THE HUMAN NEED TO HAVE THINGS GO RIGHT/WRONG --- ELLIOTT #2119

I'm undermotivated to write a Thinksheet on our human need to have things go right. I guess it's because I'm so convinced of it, and think everybody else is too. A Thinksheet on anything so obvious would bore me to write and bore you even worse to read. But at least as prophylaxis against being thought negative in what I am motivated to say in this Thinksheet, here's a story to say how eager I am to have things go right for us human beings, right enough for our joy and peace and hope and love....Last week on the West Coast (Nov/86) I was walking in heavy rain with 4½-year-old grandson Matthew Mines (his mother's maidenname) Elliott, who suddenly started to cry because "his" chestnut, which he'd followed about a hundred feet as it floated & bobbed in fast water along a curbing, had disappeared into a grating. "Let's have a look, Matthew." "It's gone, it's gone, I can't see it anymore" (which was the case not because it wasn't visible bobbing away about a foot below the grating but because he couldn't see through his tears). "Get it for me, Grammpa, get it for me!" "I'm sorry Matthew, I can't" (the grating being too narrow for my hand, though not for his). "I want it, I want it back!" He ran away, and I waited for him to return--never taking my eyes off the chestnut. Curiosity got him; he returned, saw what I saw, and said "THERE it is!" I: "Shall we leave it there?" He: "No, get it Grammpa!" I showed him I couldn't, and said "We'll just have to leave it there unless you can think of some way to get it." He looked at me, smiled, rolled up his sleeve, grabbed, and squealed with delight. I: "Good, Matthew! I'm glad you got it! Did you learn anything?" "No," said he. "Think!" said I. He scowled, then smiled and said "I can do something you can't do, Grammpa!" I: "So God has figured out a way for us both to learn something...."....It's a story of a loving intervention through which something that had gone wrong occasioned something going triumphantly right, as the Crucifixion occasioned the Resurrection. Stumblingblocks are only undiscovered steppingstones. We all deeply need to have things go right. And we all have the power & commission to be ministering-angel mentors in the mission of Things Going Right. But now the balancing truth:

1. Murphy the factory forman, research has shown, wasn't being cynical-metaphysical. By "If anything can go wrong, it will," he meant "If anything can go wrong, one of you guys will figure out how to make it go wrong." A problem, you see, not of theodicy but of (un)applied (un)intelligence. The notion that some things needed to go wrong--ie, that folk in that factory needed to have some things go wrong--would have puzzled & irritated Murphy, who at least at the moment would not have been philosophical enough to ponder the fact that in factories, almost nothing goes righter --there's almost never an improvement--till something goes wrong.

2. You might not have guessed it, but this Thinksheet is about TX & CA and how awful it is that too much has gone right in those two states, or rather that not enough has gone wrong--at least till recently. We're still in the year in which Challenger, NASA-and-Houston's pride, blew up in an explosion of damn-the-defects overconfidence. And still in the year when the price of oil so plummeted as to depress the economy of that state. But the rest of this Thinksheet is about....

3. CA. California, esp. Southern CA, esp. the SF-LA strip, is--more typically than anywhere else in our nation--Hubrisland, the place of perpetual promise, with an underworld of perpetual disappointment from overpromise. In the 1960s I had numerous occasions to find myself there (and, yes, I did a bit of finding myself there, as everybody at that time was supposed to do). I was in on Esalen, hippie communes, "Berkeley" (a demonstration with Dan Berrigan),

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schools (eg, lecturing at the Jesuit school, the U of SF), churches (denominational & conciliar) work, UN (the speaker for the Marin Co. celebration of the UN's 20th year), Black demos in the wake of "Watts" (which could see "HOLLYWOOD" on the hillside above, and which Hollywood could see burning)--but I was only vaguely conscious that Reagan had left Hollywood for CA politics, and unconscious that the Rev. Jim Jones arrived from IND with a handful of disciples in 1965....CA being so American in strengths/weaknesses, I could extrapolate for CA in the 1960s either beneficent or disastrous trajectories. For the purpose of this Thinksheet, I'm picking up two events that bear the stamp of CA 1960s hopes & illusions, fantasies & falsehoods, heady facts and fronty frauds, & innovative excesses thumbing their noses at tradition. The events are Jonestown (a creature, in Guyana, of Jim Jones) & Contragate (the illegal appropriation of secret-arms-deal-Iran-$ to subversive in Nicaragua--a disaster the Pres. is responsible for by excess or defect, ie by lying subterfuge or by administrative incompetence). Comments:

(1) IL-to-CA radical-rightist Reagan shares with radical-leftist IND-to-CA Jones (a) radicality, extremism, and (b) the esprit of CA, their chosen state. It was Goldwater (using speechwriter Wm. Safire's phrase) who said "Extremism is no vice." But it was R&J who lived it out, with all the fantasies pertaining thereto. Californians aren't called "flaky" for nothing, though I've known and worked with some nonflaky ones. The 1980 election appalled me: a choice between Carter, who couldn't communicate but was a man of substance, and Reagan, who could communicate but was a man of show --so I voted for Carter (& lost), as I voted (& lost) for Nixon in 1960, a man who seemed to be of character (but the event showed to be amoral), against Kennedy, a man I (rightly) judged to be shallow and immoral. Thank God our US president, appearances to the contrary, is not king.

(2) About Jonestown, I know a thing or two more than most newsmen who wrote books about it. I spent a week with the Guyanese who was the surveyor for (the legal title) the People's Temple Agricultural Project--Bernard Mathews, a deeply Christian man who is committed to (1) remaining in his country, which he loves as a patriot, and (2) supporting his Marxist-Leninist government as much as his Christian commitment permits--and (3) being as much good news as he can, with his technological-managerial skills, to his country's economy. Both directly and through his employees, he was in continuous contact with Jonestown, which he respected (except for its latest, fatal stage, of which he warned both his own government and the US government) as a worthy experiment both agronically & communally. (Of all I've read of Jonestown, the closest to the truth seems to be Shiva Naipaul's JOURNEY TO NOWHERE: A NEW WORLD TRAGEDY (Penguin/80/82), but even it does not convey to me the tactility, the human reality, the smell of Jonestown as much as did my fellow-Christian relation with Bernard, who could not have been a more gracious host both beyond & in relation to the 75-year-old black-woman moderator of the 37 Congregational Churches of Guyana, Una Mathews, who saw to my preaching in a number of the churches, was a former student of mine, and is Bernard's aunt. I know in my bones why the Christian socialist Jones went to CA & then to Guyana: both CA & Guyana supported his strengths & illusions.

(3) About Contragate, I know that a romantic-rightist ideolog who's doubled the deficit after promising to eliminate it must now face the consequences of his magical rhetoric as Jones, romantic-socialist ideology, had to face the consequences of his magical rhetoric. The CA romanticism in both needs further looking at.