

The Whole World Is Full of His Glory

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“Cast me not off in the time of old age,; forsake me not when my strength fails me.”
Psalm 71:19

I like to watch visitors enter our nursing home. If they are new- that is, if their loved one has not resided in the home for a long time, or if they are relatively uninitiated regarding the home itself- these words of the Psalmist may well resonate within them. Sometimes, if they are aware enough, if they are honest enough, they may be able to articulate their helplessness and fear when coming to visit.

But even when their feelings remain unexpressed, one only has to look into their eyes in order to know that, walking thorough this “valley of the shadow of Death,” they *do* fear evil; so stark is the “otherness” of this place that the comfort of the Rod and the Staff may well be elusive. They have come into a place where failed strength and damaged faculties are acknowledged realities for residents and frightening possibilities fro visitors, For the uninitiated, a nursing home is a place where failure of strength is a feared admission od human finitude, Seen as a “holding area’ for the Angel of Death, it is a place to be avoided.

And of all the residential units in such a facility, no area broadcasts this message as does the Special Care (or Total Care) Unit. Visit a Special Care Unit on any given day, in any given hour, and you will be visiting a foreign land. It is, for all intents and purposes, another world where language is completely different, as are the rules for communication and socialization. Dementia brought on by advanced Alzheimer’s disease, organic brain syndrome, or cardiovascular accident (stroke) have made cognition and the capacity to reason of little value to citizens of this place. In this place, grunting and bleating substitute for normal speech; screaming and yelling replace more familiar forms of articulation. What would be deemed nonsense conversation and repetitive gibberish by us rational folks are, in this world, part of the standard *lingua franca*.

Not only do I work in this world, I am also literally “based” in it- my office is located at its entrance. To be sure, I am not uncomfortable working with the resident on Special Care. Indeed, were this the case, I would be quite inadequate in my position as chaplain. When our new building neared completion, my choice of working quarters was limited to a smaller office on the main floor closer to the “real world,” or a more spacious one at the entrance to this “other world.” At the time, I chose space over reality, telling myself that the sounds emanating from this other word would not bother concentration.

I was wrong.

Having left my door open the first day I moved into my office, I discovered that the screaming, the bleating, and the gibberish were like the ubiquitous smells of incontinence- an unavoidable part of the environment to which one must become accustomed. Given the population of that unit, these sounds, like the odors, are not only ubiquitous and unavoidable, they are an expected and a natural part of the environment. But, as I have learned, they are more than “expected.” In a curious, but significant way, they are actually needed.

This modest insight came to me that very first morning. Since then, it has had tremendous influence on how I approach my work and how I respond to my own life. Whenever I hear these sounds, this passage from our prayerbook comes to mind:

They [the Heavenly Beings] all perform with awe the will of their Creator; they all open their mouth with holiness and purity... granting permission to another to hallow their Creator... with pure speech and sacred melody, they all exclaim in unison and with reverence:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole world is full of His glory.

We learn from rabbinic teaching that when one recites this prayer, one proclaims God’s sanctity in the world, just as the angels did in Isaiah’s vision. In doing so, one creates symmetry of sanctity with these heavenly beings. Just as angels were created to continually praise God, so human beings were also created to praise God. Moreover, we learn that praise of God is more beloved when it is offered as the result of free choice- a gift bestowed upon human beings, but not angels.

Alas, it is a gift that many of the residents on Special Care have lost. Having lost this gift of free choice, and suffering from other cognitive impairments- some able only to chirp, grunt, or remain in a dumb stupor- they seem not just “little lower than the angels,” but tragically much lower. Observing their frail conditions, listening to their chatter or their silence, we may see them as lost, wasted, and useless.

But such adjectives are subjective. They do not necessarily state facts. As subjective descriptions, they are interpretations of our own choosing. We can also choose to interpret differently- as the prayerbook passage invites us to do.

Jewish tradition teaches that a genuine understanding and appreciation of human existence ultimately must be grounded, not in notions of usefulness and cognitive ability, but rather in the belief that human life is unconditionally holy. It is holy because it is God-given. And, because it is God-given, *every* human creature that yet breathes must praise the Creator in its own way, regardless of cognitive ability or the ability to choose, and regardless of any apparent usefulness to society or lack thereof. As the prayerbook declares elsewhere: “The breath of *every* living thing will bless Your name.”

Those who reside on a Special Care Unit are no longer vibrant, active individuals. Yet they breathe, neither are they dead: as Scripture teaches, “The dead cannot praise the Lord.” Rather, they are truly “in-between.” And, as Martin Buber once taught, the “Spaces in-between” are precisely where one encounters holiness. Thus while the

gruntings, shriekings and bleatings may be heard as the sonances of suffering and abandonment in a seemingly “God-forsaken” place, these cacophonies may also be sacred in and of themselves. As they reverberate in a corner of the world ignored and avoided by most of us, they may be understood to evolve into the sounds of sanctification-offerings from people who like their celestial counterparts have no choice in the matter, who now automatically praise the Holy One in a purity that comes from their afflictions. If the “whole world is full of His glory...,” then even this place, filled with helplessness and death, cannot be “God-forsaken.” Indeed, these sounds are the very lyrics of this testimony.

My hope is that those who come to visit residents of nursing homes will resonate with such a notion as instinctively as they do with the words of the Psalm quoted above; that those who are a bit more spiritually attuned will respond willingly (even joyfully?) to this invitation: to find and appreciate the hidden holiness in such a foreboding place.

To be sure, we human beings not only revere that which is holy, we also avoid it. That which is sacred is often experienced not only with awe, but also with fear (interestingly, the Hebrew word *yirah*, as in *yirah Shamayim*, fear of heaven, has both meanings). Such is the nature of numinous: mysteriously filled with divinity, it is also taboo- so sacrosanct as to be risky to encounter. Here the words of Sam Keen are helpful:

In the life of the spirit, paradox is the rule...the opposites coincide, the diseased parts form a graceful whole...In considering the whole and holiness of life, we must at once hold before our eyes visions of horror and wonder, cruelty and kindness...Both/ and, not either/ or. ¹

I pray that those who enter nursing homes to visit loved ones will come to appreciate these words. May they begin to affirm on a deeper level that even in the valley of the Shadow, the comfort and holiness of the Rod and Staff are indeed present. May they begin to understand that the feelings of fear and avoidance often experienced in the presence of the frail elderly may be as much a function of this indiscernible and ineffable sanctity, as they are of the deterioration and debilitation that are more palpably felt. To the extent they succeed, they will rediscover anew the presence of the Holy One in our broken world. May their success help them to glue those broken pieces back together, and ultimately redeem them.

¹ Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York, NY:1991), p.170ff.