

For "Conversations of Consequence,"

WE NEVER OUTGROW OUR NEED FOR ANTI/HEROES (good/bad behavioral examples)

Yesterday, that \$-million no-charge baseball, with Mark's name & his penning of "9.8.98, The 62nd," was put behind glass in Cooperstown's Baseball Hall of Fame; & today, the 36 file-boxes of Starr's "information" were delivered to the House of Representatives. Let's think about these two great huggers, Mark & Bill.

1 Billions of words have poured out of the populace about good-boy Mark & bad-boy Bill. (Life is complicated: Good-boy Mark divorced his wife, bad-boy Bill did not. And good-boy Mark's 62nd has the bad effect of making the country even more sports-worshiping, while bad-boy Bill's bad example will have some good effects on public morals [as Bill said yesterday, "I hope that millions of families all over America are in a way growing stronger because of this"].)

2 I can't lose. In my left hand I've a sermon titled MORALITY MATTERS (in case Bill loses his job); in my right hand, a sermon titled GRACE ABOUND. (My 46-cs.-old Osiris has a whip [for judgment]; in his right hand, a shepherd's crook [for benevolent rule, mercy-forgiveness-grace]. The biblical God of the living as well as of [eg, Osiris] the dead, rules, for those who have eyes of Faith to see it, over "all things" in both judgment [the Cross] & grace [the Resurrection] without rushing. Rushing? The vb. "rush to" has often appeared in the Clinton event: some are said to have rushed to judgment [the Christian Coalition?], some to forgiveness [the clergy?].)

3 Complicated: bad-boy Bill (in sexual morality) is also good-boy Bill (in social morality: racial justice, women's rights, poverty, education, environment, budget- & debt reduction, etc.). The bad boy, finally having used most of the magic words ("wrong," "sorry," "regret," "apology," requests for "forgiveness"), says he's done with adultery & lying about it. Being a virgin (except in marriage), I've never been tempted to coverup sex-lying, the most common form of prevarication (lit., "walking crookedly"). Some instances of this form of lying produce only small ripples in the social pond, but Clinton dropped a huge-wave-making boulder.

4 Should the punishment fit, in size, the ripple/wave effect? Punishment has its objective (exterior) & its subjective (interior) sides, & Clinton is suffering both. (Objectively, he's suffered the collapse of his legislative dreams at least for this seventh year of his presidency. Enough, I think. Losing his job would be excessive punishment, "cruel and unusual"; & it would punish the innocent, the citizenry, by depriving us of the services of a highly skilled, greased-pig politician who truly does feel the public pains & has proved his ability to do something about them.)

5 But what about the illegal lengths to which his sex-lying went? Should not the laws be honored by taking a pound of flesh next to his job (meaning, Shakespearianly, ejection from the White House)? Again, I think not. We have judges (in this case, the Congress acting as grand jury) to work not "judgment" (a codical matter) but "justice" (a matter of fairness, proportion, perspective). Orthodox-Jew Senator Lieberman rightly said Clinton's been "immoral," & (I believe also rightly) is not for impeachment (a process wisely in the hands not of the judicial but of the legislative branch of the federal government) even though the President has committed crimes in his pellmell desperation to cover up his adultery. (Judaism & Christianity differ in the divine means of grace, the latter the Cross; but do not differ in the moral-ethical understanding of the divine nature vis-a-vis judgment/grace.)

6 (9.11.98) At the Prayer Breakfast this morning, the President added some words to his lexicon of the Event: "sin," "repentance," "contrite," "seeking pastoral support," "God can change us & make us strong at the broken places," "I ask that God give me a clean heart & let me walk by faith & not by sight," "my Bible [speaks of] a broken heart....I must have God's help....a renunciation of pride," if I "maintain both a broken spirit & a strong heart, good can come." But on the Lehrer Show, the pres. of the Southern Baptist Convention was relentlessly legalistic: Clin-

ton must go. What gives a leg up to legalism-legality-law is the fact that law is the predominant occupation of the members of Congress. Then there's the moralistic argument that Congress should "make an example" of Clinton as to how a righteous nation should treat the unrighteous--an argument offset by those who say that Congress itself should be an example of wisdom (truth proportionality) & grace (mature forgiveness). We cannot give Bill the benefit of the doubt: there is no doubt. But believing that his repentance, rejection of his adulterous-lying habits, & request for forgiveness are all genuine, we can give him the benefit of our forgivingness & our consequent support for his continued presidency. CAUTIONARY NOTE: We, as well as he, are being judged in the Superior Court (above the Supreme Court).

7 As we read biographies & fiction & are attentive to the good/bad doings of our contemporaries, one question never entirely absent within us is "How am I to live?" A good education provides us with the world's **funded wisdom** on every dimension of human behavior, physical-interpersonal-intellectual-spiritual. And, as we traverse life's stages, we each fund up some bought-&-paid-for understandings of good/bad, right/wrong, kind/cruel, un/fair, un/selfish, un/important. Certain persons (historical [eg, biblical], mythological, fairy-story, personal [known to us directly], public [known to us indirectly]) become personal symbols & models of virtues/vices. And some of these--eg, the slave-ship captain who, after repentance, wrote "Amazing Grace"--are double examples, two-box "before"/"after" cartoons, trophies of grace (as I hope Clinton will be in the near & distant future).

This person-as-behavioral-symbol form of wisdom is central to most programs of **moral education**. Wm.Law's "characters" (of whom Alex.Whyte wrote brilliantly, in an old book I cherish) thumbnail the virtues/vices fictionally, so memorably & insightfully that Sam.Johnson said of A SERIOUS CALL TO A DEVOUT AND HOLY LIFE that it was, with the exception of the Bible, the most helpful book he had ever read. Law's logic is relentless, always with an edge of kindness & another of humor. (I doubt that Clinton has read this classic. Have you?)

8 On the plus side of the Clinton event, everybody's getting something of a moral education by engaging in "conversations of consequence" about it. Churches should provide opportunities for such conversations about what's happening "out there" (as well as "in here"). Our congregation, & during the summer the Craigville Tabernacle, is providing space/time for this. What did I have in mind when this phrase popped into my mind? A conversation is of consequence if it has any bearing on such questions as *How am I to live? use my resources? relate to others at home, at work, in church, in community? What are my/our economic-political-ecological responsibilities locally/nationally/globally? What are my duties to God?*

9 "It's **payback time**" for Clinton, a Greek-style flawed-tragic hero, whose weak part was not (as Achilles) his heel. He was, as they say in the South, "a hard dog to keep on the porch." "Unconditional surrender" seemed cruel to Germany & Japan but, after WWII, proved wise. More than Starr, science (Clinton's DNA on "the dress") forced the President into unconditional surrender of his dodges. "Payback time" is a clever recent coinage for this hopeless/hopeful condition (hopeful because hopeless: you can't have a new start till you've stopped). First humiliation, then humility ("a renunciation of pride," Clinton called it this morning; "a broken heart")....Early this morning, Clinton wrote this morning's speech, which included "a broken heart....a broken spirit." The ref., Ps.51, speaks of one's bones being "crushed" (humiliation indeed!), then "a contrite spirit; God, You will not despise a contrite and crushed heart" (TANAKH/85 has "crushed" instead of "broken," though the second is a different verb). Clinton is, finally, crushed. Many feel crushed about the whole tragic affair. I am more sad than angry. Sad for the Clintons. Sad for the seductress, who bragged about her conquest. Sad for this sex-obsessed voyeurish nation, "our refusal to move our eyes away from the President's fly" (as Mary Ann Sorentino's 9.2.98 column put it--the day after the feeding frenzy to buy the video of "Titanic," the story of another successful seductress).^{*} Sad that on both sides of the Beltway we might have been paying attention, instead, to matters of domestic & foreign consequence--which now I'm glad (or at least prayerful) that we can now turn to, the nation's moral sense having undergone some purgation of right/wrong (against the prevailing ethical relativism).

* ((9.12.98) In the Starr Report, Monica herself makes the "Titanic"/herself-as-seductress connection.