

The funny thing to me is that all this had to do with a little blink; just a little black box in my imagination. I'll bet that little blink and that little black box is in everybody alike. That everytime we grab each other's hands and look, that happens. That that is there in our life, just to hold us over against what it is to be human beings.

About that time, the phone rang. I blinked again. I said hello, and I had that lapse again; that little black thing flew across my forehead. I said hello, but you know what? When he said, "Hello," I could see that same little black thing in his life, right over the telephone. I am here to report to you that we had one good conversation that morning about life--one that I do not think either one of us will forget for a long time.

---George Holcombe

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