

STICK OF BITTERNESS, CARROT OF LOVE:  
A COMPARATIVE ESSAY ON RIVAL MOTIVATORS

#2199 Christmas +1 '87  
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*'Twas the day after Christmas, / and all through the house / the creatures were stirring / with nary a grouse.* The day-after-Christmas mood is mellow, the Root of Jesse having polticed out the root of bitterness, of contrariety, of complaint, resentment, regret, remorse....Not that normally our household is overloaded with negativity; but little or much, bitterness comporteth not with the Nativity.....This Thinksheet comes of (1) my after-the-party (at our house last night) guilty feeling that there'd been too much *levitas* & too little *gravitas*, heaviness vis-a-vis the suffering world--a feeling Loree at breakfast this morning somewhat relieved by reminding me that she & I have a tendency to go too light on lightness; (2) noticing in my earliest worldly reading of the day that that grand old CAROLINA ISRAELITE (founder & editor) I.F. Stone, on the occasion of coming 80, said "I am without rancor. Some people become radical out of hatred. Others become radical out of love and sympathy. I come out of the second class. I have hated very few people" (46CCT26Dec87, NYTimes); (3) today's AP headline "Peace reigns in Bethlehem," followed by the subhead "Israel arrests 800 Palestinians to quell riots"; (4) in N.Ireland, the strange, refreshing revulsion, on both sides, against the bitterness that before the Enniskillen bombing time & again escalated into violence; (5) a man of no prior religious commitment, telling me today of his Christmas decision to surrender his bitterness about life & become a practicing Christian; (6) a letter of Flannery O'Connor (90, S.Fitzgerald, THE HABIT OF BEING) in delighted response to a letter-writer who (in contrast to the usual stupid ones) understood her, which "startled" her: I am "a God-conscious writer....a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty....the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endure; the only thing that makes the Church endureable is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it. This may explain the lack of bitterness in the stories" (ie, the O'Connor stories her correspondent liked & understood). (In context & contrast, she calls the NEW YORKER reviewer "moronic....the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead....there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them.")

1. As is my wont, I went to the Bible to study the Thinksheet theme--here, bitterness. (Personal process-note: After studying all the words in the biblical languages & noting the variety of contexts, I then read articles in Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, et al--eg, all my basic conclusions were confirmed in THE INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE, I.443f. If you were to go only to IDB, you would--though missing much depth & resonance--see all the basic facts.) Of our five physical senses, taste is the one here: the experience of bitterness on the tongue & in the entire gastronomic system is the metaphoric base for a range of inner-outer, subjective-objective attitudes & actions. Living conditions can be, are for many, bitter--so the bitter herbs in the Passover meal, reminiscent of the bondage in Egypt. We say a person has "gone sour"; & I've often heard Calvin's theology dismissed as a projection of his dyspepsia. It is indeed hard to keep sweet on life, & toward other people, if your tummy's upset. Take your biblical concordance & note, under "bitter/ness," the characters who wrestled with this problem (Job, eg).

over

2. Stick/carrot is a double metaphor for motivating the social animal, society. In this Thinksheet I'm using it interiorly: a human being feels-thinks-speaks/writes-acts under negative & positive motivators, in response to pushes & pulls, aversively & attractively--on the grid of judgment, doing a right thing for a right reason, a wrong thing for a wrong reason, a right thing for a wrong reason, or a wrong thing for a right reason. My focus is stateable as a question: Is, in a particular person & situation, the attitude/action driven by bitterness or drawn by love or, if both, how much of each?

3. This question first came alive for me in the early 1930s as I left a group that was driven by bitterness (a communist cell) & joined a fundamentalist, new, struggling church (more drawn by love, though somewhat driven by bitterness). In the competition for me, Jesus won over Marx. Today, it seems, in many quarters, even some of them religious, Marx is winning over Jesus, hostility toward "the powers that be" (Ro.13.1) being so intense as to equate them with "the principalities & powers" (of Eph.6.12, on which see Walter Wink's trilogy). Jn.3.16 doesn't say "God so hated the world...."

4. Love & hate-hostility-bitterness are the same energy in different quantum states (as in 1934 Fermi discovered about subatomic particles). I'm not saying, Pollyannaishly, love is nice & bitterness is naughty. God preordains (TANAKH note, Eccl.3) "a time for loving and a time for hating" (targeting your bitterness; cf. "curse bitterly," rr, which is, other than mr, the only Hebrew root to be trd. by "bitter" in English translations, which tr. wds. of the latter root by a wide variety of wd.-ideas: anger, bile, gall, enemy-enmity, foe, grieved, chafed, discontent, choler, rebel, provoke, disobey, aversion, revulsion)...Bitterness is a soul-condition that may be, except when the will loses control, (a) intensified or weakened, (b) repressed or expressed, and (c) expressed with ill will destructively or good will constructively, even creatively --but also, though rarely, with good will destructively in the interest of new creation.

5. Loser bitterness has a nigh-insatiable appetite of its own. Cape Cod just got a new ferry, and we are in a flap over its sailing into Woods Hole flying the Confederate flag (it having been made in the Great Southland). Southerners are (historically) losers, as having been defeated; so are American blacks, as having been dragged here. Then there's vicarious bitterness, a characteristic of nonlosers who identify with losers (as God is said to do in having "a preferential option for the poor"). Then there's antivicarious bitterness, as in those who see the vicariously bitter (eg, those proJewish because of the Holocaust) as on an inauthentic guilt-trip. Then there's generation-gap bitterness in both generations, its intensity proportional to the change-distance between offspring & parents. Then there's feministic bitterness, of consciousness-raised women & male-selfimage-offended men. And of course there's religion bitterness, Shiite/Suni, Jewish orthodox/nonorthodox, Christian catholic/protestant & mainline/evangelical-fundamentalist. A headline yesterday: "Saudi king says Iran undermines Arab bid to 'liberate' Jerusalem." It's enough to make a rationalist despair--a rationalist not perceptive enough to meditate on his/r own arrogant bitterness against irrationality. Then there's prisoner bitterness: I'm trying to keep TM out of MA prisons & substitute a secular form of pacifying meditation, with specific religious options not promoted by tax money. Pray for S.Africa, N.Ireland, Haiti, Korea, Israel/Palestinianians, and who not.

6. Christianity as winner has the Grand Inquisitor discomfort with Jesus; as loser, it easily preaches Jesus' outsider (a) affinity for sufferers from the system & (b) bitterness toward the causes of their suffering.