

This morning--11 July 87--it's almost quiet in our Cape Cod home. Of the 15 relatives who've been buzzing around for a week, the last 2 left--leaving only the 4 overnight guests from NY, good friends but "unrelated" in the bio-sense. My mood is compounded of gratitude to God & all those good folks, that I am nourished & upheld by these networks of society, in the intimate sense, at the other pole from solitude, for which I have a genetic preference.

1. As a radical theist, my first interpretive frame sees every experience & situation as divine reward/punishment, blessing/curse, command/invitation, etc. As to what this Thinksheet intends, I thank God for these polar punishments: (1) When I overlisten to my genes, my solitude (quite simply, avoiding people) rots into various emotional negatives (loneliness, loss of self-confidence, mild depression, tinges of cynicism--though never into doubting God or God's love for me); (2) When I overinvolve myself with other humans, my sense of the presence of God--my life's most vital connection--dims. I thank my heavenly Guide for lovingly punishing me with this rotting & this dimming.

2. I'm indebted to Arthur Kornhaber & Ken. L. Woodward for the phrase "vital connections" as they use it in their GRANDPARENTS/GRANDCHILDREN: THE VITAL CONNECTION (Anchor-Doubleday/81). (Ken asked me to write it with him, was surprised to discover that at that time I was not yet a grandfather, then got a better man: it's a better book for having this pediatrician/ family specialist as Ken's partner; and, now that I'm a grandfather, I'm a better one because of this book.) Their social analysis is one familiar from such recent books as Robt. Bellah et al, HABITS OF THE HEART, & Allan Bloom, THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND: our new American social contract of radical individualism has cut us off from the vital connections we need to feed our deepest humanity, & our behavior reveals the consequent emotional-spiritual malnutrition. (In 1941 I heard Elton Trueblood's first giving of his "Our Cut-Flower Civilization" lecture--the roots analogy for the same phenomenon: the deracination, cutting off from the roots, has been increasing for three generations....In 1952 I studied with Viktor Frankl, who used another image for the same dismal fact: "existential vacuum," a figure I made simpler by a commonplace image, viz, the doughnut, empty in the center.)

3. Because of its importance itself, but also because of spinoff values from it, let's look at K&W's "The Method" (pp.107-9). "Most grandparents we visited" seemed satisfied with the new social contract, "satisfied with the material conditions of their lives," "content with their relations to their children and grandchildren." "It was only when we began to probe their vital connections that our respondents were able to get beneath their surface attitudes and into the stuff of emotional history." Our method helped them "become aware of their vital connections--despite the effects of the new social contract--and thus view their individual life histories through the prism of emotional attachments and detachments. Our method was simple: we asked them to recall their own grandparents. In order to do this, they had to summon forth the child within each of them; it is impossible to recall one's grandparents without, at the same time, calling forth the child who experienced those grandparents." Thus they could "re-enter a world of emotional relationships which existed before they became parties to the new social contract. Gradually, this process put them in touch with all their vital connections and, eventually, they were able to articulate the pain and disorientation they now felt as a result of their separation from their own children and ^{over}

grandchildren." The mood of this process is similar to that of poetry as Wordsworth defined it: "emotion recollected in tranquility." But though all this is subjective, it reminds me of Kierkegaard's way of stating the objectivity of subjectivity: "Truth is subjectivity." K & W put it this way: "The way things feel is the way things are, esp. to children. And for the old, the way things felt is the most important dimension of what they have to tell us about the way things were. To discover 'the way things felt,' we asked grandparents to tell us their life stories, focusing on their experiences of receiving and giving nurture." Stories have beginnings & endings, but one's life story "must extend beyond both events," one's birth & one's death: the first is "rooted in the lives of those people out of whom we emerged," and the second "incorporates the on-going lives of those who have emerged from us. Whatever else they might be about, therefore, all life stories are inherently stories of vital connections." In all the interviews, "the common standpoint" of "their present relationship to their own grandchildren" made it possible for us to isolate the central themes" of the life stories "and out of these to construct the outlines of a common emotional history" of today's American new-social-contract grandparents. At the other end, the authors interviewed grandchildren & asked them to draw their grandparents--which they did, unconsciously detailing their relative emotional distance from / closeness to their grandparents--drawings that could subsequently be used in counseling the particular grandparents & parents....Would that every church were to start a grandparents group to have a serious go with this book! Not just to improve grandparent/grandchildren & parent/child relations, but also to deepen & sharpen understanding of what's gone wrong in our civilization which James ("Scotty") Reston, aporpos of Irancontragate & other recent shockers, describes as in moral rot, "the decay of decency" & trust & cooperation; and (16 July 87) he gives thanks for the built-in wisdom of the US "system," which sooner or later catches up with Wall St. twisters, White House liars, & backsliding preachers. Where will it all end? despairing letterwriters ask Ann Landers; and, grandmotherly-earthly optimist though she be, she's now responding "Don't ask me, I just work here." But, mystical optimist that I am, I see signs of hope in the revelations of venality & mendacity & idolatry, and remember Emerson's definition of a weed as "a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered."

4. My mystical optimism derives from my conviction of mystical unity, that the universe is a web in which any connection discovered is all other connections in process of discovery--a God-spun web to catch & devour us into divinity. I am full of stories, my own & others', confirming this total interconnectedness, which for me is best illumined by the cosmic Christ (as in Colossians & Ephesians, but also in Revelation). Every yearning is yearning for God. Every trivial & every neutral & merely functional connection is related to vital connections. And in and throughout it all, the creature retains creaturely dignity while the Creator retains holiness, the holiness we can participate in through praise & obedience--see p.98 of the Reform Jewish prayerbook, GATES OF PRAISE: "You are holy, Your name is holy, and those who strive to be holy declare Your glory day by day. Blessed is the Lord, the holy God." (I roughly translate "They are holy who daily hallelujah!")

5. Says an old bromide, you don't miss your health till you lose it. Well, present feelings of disconnection, alienation, loneliness in our culture open us to spiritual renewal--as bodily pain opens us to seek out our sickness so that we may act responsibly-intelligently toward the renewal of health. We are amnesiac, and can recover-recreate our past; we are withdraw into cocooning, and can open ourselves to the risks of intimacy & of community centering in ultimacy; we are manifoldly wayward, but can wend our way home.