

Base Centrum

Prior Spin

GLORIOUSLY EMBRACING EVERLASTING SUFFERING

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If I were to write a book, one of the titles I would use is "The Death of the Liberal." I would have one chapter about my visit to Fifth City, the first great death. Another one of those chapters would be my adventures on the Global Odyssey, concerning what happened to me in Calcutta, in Katmandu and in Hong Kong, events I could not talk about for the next nine months. It was a powerful death, a blow to my liberalism. Another chapter would be about Summer '71. The whole assembly centered around Little Big Man. We kept pushing and pushing that movie and we liberals kept squealing and squealing. Finally we built that great huge liberal smasher, called the "social process." We said putting it in balance is what it means to love your neighbor!

This year the destruction of liberalism came to me in that document the Priors wrote, called "The Profound Function of the Religious House." That is by far the best document we have ever written. I still cannot believe that we wrote it. A section in the beginning talks about the dramatization of Resurgence. It says "The religious house dramatizes Resurgence socially by embracing everlasting suffering." Gloriously embracing everlasting suffering. Well I said, "That is good stuff. Why don't we do it one night at Ecclesiola." And I said, "I had better lead this one. It is a bit 'heavy'." While teaching it, my throat swelled up and I was speaking in a strangled voice. The participants' heads would roll back and nobody could talk, because we had that section so grounded. There is one little line in it which says, "The liberals are out to eliminate suffering. And the way life is won't let it happen." That is, by far, the deepest blow I have ever taken. When we got that grounded, I said, "My God, all my life I have been trying to eliminate suffering, especially my own." (There is, or course, the whole question of innocent suffering but let us not get into that.)

On the other side of that realization, if eliminating suffering is not our function, then what is it? Kaye Hayes has been impacting our research group; she is full of hard sayings which ripple through the day. We were talking about tragedy; I think the same applies for suffering. There are several responses to suffering. You can say it is bad and somewhere, sometime, your life is going to be different. So you leave that situation or float over it. That is one response. Or another response, which hits home a little more when you consider it, is to say, "There is bound to be some good in this suffering. It is good for us to have suffered like this. In fact, it has to be good for us. It is good for our children to go through those emerging generation structures. They will make men out of them. (Well they will, like the amoeba who evolved into a paramecium. They are growing hair.) There is bound to be a little good in this pile somewhere." That is a great liberal response. Then Kaye says, "But the man of faith does not say there is a little glory in it. It is glory. It is blessed. It is Sanctified." And then it is glorified. Barth told me never to play with the theology of glory. He says, "Look where it will lead you. The theology of crisis." I think today Sanctification may be the theology of glory.

While visiting in Norfolk on the James River, I happened to take out my mobile Religious House sack and began eating lunch when I heard a noise from across the way. I got closer to it and I could not believe it. I forgot to eat; I just

sat there looking. Imagine a 200 foot crane with a big hammer on the end of it and, then, some one hundred feet high concrete columns. The crane would roll the hammer up and crash! It reverberated all over the peninsula. Crash! I sat for an hour and watched it. The transparency came, driving those columns into the river bed over which a bridge will be built. Crash! I grounded the hundred ton crane in those columns. One of my transparent reflections was, "My God, why doesn't that column just shatter into a million pieces? What is holding it together? It is just concrete." I asked an engineer there, and he replied, "Oh it has steel reinforcements all the way through it. The blow comes and they absorb the tension." And I had more transparency.

People are out there looking at those profound functions, called the Religious House, and they say, "What is holding you guys together?" Or they will look at you and say, "What is it that holds you together? Knowing what you know and experiencing life as you experience it?" Or, "What makes you guys so happy?" I always do a double-take on that; I do not experience myself as all that happy. A clergyman in the last PLC I taught said, "Why are you so full of joy?" I did not experience myself full of joy at that course. They are looking and asking. "What is holding you guys together in this time of incredible suffering in the midst of this Resurgence?" I have begun to reflect that anybody can be a suffering servant. But the question haunting me, and the promise I would claim for us in this outfit is, "What does it mean to gloriously embrace everlasting suffering? And show all men what they can do?" Glorious suffering servants, on to the Happy Death!

-John Cock-