

RED-NOSE-REINDEER WORDS as hope & peril

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This old guy I saw on the telly yesterday, he said he wrote the Rudolph song "on a hot July day in an effort to get cool by thinking cool." It's cool alright; made a cool million on it in its early days, & it's proving as durable as any other secular Christmas song. What with Musak, the telly, & radio, in whose bonnet at Christmastide does that glowing-nose reindeer not cavort, esp. in the Disney image?...Well, the claims made for that nose brushed up against, in my mind, a parallel fantasy, viz. the claims made through certain luminous words, each glowing in some darkness, presaging some light, signaling some hopeful direction, seducing to the belief that noncritical affirmation of the word will levitate (as Santa's sleigh!) the believer & the believer's cause up out of the messy complexity & painful perplexities & unfair-unjust conditions in which the dream of deliverance is born & born again....The point of this Thinksheet is that such words have a downside as well as an upside. They do indeed help us hope, serve as direction-markers, provide us & ours with rallying standards (as the cohort standards in the ancient Roman armies); but they also tempt us to idolatry with all its dangers....Make your own list: peace, justice, glasnost, liberation, love, salvation, born-againness, inerrancy, revolution, wholeness, New Age, healing, freedom....

FREEDOM I'll limit myself to Elie Wiesel's "What Really Makes Us Free" (in PARADE, the Sunday stuffer, 27Dec87). Because we are preprogrammed for beauty, truth, goodness, love when we begin anything by him --because we know this Holocaust survivor is the sad but victorious singer of these human essentials--our guard is down: we are disinclined to turn on our critical consciousness. Indeed, we so much need the profound & sobering poetry of his prose that I have a tinge of guilt as I point out, as I must, the red-nose-reindeer, idolatrous use of "free," "freedom" in this article. But here goes: (1) As God must come to the hungry in the form of bread, so to the prisoner as freedom. Exprisoner literati--supremely from WWII, the Jew Wiesel vis-a-vis the konzentrations-lager & the Christian Solzhenitsyn vis-a-vis the gulag--use their incarceration experience as metaphor for their readers' condition in an imperfect & fallen world. Earlier & continuing instances are redemption (from bondage in Egypt), salvation (from sinful, wilful captivity to Satan), emancipation (from slavery). Then there are participation (for those previously shut out of the ecopolitical decision-making processes, as Saul Alinsky & others put it) & liberation (from oppressive attitudes, processes, & structures, as in liberation theology) & resurrection (from the tomb-prison of death) & release (from some thralldom outer or inner --some compulsion, addiction, infatuation) & extrication, rescue, escape. The temptation of the freed & of those longing for freedom is to make freedom the summum bonum, king of kings, queen of queens, among the virtues & values. This Wiesel clearly does. "Does there exist a nobler inspiration than the desire to be free?" Not for the Greek & not for Wiesel, who has a Jewish heart but a Greek-Enlightenment mind....(2) "Man wants to be free as God is free: free to choose between good and evil"--which was the Gn.3 snake's appeal....(3) "Freedom alone gives meaning to the life of an individual or a people." Biblically, it's obedience--but the difference is not diametrical....(4) "For a people--that is, for a social, ethnic or religious group--the problem and its solution are both simple. When a people loses its freedom, it has a right, a duty, to emply every possible means to win it back." Just what the Boers did when in 1948 they won their freedom from the British & set up their apartheid rule. Just what the Germans did when under Hitler they threw off the oppressive Treaty of Versailles. Just what the Palestinians have been doing in the "unconventional warfare" of terrorism & the current Gaza, West Bank, & Jerusalem rock-throwing mass street-action.

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It's disarmingly easy for a person who's always been self-employed & never held public office to speak of the freedom problem as "simple." Such talk may capture the simple-minded & comfort the disheartened, but it cannot advance, & may impede, progress toward real-world improvements in the human condition....(5) Repeatedly, with changing expressions, EW sounds the cliché that both the guard & the inmate are imprisoned. But the wider reality is that the guard lives in two social worlds, the prisoner in only one. EW's failure to acknowledge this gives an unreal coloration to his writing. I like the solidarity theme that none can be saved unless all are saved, but the equally human fact is that many enjoy much of freedom with little or no thought for those without opportunity for such enjoyment: life isn't fair, & those who preach the utopian illusion that it could be if only we would do this or that are increasing human frustration & pain & bitterness & violence without making an adequately compensatory contribution toward improving the human condition. Mine, however, is no council of despair: we can & therefore must press, day by day, in intimate & public relations, toward God's Rule (in both senses), heartening ourselves & others with this idealistic vision without damaging ourselves & others with utopian dreams.... (6) "One has no right to compare anything to Auschwitz." This romantic reservation of the Holocaust as supremely & uniquely, incomparably evil is a disservice to reason & thus to clear, concatenated thought--too great a price to pay, I think, for the emotional-rhetorical advantage of declaring a particular historical event the Ultimate Horror. (My religion faces a parallel dilemma: the death of God-among-us on the Cross.) (7) While you can't get to, or even conceive, the universal except through the particular, time & again I'm distressed by EW's virtual synonymizing of "faith in the Jewish people" (which is idolatrous tribalizing) and faith in God (which is light-to-the-nations universalism). I must read his faith in his people in the light both of his doctrine of the Holocaust's uniqueness & of his teachings about freedom. But what he says of Soviet Jews is true of all Jews & Christians: "Writing, translating, reading and studying are free and liberating acts. By passing the word on, as by living the faith, they are integrated into an ancient collective experience and memory."....(8) EW unwittingly states his mission: "The free man is one who, even in prison, gives to the other prisoners their thirst for, their memory of, freedom." "Even in a climate of oppression, men are capable of inventing their own freedom, of creating their own ideal of sovereignty." Here "freedom" is so devotionally invested as to be a holophrase for God. No, I'm not insisting that an artist of the soul use words with the same precision as a philosopher of the soul, a theologian. But when an artist makes "freedom" glow with divine radiance, I can't help but think of Rudolph's red nose & Santa's air-borne sleigh. (An interesting comparison-contrast is theologian-preacher King's "Let freedom ring!")....(9) Biblical people, Jews and Christians, teach that "man," humanity, is defined by "God," deity--or, put from another angle, the two are interdefining. But hear EW preach the Enlightenment: "It is by his freedom that a man knows himself, by his sovereignty over his own life that a man measures himself,...to take responsibility for himself with dignity."....Now, stepping outside the EW article, this comment: Liberation theologies tend to give "freedom" a weight & substance similar to EW's, with the force & perils thereof.

PEACE Gorby knows how to orchestrate peace-fever at home & abroad. Currently in the USSR "mir" is as red-nose & starry-eyed as "peace" in the USA. Even when defined as the absence of war & the presence of justice, "peace" is bulbous with peril as well as hope. If you are for peace & justice & I am against you, you may claim I'm against peace & justice--& the event may be, for us both together, less of both....So "justice" is another red-nose-reindeer word!