

## WHEN DEATH

## POKES A HOLE IN THE BOTTOM OF YOUR RELIGION AND YOUR FAITH LEAKS OUT

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An **open letter** from an old man to a very old man whose heart-unburdening letter I received yesterday

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

1 When your dear wife of the short many years died, Loree & I had you in our home for dinner, and you poured out your heart with the commendable courage & clarity you have now put into writing, than which there's no better self-therapy for grief. This my reply is personal-impersonal: personal in content (my heart to yours), impersonal in form (as I know you would be glad to have my readers benefit from our letter-exchange even if a few of them guess your identity: only the innocent and the ignorant could be at all critical of you for your present inner-life confusion, & I think none of my readers falls into either category).

2 Not only because you are older than I, but also because you've had some struggles I've not had, I feel reverentially hesitant to write to you as frankly as my mind urges me to: I was raised (reared, we use to say) to respect my elders in the hierarchy of the flow of flesh from generation to generation. But while I cannot give myself permission to be frank, in your first sentence you have given it to me: "You have been into theology all of your life so that I'm hoping you can give me some answers." Responses certainly, answers maybe: answers only if your soul hopefully accepts my responses into the arms of your questions. And if you decide to write in reply to this letter, the numbering of its sections is for your convenience.

3 At the nadir of the Great Depression you had the courage to go into business for yourself, selling greeting cards! I'm so far from being good at selling anything that I cannot even imagine such courage. I'm one of those clergy who've never "worked" in "the workworld" of business (except some Saturday nights making tents with fellow-college-professors during World War II's last year). Having eaten off of religion all my life, I am humbly aware that I have (as Jesus says in Jn.4.38 CEV) "harvest[ed] crops in fields where others have done all the hard work." My sense of economic dependence-&-solidarity with the workers of the world yesterday & today produces in me a gratitude that squelches any internal uprising of pride in my achievements, little though they be.

The Depression: its effects remain in us who suffered it. (Our family lost more than everything monetary.) Evidence in me: when the mailperson picked up a picture of you (in our home during that dinner), he dropped off your letter to me, & my first thought was "I could have saved 33¢." The save-your-pennies mentality, foreign to our children, incredible to our grandchildren.

The Depression: "Things can never satisfy the human heart" was the refrain of a sermon on Esther I heard in a tabernacle (of the same vintage as the Craigville one) in 1932, when few Americans had the privilege of testing whether things ("stuff" we're now calling it, with too much around) could satisfy the human heart. The message was, & is, confirmatory of my then, & now, greater hunger for things invisible than for things visible--& greater trust in heaven than in earth. Consequently, my dreams of worldly success have been too weak to tempt me to pay too high a price for it, the price (to put it one way) of going along to get along. "Sweet are the uses of adversity," said the Bard: on its positive side, the Depression nudged many to seek those uses--you & me, among many.

4 Now you have fallen into a different sort of depression, the dark night of the soul bereft of the beloved. Your last sentence is a cry of despair: "After all this, I ask you what is my rationale for living?" Grief is usually deepest, & reason least available to it, about a half year after the shock of bereavement--right about where you are now. You ask for reasons, & I could spell out a few; but I believe that right now you can make better use of clues than of reasons. Clues are open doors, or at least keys to open locked doors. Here's one: God our Life-Giver has for us **dark gifts** he cannot give us in the light, when things (as we say) are going well. How can you be ready to receive these gifts? Another clue: by practicing daily

gratitude to God for yesterday's bright gifts & today's gift of continuing life with its opportunities to be light in others' darkness.

5 Hold onto that clue: "light in other people's darkness." The Dalai Lama has two current best-sellers with one theme: happiness is a reflex from helping (negatively put, misery is a symptom of not helping, of the disease of introversion ["incurvature," Luther called it]). "Hell is other people" said the French atheist existentialist Jn. Paul Sartre. True, but not as true as that **heaven is other people** whom we help even if only by a kind word and smile. This you know & have practiced, but in your deep well of woe you may need to be reminded of it.

6 Your second paragraph states the basic religion you've observed through your long life: "Whenever obstacles have come up in my life, I have always gone back to God's promises in the 1st Psalm & the 3rd chapter of Proverbs." And on p2 you said this about starting your business (in 1933!) with \$45: "with great faith in God I was sure I was going to make it." Your faith did not fail when the great hurricane of '38 "completely wiped us out" by flood...! In our 53 years of business we survived another flood, a fire, & 5 relocations because of the sale of the buildings we were in!...In '43 I was off to war....In '78 we were forced to sell our home at a tremendous loss because we could not afford to maintain it."....P3: In '78 we had to "give up our independence," moving into the home of one of our two children, where we were wonderfully treated; but "I visualized, I prayed, I affirmed that God would open a way for us to have our own little home again, but it never happened. I know, Willis, that there are many people worse off than we ever were. That is not the point."....P4: "Up until now I have always believed that I had a purpose in life and that was to show people by my words and by my actions what a wonderful gift this life of ours is and to look for the best in all--to overlook the negative & to see the good. I ask myself, after 53 years of 6-day work-weeks--outside of respect, what did it bring me?"....P5: "You can see that my life-long beliefs and values have been shaken to the core. As a thank-you to God, I always believed in making my life as productive as possible, & always asking God how I could use my talents to better advantage. I need some kind of assurance that I didn't make all the wrong decisions and somehow God was guiding me, but right now I cannot see it."

7 Before commenting on your basic religion, I must confess two ignorances: (1) Though I was an ordained minister before Pearl Harbor (12.7.41), my eyes were too bad to get into the chaplaincy, so I studied & taught through WWII, while you fought in it; (2) My beloved of 55 years is still with me, & I cannot know how I would take her death, what effect it would have on my faith. Please forgive me if these ignorances impede my being as helpful in comments as I pray to be.

8 You have had thick (genuine, hearty) faith on the basis of thin religion. (Please reread the title of this open-letter Thinksheet). You were right to stand inwardly on "God's promises," but Ps.1 & Prov.3--while true expressions of biblical faith--are too narrow a slice of the Bible to represent & convey its Story of the Promise. They are, as scholars say, Deuteronomistic: good things happen to good people & bad things to bad. I believe that's true *at the end of the day* (as the current saying for final outcomes, including the afterlife, puts it); but it's a matter of faith: observation alone yields ambiguity or even, sometimes, at least temporary despair (which you're now experiencing). Realistically, the Bible presents both the promises & the problems, both the faith & the frustrations. Jesus asks Peter to walk on water & the poor bastard (temporarily) sinks. God asks Job to be righteous & the poor bastard (temporarily) loses everything. Jesus preaches life & (temporarily) dies for it (but we add "for us & our salvation" from "sin, death, & the devil"). It takes the **whole**\* Bible (the canon) for us to see the **whole** picture. Read Ps.1 in light of the rest of the Psalter (e.g., 73.3: "I saw the prosperity of the wicked") & read Prov.3 in light of Job 13.15 (God "will kill me; I have no hope" [which, the NRSV footnote says, can also be translated "Though he kill me, yet will I trust in him"]!). Life & the Bible are a perfect fit for each other: both are messy, so "trust the LORD and not your own judgment," & "don't turn away or become bitter" (both expressions are in your beloved Prov.3, Contemporary English Version). "Your [present] pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding." (Gibran)

\* You are right about the "gift" of life & that we should be "productive"; but add (for example) Ephesians 2.1-10 (on the unearned gift of new life) to your few Old Testament favorites: "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works" but "for good works" (New Revised Standard Version). Please ponder Romans 1-8. And church-hunt!