

"any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."--Jn.Donne, in a "Devotion" written during a near-death illness (in the "Devotions" section of E.P.Rudolph's A JOHN DONNE TREASURY [Victor/78], the other two sections being "Poems" & "Sermons")

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS 2972
309 L.Ellz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 8.12.99
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UNDEFEATED DIMINISHMENT

Like many others, this Thinksheet is a "devotion" in the Jn.Donne sense--a life-meditation woof on the warp of God (an essential inner praxis of all God-lovers). Here are the threads I wove on the warp of God TODAY, as I awoke this morning:

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1 A half-century ago today, our middle son, Stephen John, died shortly after birth. This morning I found this Pullman ticket (upper birth, to save \$) stapled to my diary-entry: "the baby lived only a few minutes." Night train: I'd spent the day job-hunting: 10 applications by mail, visits to the U. of Chicago Placement Office & Chicago Theol.Sem.'s pres. McGiffert, who "wrote three Congregational schools on my behalf." The diary entry concludes thus: "Thank God for the firmest tradition of solace, & the truest Solacer." Next day's entry: I took the dead baby's hands (shaped like mine) in my hands, & wept. Then this: "Today I buried our Stephen John and visited my dear wife three times in the Kearney General Hospital. At night I knelt by the crib & prayed, 'Lord, this crib is empty for a purpose--Thy purpose--Thy purpose of Love.'...No prayer, no warp, woof but no weaving. Prayer & love: Loree & I were diminished but neither denying nor defiant (as was suicide Hemingway, after writing a Spanish-civil-war novel which he titled [from Jn. Donne] FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS).

2 Since God is, wills, & will do the good, it would be blasphemous to grieve excessively: since God loves, he grieves with us when we grieve: since God grieves, it would be blasphemous not to grieve with him. God grieves? Yes, he grieves (1) his losses. In Jewish lore, God grieves the AD 70 CE loss of the temple, where he received praises: he grieves the loss of praise, the essential response of creature to Creator & delivered to Deliverer-Redeemer-Savior. And he grieves, too, (2) the limits our unfaithfulness, which is to say our sin, imposes on him. Ps.78.41b has as its verb *tawah*, which in the Hiphel tense means to "limit" or "grieve": grief is the suffering of some diminishment. Curiosum: Of the scores of English translations I just checked, only the good ol' King James conveys the color & power of the Hebrew: By their disobedience, the Israelites "*limited* the Holy One of Israel" (v.40 has "grief" [a different Heb.wd.]). TANACH, the excellent Jewish translation, has, as a footnote from "vexed," "set a limit to."....God, who is "The Unconfinable" (Thinksheet #80), is by his own decisions nevertheless the Limitable: we who are called to "magnify" him, make him great-holy (as in the Magnificat & the 1st line of the Lord's Prayer), have, by perversion of this ability, the power to parvify him, make him small, diminish him, grieve him. So "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph.4.30; CEV "Don't make God's Spirit sad"--the reverse of the biblical aim to please God; the [Greek] notion that God is emotionless, impassible, is antibiblical: the Bible teaches anthropopathism, that God has himself the feeling-range he created in us &, in the incarnation, experienced as us, as a human being).

3 SOLIDARITY, some implicates of: If I just by dying will diminish humanity (according to Donne's devotion quoted before this Thinksheet's title), in living I have the power to enhance humanity. An undersize, highly deprived, underachieving child, on the way home from school each day, comes to an inner-city church to get a hug from the pastor. No words. (As I write, that pastor & her family are spending a vacation week in our home. Her being enhances a life, a human life, life itself.)....Donne (continued): When the church "baptizes a child, that action concerns me, for the child is thereby connected with that body...whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me. All mankind is of one author, and is one volume. When one man dies, that chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language, and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators....As, therefore, the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to

come, so this [death-announcing] bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness....Who can keep that bell from passing a piece of himself out of this world? ¶No man is an island unto himself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main....any man's death diminishes me," so the bell "tolls for thee....¶....Tribulation is treasure....making my recourse to my God, who is our only security...light out of darkness...strength out of weaknessI hear [in the knell] that which makes all sound music, and all music perfect. I hear Thy Son Himself saying, 'Let not your heart be troubled [Jn.14.1].'"....J.D. gets quoted from this passage as solidarity medicine against the West's hypertrophied individualism. His solidarity-doctrine was spiritual; Marx's, later, was material. The former is always true; the latter is becoming more true, though its impersonality is, politically, a fatal flaw.

4 "The time will come when there isn't anything left of you except what's inside, so pay attention to that now [my underlining]," said Presbyterian-minister Fred Rogers of the 30-yr.-long television show "Mr.Roger's Neighborhood" three evenings ago on CNN:TIME--a sermon from an unexpected pulpit. Somebody had called me from my wordprocessor in time for me to hear that, which prepared me for the next day's hospital visits to three who very soon may pass through the door (to use Donne's metaphor, line two on this page). The three patients all hoped that their frail bodies would continue to sustain them in this life, though all were ineluctably faced with their old bodies' **necessary diminishment**. Mr.Rogers, who necessarily avoids specific religious language on his show, had given me a specific nonreligious way of speaking to the patients about death (without using the d-word). I could & did then go on to bespeak the gospel, that God in Jesus confronted & suffered death for us on the cross, & in the resurrection triumphed over it.

While **diminishment** is inevitable if we don't die young, **defeat** is not!

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville MA 02632

