

GRIEF AS "THE ONLY DOOR AND ROUTE TO JOY" ----- ELLIOTT #2146

While #2145 is background, this Thinksheet can stand by itself. It's point can be stated in terms of the metaphor in the title: Grief of all kinds feels like a wall without windows or doors and can be a "door and route to joy." Indeed, at the profoundest level, grieving-mourning is--p.112, Walter Brueggemann, THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION (Fortress/78/83)--"the only door and route to joy." Let's see how this is, and can be.

1. Upfront let me say that my burden here, indeed my grief, is that the kind and quality of grieving I see represented in & therefore promoted by the Hospice literature that's reached me is other & less than Christian. It is sorrowing as "the world" sorrows, "as those who have no hope" (1Thes.4.13), not seeing that (as a spiritual has it) "the Lord makes a way in the wilderness," always intending joy through grief--the same Lord who through Judaism offers (Is.61) "to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to announce release to captives and freedom to those in prison,...to comfort all who mourn, to give to those who mourn...joy and gladness instead of grief, a song of praise instead of sorrow" (KJV: "a garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness")--all of which, in Christianity, is understood specifically through Jesus' taking it up as messianic commission (specifically: this specificity does not cancel, by assumption into Christianity, the promise to and through Judaism).

2. All intelligent & compassionate teaching & counseling on grief affirms grief as normal, healthful, indeed necessary to the next life-steps. ...and therefore sets itself against all grief denial, grief evasion, & grief foreshortening. The differences come in the various world-picture contextings of grief: how-where does grief fit into my picture of "how things are," "the world," "life" (human & other subdivine life), "God," Jesus' death & resurrection, history, the future here & hereafter, my present & future responsibilities for others (including the formation of community & the shaping of society)? My way of putting the question indicates the spheres I as a Christian consider relevant. Note that I've kept the self separate: how-where does grief fit into my picture of myself--the question that dominates much current grief counseling but has little standing historically except in Stoicism. But since Stoicism, being the primary religion of our public schools, is so powerful in our culture, griefwork (of sufferer & counselor) must include grief as self-mirror. Our central spiritual heritage, however, is more concerned with action than with perception, more attentive to behavior than to feeling or even beliefs. Hear 2.Cor.7, eg: (1) v.9: "Your sadness made you change your ways"; (2) v.11: "See what God did with this sadness of yours, how earnest it has made you." NOTE: We tend to see "grief" in ref. to bereavement; but it's response to all separation & loss; it's repentance-penitence, remorse, regret, lament for what was & what never was & what never can be. It's antonymic to joy, as in this road-of-holiness poem (Is.35.10): "They will reach Jerusalem with gladness,/singing and shouting for joy,/ They will be happy forever,/forever free from sorrow and grief" (KJV of v.10: "sorrow and sighing shall flee away"--sighing & groaning being physical expressions of the affective complex we signal by the single word "grief")....NOTE: Jewish & Christian Scripture & liturgics closely associate "grief" & joy; to fail of this association, in grief counseling (care for the dying & the caring & the bereaved), is to fail to be religious in the biblical way; and to the extent to which you are religiously committed, it is also (Stoic sanction!) to fail to be yourself.

3. But the conjunction of grief & joy, to be authentic rather than imposed, must be particular-peculiar to the situation, in each situation. Conferences on & training in "Hospice & Spirituality" can offer skills & clues, but much depends on the inspiration/gift/insight/imagination of the moment.

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4. Who am I to the griever? A fellow-griever. A fellow-griever who cares enough to be with the griever & who rightly bears the dignity of that caring, a dignity that is itself sacramental, the outer sign of sympathy-empathy-courage. And to the griever I am also a witness. A witness to--well, what would you say? To acceptance of (1) the reality of what's happened & of the grief response thereto, and (2) the human status, the unashamed humanity, of the grief response. To faith in the grace of presence, the conviction that "being there" with the griever is in itself "something" and yes more than something. To confidence that the griever can live in-with-through the grief and come out "on the other side" with renewal of life & hope. To trust in God (or, if one is nontheistic, in "life" and/or "nature") for the whole process & all persons involved. And I am an enemy of "the sickness unto death," the deadly philosophy of the cynic, the stubborn impenitent, the negative narcissist who, instead of living through grief, lives grief instead of life. And I am a friend of life against death, of hope against despair, of love against abandoned loneliness....And I as a Christian am all these things on God's behalf, in Jesus' name, not just for this sufferer in whose presence I have chosen to be but also in the presence of this suffering, grieving society-world-age: I am a "prophet" of renewal, of the new age, of the coming Reign-Rule-Kingdom of God. (Grief-helping is also "social action," eschatological modeling, apocalyptic inbreaking.)

5. Finally, consider how these Brueggemann words (pp.111-113) illumine Hospice work: "Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us. There is a yearning for energy in a world grown weary. And we know that the only act that energizes is a word, a gesture, an act that believes in our future." Our society, emphasizing initiative and self-actualization, has "nearly lost" "the capacity to lament the death of the old world" around us and in us. "In a society strong on self-congratulation, the capacity to receive in doxology the new world being given is nearly lost. Grief and praise are ways of prophetic criticism and energy."

"Jesus takes a quite dialectical two-age view of things. He will not be like one-world liberals who view the present world as the only one, nor will he be like the unworldly who yearn for the future with an unconcern about the present. There is work to be done in the present that the future may come. There is mourning to be done for those who do not know of the deathliness of their situation. There is mourning to be done with those who know pain and suffering and lack the power or freedom to bring it to speech. The saying ("Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh," L.6.21; "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," Mt.5.4) is a harsh one, for it sets this grief work as the precondition of joy. It announces that those who have not cared enough to grieve will not know joy."

"The mourning is a precondition in another way too. It is not a formal, external requirement but rather the only door and route to joy. Seen in that context, this is not just a neat saying but a summary of the entire theology of the cross. Only that kind of anguished disengagement permits fruitful yearning, and only the public embrace of deathliness permits newness to come. We are at the edge of knowing this in our personal lives, for we understand a bit of the process of grieving. But we have yet to learn and apply it to the reality of society. And finally, we have yet to learn it about God, who grieves in ways hidden from us and who waits to rejoice until his promises are fully kept."

We shrink from grief & death, as did Jesus, who yet within the shrinking can pray "Yet not what I want, but what You want" (M.14.36). ...Hospice work (I add) puts one in touch with sufferers who, in their grieving, parallel, and may participate in, "the alternative community inclusive of the poor, hungry, and grieving...the wave of God's future."