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An open letter to Harold Wilke, armless embracer of the world

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Prolegomena to A THEOLOGY OF DISABILITY

Dear Harold,

I fooled you! It's been so long since you asked me to write "a theology of disability" that you'd given up hope, no? So what, in addition to the desire to free myself from the nudges of conscience, prompts me to action? But first let me dispose of the hesitances behind the delay: (1) Who was I, physically undisabled, to address the subject? Doesn't it take one to know one? (2) How could I say anything on the subject to you, who qualify not only as disabled but as good a theologian as I (modesty prompted me to say "at least," but honesty won)? (3) Never pass up a chance to blame the victim: I figured the delay was your fault. At Holyoke College as you & I were getting into your car not long after your request, I said "Harold, which is worse, no arms or no legs?" & you expostulated "Willis! How could **you** ask that [stupid] question? The wheelchair-bound are handicapped, I'm only disabled, if that!" Whereupon off we went, you proving that a steeringwheel is only a frill, unnecessary to good driving. Man, that was intimidating! I don't mean the driving: I'm so used to being with you in your car that I scarcely noticed that. I mean your calling me stupid, & (by implication) unworthy of writing anything worth reading on the theology of disability. No, you are too much a paragon to everyone (except, I suppose, Peg, whom I greet here only in this parenthesis) to say "Stupid!" It was only in your shock, your body language, that I felt the accusation. (All my life I've had this dismal experience of people thinking more of me before I open my mouth.)

So what did prompt me to action? Not primarily the fact that I'd developed a bulging file on "Wilke: Theology of Disability." I've many such file-substitutes for action. Rather, the fact that hurdle "(1)" was overcome: I became disabled. Rising from my bed on July 9 last, I discovered that I was totally reading-blind in my left eye: even a newspaper's largest type was only a blur. Four levels of specialists declared my eye brain-dead (the eye being a part of the brain), & the Harv.prof. of my affliction said "Sorry, but if the other eye goes, don't ask for an appointment: I wouldn't be able to do anything for you. Any morning as long as you live, you have a 50-50 change of becoming reading-blind in your good eye." Disability, + daily threat of further disability, of becoming (literally) illiterate (a condition that would reduce some folks' activities 10%, mine 90%).

"Accidental" sudden disability is radically different from genetic or congenital disability. (One angle: Recently a man born blind told me, at coffeehour after church, that he pities his blind friends who lost their sight, instead of never having had it.) Might there be, accordingly, two theologies of the disabled, corresponding to these two types of disablement? I doubt it, but perhaps its worth thinking about.

That morning, I was thrown into prayer & terror, a creative mix. My faith was not rocked, but neuromuscular me fell into the deep pit the Psalmists speak of. A terror of the child of the past within me revived: at age 14, before eye surgery,

I had to sign against malpractice suing in case of total blindness: & for two weeks I could see no light at all through the bandages.

At the risk of seeming maudlin, I had to tell my disability story as prolegomenal to these prolegomena toward a theology of disability. Yes, I'm not readly to write a theology of disability, but I do have enough courage to suggest a few preludes, which I jot down here in no particular order:

1. Theodicy: **If God is just, why is anybody disabled?** (Physically, the only dimension of disablement I'm dealing with in this Thinksheet; the same question needs answering also vis-a-vis mental, emotional, spiritual, & social disablements.) A theological function of visible disability is to raise the question of life's profound & pervasive inequities. The question needs to confront its reverse: What realities--realities, not illusions--feed the widespread human conviction that God is good, righteous, just? (A parallel twosome: "How can you believe in a good God when there's so much evil in the world?" needs to confront "How can you not believe in a good God when there's so much good in the world?") Logically, theodicy is a wash item; psychologically, it's a conundrum; theologically, it's a challenge to transcend (as do, variously, Job & Jesus) the moralization of God....I'm not done with this item. I'll never be done with it, & it may come up again in this Thinksheet.

Some of my Thinksheets these days are in the "Justification & Justice" series looking toward Craigville Theological Colloquy VII on that theme (July 16-21 here where we live). Your nimble mind will make swift connections between this bipolar theme and this first § of this Thinksheet.

2. Site clearance precedes building. (From building our house on Cape Cod a decade ago, we still have a few logs left from site clearance as well as a few timbers left from building.) A theology of disability has the **critical** (in both senses) task of exposing & smashing the psycho- & socio-icons (literally, "icono-clasm") that have first relativized & then de-moralized **morality.** In recent days Trudeau has been hammering away at one of them, viz "self-esteem." Today he's arrived at a dissident "in the back" of the room who asks "one last question," a question that blows the scene & blasts the idol-icon, so much so that the chair whispers "Call security!" I was incensed when the glass-cathedral preacher so bought into the secular "self-esteem" fad & fraud as to do a book on it & get the bucks to send a copy to each of America's preachers (in my opinion, a slightly worse violation of the gospel than those of Jim & Tammy Bakker). Let's see:

(1) Doonesbury's dissident suggests that a healthy self-esteem can't be got at directly but is "simply the happy side effect" of something else. A famous diagram of Viktor Frankl shows happiness as only indirectly available: on the base of a right triangle there's a block between "I" (Freud's "das Ich") & "happiness"; so to get to happiness you must aim at something else (perpendicular to happiness), ascending the hypotenuse to get to that something else. As you're selfforgetfully going about the business of that something else, your surprised, caught off guard, by happiness (cf. C.S.Lewis' SURPRISED BY JOY). Biblically, that something else goes under such holophrases as "the glory of God," "what is pleasing to God," and "the kingdom of God."....Gospel selfforgetfulness is radically other than selfabandonment, throwing yourself away as no damn good. The latter is, like self-esteem directly aimed at, a form of egoism, narcissism. Indeed, self-esteen & selfabandonment are the polars of selfish individualism, the chief sickness attacked in HABITS OF THE HEART.

(2) By contrast, the life-&-fiction protagonist of "Born on the Fourth of July" hurls himself & his wheelchair into a worthy cause, thus ceasing to feel his bathos, & is finally able to say, self-acceptingly, "I'm home." Thank God for the rising number of films celebrating solid human values & virtues. This one can be viewed as a commentary on our Lord's sayings that his disciples must "deny" themselves & "lose" their lives (Mt.**16**24f M.**8**34f L.**9**23f; on "lose," see also Mt.**10**39 L.**17**33 Jn.**12**25).

(3) Further, our Doonesbury dissident identifies that of which self-esteem is a "happy side effect" as "a sturdy character," integrity, personal moral substance, an ethical quality of life. Not how you feel about yourself but what you do when

faced with decisions in which self-interest is set over against what you're convinced is right/good/appropriate (or at least two of the three). You are sturdy if in those situations your subjective self-esteem is inferior to your objective esteem for righteousness (antonym of "self-righteousness"), uprightness, probity. Those whose primary dedication is to self would never get themselves twisted into the inner pretzel of Romans 7, the condition in which one's moral sensitivity has been conscience-raised to the point of ethical impotence (as in the first of the Twelve Steps of AA & spinoffs) &, with that confession, one has been given faith that somebody else can do something about the mess you are (the second Step: "higher power"). Paradoxically, a "sturdy character" is a can't-do person, a person whose self-esteem is too low to believe can-do but who believes can do with God's help.

(4) Most societies help their visibly disabled have low self-esteem, Jesus' good news becomes a possibility only when one's self-esteem is low enough, so (unintentionally & perversely) most societies thus provide *praeparatio evangelii*, seed-bed for the Christian conversion of the visibly disabled. Let's transpose: Suppose Paul's inner crippling (again, Ro.7) were visible & the disablements of the visibly disabled were invisible: does that help you feel what I'm trying to say?

(5) In ours or any other society, visible cripples (here I carefully choose this word rather than "the disablied" or "the handicapped") are only the tip of cripple iceberg. To aim, as our public schools do, to teach self-esteem to these millions of inner cripples is to throw oil on fire. The gospel call is to repentance & faith, not to self-respect & self-esteem.... Disabled means can't do [I've often heard you say "How can you call me disabled? What is it you think I can't do?"]: millions of Americans are invisibly can't-do emotionally, morally, mentally, culturally, spiritually. Isn't there anything, anything at all, they can do? Yes: "Repent, and believe the gospel!" That's the Christian mission's baseline, but it's been largely abandoned by the liberal churches, who preach instead various pop versions of Renaissance & Enlightenment humanism, by many currently summed up in the holophrase "self-esteem."

(6) Back to our Doonesbury dissident, who further diminishes the ego (in the pop Freudian sense) by depriving the self of any claim that "a sturdy character" is a do-it-yourself achievement. Says s/he, "a sturdy character, itself the product of unambiguous moral education." (I love the first chapter of Marcus Aurelius' MEDITATIONS: he throws all the laurels for his character & accomplishments over his shoulders so they land on his parents, mentors, & ancestors. It's a shame that the skeeters ate him alive on the Danube in AD/CE180 when he was up there killing off enough Germans to keep them pacified so he could go back home & kill off Christians, whom finally none of the Roman emperors could keep pacified. Maybe the mosquitos were God's punishment for killing Christians [maybe also Germans]. I am not one of those theologians who make haste to assure one & all that something is not a divine punishment--eg, those 100 "national religious leaders" who last December issued "The Atlanta Interfaith Statement on AIDS": did God tell them AIDS is not divine punishment, or that believing it isn't is necessary to "commitment to AIDS ministry"? Scratch that surface & you'd have 100 theologians who'd put an "x" in the "yes" box in front of the statement "God is not a punishing God.")

(7) In contrast to Trudeau's "unambiguous moral education" are all the current schemes amounting to ambiguous moral education (eg, "values clarification" & behavioristic "stages of moral development" & the preaching of middle axioms as though they were principles & the pushing of proposed social fix-its as though they were essential moral values & the inculcating of interpersonal strategems as though they were virtues). From all these angles a vital theology of the disabled could illumine Christan ethics as well as theology in the overall (and overalls). Why has America's moral education, along with Americans' bodies, gone to flab? My working hypothesis is that it's because America's spiritual-religious education, always & everywhere humanity's moral food & motivation, has withered, & the junk-food substitutes (commercial entertainment, shoppingmalls as consumerists' cathedrals of choice) are no more curing the malnutrition than more alcohol cures that of the alcoholic. Yes, I'm preaching to the choir; but critical cultural analysis is one of the necessary contexts for doing theology of the disabled.

(8) Churches & schools should become engaged in unambiguous spiritual-&-moral education. The pedagogy can include case method, but the current "issues" orientation practices all the evasions of Sid. Simon's dogeared "values clarification," leaving the practitioners (not the pupils!) free to be values-neutral (except for pressing, as one school principal recently put it to me, in self-defense against my pressing the founding American values, "the multicultural approach"). A primary obstacle to educational reform in this direction is the post-WWI set of anti-negative taboos that have been, moreso in each generation, woven into a wall against discipline, which is an (ugh?) negative business, an or-else stick in one hand to cooperate with the yes-carrot in the other. As blame has been transferred from the criminal to society (so that the society-victimizing criminal is seen as victim), educational taboos have been transferred from pupils (what they're forced to do, or else) to teachers (what they're forced not to do, or else). This permissive-narcissistic sickness pervades our society, including schools & even churches....The bearing on a theology of the disabled? The disabled who "make it" are far more self-disciplined than is the general public. The Christian doctrine of charisms for the community, particular gifts given individuals for ministry in society (eg, ICor.12 Eph.411-16), by implication calls on those who have the dark gift of disability to minister out from within their particular experience, & calls on the community (sacred & secular) to receive humbly & gratefully this ministry. Here the vertical is inevitable: the disabled are in the superior position, & the community is to accept this superiority. (Sorry, ol' man, but I must use you here as a model of pity-reversal. Instead of pitying you, many pity themselves, being envious of what you have let God do for & through your disability. And I suppose it does not stretch the truth to say that you are this form of teacher to the world more than anyone else since Helen Keller. Again I shrink: who am I to be writing to **you** these rough notes toward a theology of the disabled? But I have pain in my eyes as I write, always more or less pain. Yet I do write, harder though it is; & I'm at least slightly more qualified to be writing this Thinksheet than at any previous stage of my life.)

3. I've said enough so far that a perceptive reader can sketch the God who is behind my words--or to generalize, **Who is this God in Willis' theology of disability?** I ended §2(6) with a God-statement befitting our laid-back cultural climate but misfitting the biblical God, viz "God is not a punishing God." The Bible's moral earnestness includes retribution, the doctrine of divinely intended & effectuated +/- consequences (before & after death) of human behavior. I hear more about distributive justice (fair distribution of resources/opportunities) than about retributive justice (people getting theirs, +/-, rewards/punishments, both atheistically known only as consequences) & justificative justice (people not getting theirs, ie damnation, but Christ's, ie salvation by our Lord's righteousness imputed to penitent believers). I'm hearing much of a grandparently God of "unconditional love," who amorally extends the divine beneficence to impenitent as well as penitent, for (as Eliz. Kübler-Ross puts it in describing a Cockaignish afterlife for all) "God is all love [& nothing else but]." Now, disability, pointing to the mystery of evil, is a counter against this optimistic Pollyannism. The medics can trace my eye affliction to nothing I did or didn't do; but does it not enmesh me in, & further incite me to reflection on, the mystery of evil? Even when the disabled let God sing through them in major, are we not more able than the undisabled to sing in minor a theology of the disabled and for all? We the (less or more) disabled can see life, & God, from the underside as well as the topside (if we don't let our disabilities blind us to the topside). And there's an a fortiori quality to the witness when boils-covered Job rejects his wife's advice to "curse God and die." As for the facile moralistic identification of God with the good & loving, & the stiff legalistic identification of God with the right, I've a new appreciation of Nietzsche's God as "beyond good and evil" & of Kierkegaard's analysis of ethics as degenerate religion & esthetics as degenerate ethics.

4. Another reason for my diffidence about writing a theology of disability is my fear of losing tactility (which reminds me of Ortega y Gasset's "To create a concept is to leave reality behind"). I fear taking off into the tame blue yonder & then landing with my presuppositions & prejudices intact. One prophylaxis is to let the poets

shake our sememes loose from our morphemes. Me, I do a poem a day ("do" always meaning read, sometimes meaning also write). Hear Marianne Moore today, in her "The Past Is the Present": "'Hebrew poetry is / prose with a sort of heightened consciousness.' Ecstasy / affords the occasion and expediency determines the form." Reminds me of a sentence I often recall from the "Religion" art. in THE ENCY. OF THE SOC. SCIENCES: "The function of religion is to render impressive the best that is known, dreamed of, and hoped for." Since theology is religion in the form of intellection, the function of a theology of disability is to render intellectually impressive, & therefore logically plausible / spiritually persuasive / existentially pertinent what a religious intellectual knows, dreams of, and hopes for. Now, in this process, the subtlest & seriest temptation is to imprison in one's way of seeing and living in the world the Bible's wild, willful, free, unconfinable, more-mysterious-than-known God. This God without other than self-imposed disabilities, how can a theologian of his find & exploit tangencies where his heart, known through his story, touches the experience of the disabled & of those who experience the disabled? Again I feel the fear & trembling of standing on holy ground. "I say a prayer of gratitude for what I have [for this task], and I ask my Higher Power for the necessary guidance and wisdom." (The quote is from today's column of "life transition consultant" & addiction authority Tom O'Connell, who's detailing how obsessive/compulsive behavior continues, as distorted thinking, after recovery from an addiction. I try to "live fully in the present and in the presence of my Higher Power," which is what he recommends to his post-addiction distorted thinkers, giving them "TODAY" as a guiding acrostic: "**T**hink, **O**bserve, **D**istortion, **A**ffirm, **Y**es.")

5. Once I heard Shailer Mathews (as you know, cofounder with Shirley Jackson Case of "the Chicago school" of the social gospel as action & of social determinism as philosophy) call theology "transcendentalized politics" (a take-off on Voltaire's "returning the compliment" by "making God in our image"). For Mathews it was an insight & warning, not a doctrine; but in the next generation of Chicago scholars it became a doctrine: by anthropopathism God came to mirror how the modern(ist) Midwestern Protestant intellectual felt about things & stuff, everything. The mirror came ever closer till it disappeared into the process, ie the Process, so "the Chicago school" came to mean process thinking. I knew face-to-face all three generations of those scholars, & it was a delight of my spiritual-intellectual development to disagree with, while learning from, them all....The pertinence to a theology of disability? Any theology that tries "to serve the present age" in general & a subculture or cohort or subset of the populace in particiular (say, as in the case of my cautionary tale, American intellectuals; or the disabled) walks a tightrope, in danger of falling left into academicism (shaping a God too distant to be relevant) and right into sentimentalism (shaping a God too close, indeed indistinguishable from [a phrase you're famous for] "the caring community"). As a Hospice chaplain, Loree constantly faces this problem of placing God at just the right distance so he's neither the nonsignificant Other nor merely the transcendentalized Carer. Since the former would make the Hospice chaplain irrelevant, it's no big temptation; but the latter, blessing everything visible & invisible in range of the chaplain's touch, with "nonjudgmental" (read for amoral & nonconfrontational) style, is a huge temptation &, I think, the central temptation in shaping a theology of disability (which is why I'm willing to come up to the edge of blasphemy with my description of the biblical God as "wild, willful, free, unconfinable, more-mysterious-than-known").

6. The biblical God, my God, is very emotional, dangerously emotional. How do I know? "Jesus loves me, this I know / For the Bible tells me so." "God is love," it says here in Scripture, & love is not cold (love "grown cold" means the fire's gone out, & God's hasn't). What distinguishes God's love from sentimentality? Holiness (as in our UCC Statement of Faith, God "seeks in holy love"). But what's "holiness"? The word signaling the character of God as power-truth-right(eousness)-love-promise/threat. A theology of disability should expound all the points of tangency between this divine holiness & the disabled's condition & situation. Failure to do so any any point would be a failure of theism, which the dictionaries still say

is belief-faith in the biblical God, the "only" (*mono*-theism) God. (Here is the double burden of monotheism: [1] It's broad, leaving nothing out, so it's theologians don't have the option of exempting some segments of reality, an exemption which would save them no little embarrassment, indeed so much embarrassment that some of them betray monotheism down into some henotheism or panentheism; & [2] It's narrow, exclusive of other gods & other ways of seeing the world, though neither intolerant nor unopen to learning from God through his "other sheep." So here are two more marks of a theology of the disabled: It should learn from & teach through the disabled what, in theism's broadness/narrowness, can be learned from & taught only through the disabled.) ....What I've said of biblical holiness in this § sharpens down, for this §'s purpose, to emotional honesty-&-freedom in God & therefore, by command of (Dante's) "the Love that moves the worlds," in biblical people, Jews & Christians. (Yes, "Be holy, for I am holy.") But....

7. ....this personal virtue & social value is routinely subverted by psychosocial dogmas. Thank God for much of what we've learned from psychology & sociology, but may he deliver us from the rest. And may he deliver us from the overenthusiasm that has opened Western liberal theologies to substitute, for theistic diagnoses-prescriptions, psychological & sociological ones. So there's another caution for those doing theology of disability: Beware the facile & (because culturally pervasive) plausible psycho- & socio-words/explanations/advice; exercise the hermeneutics of suspicion, reminding yourself that the premises, presuppositions, & perspective of those two disciplines are atheistic (a-theist, having no faith in, & so no need or room for, the biblical God).

ITEM: Yesterday, Ann Landers praised a mother who many years ago made her daughter pay 3¢ (much of her allowance) for three grapes she'd stolen in a food store. When the daughter cried "Nobody was watching!" the mother said "God is always watching." Now, thirty years later, the little girl become woman thanks her mother for the wisdom to suggest a lifelong motivation for righteousness. Now, I hope the mother meant both to frighten her daughter with "the fear of the Lord" & to think, before acting, whether the action will make God smile or weep, since "God is love." Maybe she meant it only as POSITIVE DISCIPLINE (Jane Nelson's title [Ballantine/81/87], a la B.F.Skinner; one would not expect "Religion" or "God" to appear in the index, & they don't; "inspire a positive atmosphere for winning children over rather than winning over children"; use "natural and logical consequences instead of punishment"; in Tillichian terms, aim at autonomy, not heteronomy or theonomy); maybe she meant it only as negative discipline (viz, God will get you if....); as I say, maybe she meant both. In any of the three cases, she meant to direct her child's attention to God, the biblical orientation. For that, I thank that mother, her child now woman, & Ann Landers.

But today, Ann Landers falls into psycho-bathos, utterly & dogmatically rejecting a letter-writer's emotional honesty-&-freedom. The woman had been snared, trapped, enslaved in a codependency from which finally she had the strength to break free. I present her text because doing theology of disability should deal with many of the emotions this woman has experienced, emotions often felt by the disabled:

I quit my job to nurse my terminally ill mother and lived off my savings, while my sister, Mom's "favorite," was not working and could have cared for her if she had wanted to. I wasn't reimbursed for one dime. So who did Mom leave all her money to? You guessed it. Her favorite.

I put in a lifetime of loving that shallow woman, and it didn't mean a damned thing. I spent every holiday with her. My sister rarely put herself out to come visit, but all Mom ever talked about was how wonderful she was. After listening to that garbage for the umpteenth time, I got on the phone to my sister and told her to come and get her mother, because I'd had it.

I did not say goodbye, nor did I go to Mom's funeral. When she died, I didn't shed one tear, and I regret nothing. After a lifetime of rejection, I was able to wipe it all away by rejecting her. That was how I finally settled the score.

Parents can be despicable. My mother was selfish and cruel. But fate has a way of getting even. She died alone in a rooming house, and my sister was not at her side. She got Mom's money, but I feel that I won because I had the satisfaction of rejecting that terrible woman. – Columbus, Ohio

As you know, Harold, hermeneuts are forever coming up with new adjectives in front of "criticism" to describe interpretive angles of awareness. Lately we've been getting "reader-response criticism." Well, what is my reader-response (as +/- feelings, & ideas) criticism as I read this letter? (It's almost a Rohrschach, so should I expose myself? But whatever it is is not as important as my using the letter, & my & AL's responses, as a way of pointing to how bloody important feelings are in theologizing, its formal distinction from philosophizing (the functional distinction being that God is to theology what truth is to philosophy).

This leads me to comment that a theology of disability should be a conversational emergent. Thus one more aspect to my hesitance: could I, or anyone else, produce alone a theology of disability? As I continue comments on the letter, I'm keenly aware that if you & I had had ten minutes of conversation on the letter, these comments would be somewhat (I think, however, not radically) different. Here goes: (1) Thank God she broke out of a demonic codependent relationship. (2) God gave the mother, through the loss of her slave, a potential gate of new life (though it seems she didn't enter through it). (3) The mother loaded onto the slave the double evils of multiple unfairness & of multiple ingratitude. (4) I cheer the self-liberated slave because before, during, & after pastoring I've known so many women who gave up their own lives to be houseslaves to ingrate parents: yep, the letter pushed a hot button in me. Thank God, at least this one got away! (5) Vengeance is sweet, which is one reason the Lord says "Vengeance is mine." But partly because of that biblical saying, many of us grow up thinking-feeling vengeance is naughty (except in God's case!), & its sweetness proves its naughtiness. (The biblical injunction is against personal/tribal blood-vengeance, socially disruptive behavior it's a function of criminal jurisprudence to render unnecessary--as "Thou shalt not kill" interdicts murder as socially disruptive &--since the state is responsible for doing necessary killing (capital punishment & war)--unnecessary.) Vengeance in this case was not socially disruptive & had the potential for being socially constructive at both ends, & it was emotionally both honest & freeing. (Again, society, functioning *in loco Dei* [Ro.13], takes vengeance on criminals, enjoying both their discomfiture & the public's freedom from fear of their further criminal behavior. Emotional dishonesty is so built into public life, however, that many feel it's fatal to the argument for capital punishment that evidence of deterrence therefrom is inconclusive--whereas the plain fact is simply that there are people whom the public wants dead, wants the government to take death-vengeance on. Ezekiel's two great individual-responsibility passages, chaps.18(esp.vv.23-32)&33(esp.vv.10-20), repeatedly pronounce life/death consequences for personal behavior & state God's pleasure as more in the repentance than in the death of the wicked [comparatively put radically, as "no pleasure" in the latter]. The honest pleasure in vengeance--individual, societal, divine--is in joy at the restoration of order after the evil disruption of order, & of freedom after tyranny, & of tranquility after fear.) (6) Jesus' "forgive 70x7" is abused when used to support continuation in slavery (the slave to forgive Massa no matter what). Let's face it: this dictum has often been used as an instrument of auto- & hetero-oppression. I've no doubt that sometimes, though rarely, God calls for magnanimous, heroic, noble self-sacrifice; nor do I doubt that the present case fails to be an instance. (7) That old lady got hers, right? A Hospice saying is "You die as you lived." Well, she lived selfishly & "died alone in a rooming house." The moral order of the world was satisfied, justice realized--or in the liberated daughter's words, fate got even (a pagan impersonal way to put it: what if she'd said "God punished Mom"?). (8) The liberated daughter did to her mother what God finally does to the impenitent wicked: "After a lifetime of rejection, I was able to wipe it all away by rejecting her"--no tears at her death, no attendance at her funeral, no regrets, finis. "That was how I finally settled the score....I won because I had the satisfaction of rejecting that terrible woman." (9) Wouldn't reconciliation have been better? Of course! What would it have taken? Family counseling? (Study the case again: a good prospect for family counseling?) Conversion of all three parties? (Good advice, ex post facto.) (10) Doesn't the liberated daughter have unfinished business vis-a-vis her live sibling & her dead mother? Of course. Shouldn't she be about it? In due time, no doubt. But who am I, who is anybody, to tell

when that time has come? She may not mature that much this side of the grave. My point is that at her present stage, she's emotionally honest-&-free, with the right to enjoy this stage without being afflicted by anybody's theo-, psycho-, or socio-dogma. Witness, yes; heavy-handed guilt-trips & cocksure pressure, no.

Which brings me to Ann Lander's oppressive advice to the poor woman:

> **Dear Columbus:** I've read some venomous letters in my day, but yours ranks right up there as one of the most spiteful.
>
> If you aren't in therapy when you read this, I hope you will start soon. You are so full of anger and bitterness that you're a walking time bomb, ready to explode. You must talk this poison out of your system.

"venemous...spiteful....anger and bitterness...poison." Ah, yes, speaking of poison! Reminds me of Shakespeare's woman-rejecting phrase "Hie thee to a nunnery!" Make haste to hie thee to a shrink for the talk cure! To rub it in, AL puts the woman high on her worst-cases list, & tries to put in her what used to be called the fear of God, threatening her with self-explosion from internal psychic tensions--with no recognition of the therapeutic value, the tension relief, of writing the letter & seeing it published. No praise of the woman (1) for living off her savings while nursing her terminally ill mother, (2) for making all the necessary sacrifices even though her sister was in a better position to do so, (3) for honoring her parent even though that parent dishonored her (by disfavor in "a lifetime of rejection" by a "selfish and cruel" parent), or (4) for having the dignity & guts to break out of codependent bondage. Harold, I'd like to hear what two wise old Christian counselors, you & Peg, would have said to the letter-writer, & what you'd say to AL in response to her "Dear Columbus."

To sum up & point up this §: The doing-theology-of-the-disabled situation is (1) addressing God on behalf of the disabled, including that I shall have ears to hear them & eyes to see them in their strengths & needs; (2) conversing with the disabled, that we may listen one another into appropriate words; & (3) acting both with them (in co-ministry) & (representatively) on their behalf (as did & does our Lord on ours). A theology of the disabled worth the name will be an emergent from this whole situation-in-process, without which any socalled "theology of the disabled" is condemned to be what this Thinsheet is, only (to crib from SK) a presumptive, premature, preliminary "concluding unscientific postscript." But we can from the start be clear about some preconditions of the process. The precondition this § has been addressing is that the whole project be undertaken in openeyed, openminded, openhearted intellectual & emotional honesty-&-freedom, unimpeded by dogma. I could have illustrated theological or sociological dogma; I chose to illustrate psychological dogma (the demon having the readiest access to the mind of most liberal religious leaders), instancing one AL letter-exchange.

8. "Each of us is a defective, damaged, distorted child of God & decides which is more important, the adjectives or what they modify." It just struck me that this old saying of mine (I've been saying it at least ¼c. & many times have been reminded of its helpfulness by my hearers) is an axiom for a Christian theology of the disabled (challenging the visibly undisabled to see the disabled primarily as fellow children of God) & a biblical aim for the disabled (so to live that the world sees them primarily as children of God). Any honest adult can run a midrash on my saying, & the older the longer. To begin with (& I'm ending here!), what theologically is to be made of the fact that of the 50some possible genetic defects, every human being has at least four? Just what does God have in mind in pushing us all out to sea in defective boats? If he's so fastidious about getting the polka dots on a tiger lily just right, why was he so sloppy when it came to me (with bad eyes all my life) or you (with no arms)? (Nontheists, snorting that such questions are absurb, miss the mystic playfulness of personalism, the romantic poetry of the love affair between God & those children of his who tack their souls' sails to his loving Spirit.)

In the free-will-v.-determinism discussion after church this morning (Feb.28) I said we shoud give thanks that the nature/nurture conundrum is insoluble, "for insoluble issues are special growing graces from God." Someone closed the period (just twenty minutes each Sunday, "Conversations after Coffee") with this: "Lord,

help us to nurture our natures in your will." The greater the diameter of nature, the longer the circumference of nurture: the less freedom we think humans have, the more precious --&, paradoxically, the more generous we should be in judging others & ourselves & also the more critical we should be of our own & others' irresponsible uses of freedom.

9. How we see ourselves, others, the world, God is (T.S.Eliot) "the ground of our beseeching." Accordingly, the theology of disability should be in the first act of the intellectual drama of disability. Eg, in §7 I said "The liberated daughter finally did to her mother what God does to the impenitent wicked." The two parts of that sentence are functions & mirrors of each other; to transpose the verbs, we think our behavior & do our theology. The tensions between our God-idea & our ideas of how we should relate to other human beings & our own souls & bodies are not intellectually dismissible (contra Freud's "illusion"), for the reason that they are not existentially reducible (no matter what one's God-idea or holophrasic surrogate). But now suppose God is more generous than I think he is, indeed so generous to sinners as to forgive the impenitent--ie, amorally generous. If that were the poor woman's God-model, she should straightway forgive her mother & sibling (as AN implies she should). Instead, what I said was I pray she matures to the point of doing [§7(10)] "unfinished business vis-a-vis her live sibling & her dead mother." Now, there is business she is fully responsible for finishing. It is "turning" (Hebrew for "repentance") from ill will to good will, an attitudinal re-volution (yes, "turning" in Latin) inclusive of the will to forgive the penitent (classically, Luke's prodigal father eager to forgive the penitent ex-"prodigal son"). Good will is individual & an abiding divine demand because implicit in love: forgiveness is relational, conditional upon penitence. Not only does the AL letter-writer have no responsibility to forgive her mother & her sister; she has the responsibility not to do so, lest she violate the moral structure of reality (in Ro.4-8, trilingually visible in Paul: Hebrew-Greek-Roman moral-ethical-legal feelings-concepts). But could she not take the lead, asking forgiveness from God, her mother (imaginatively, perhaps also in the afterlife), & her sibling? She should if she could; in her present frame of mind & spirit, she can't; if she lets God's grace sensitize her, she can, & should, & must (as a condition of God's forgiving her, God's love not being unconditional: Mt.**6**15)....A Christian theology of disability includes the tough love God models, & stands over against the sentimentality that correlates with pitying those "less fortunate"; it's for compassion toward those whose physical disability is visible, a compassion whose roots are good will, humility, & the wisdom to to be ever aware that all of us children of God are on the same level--all cripplies (still the dictionaries' first synonym for "disabled" or "handicapped"), defective, damaged, distorted, and all destined by grace through penitent faith for glory....What are the personal, social, & legal implicates of our all being on the same level? Radical! So I'm brought to adding, to our theology of disability, the concept of....

10. **Equity**, which is said to begin where the law leaves off, but I add underlies all humane legislation. The blindfold on statues of "Justice" is a metaphor for it. So is the Greek picture-word προσωπολημψία *prosopolemp^{s}ia*, negatived in God's case (Ro.**2**11 Eph.**6**9 Col.**3**25): on meeting people, God does not "receive" some "faces" more than others; with him, we're all, as we say, on a level playing field. Which brings me to Hebrew for "equity" (*mes^{h}arim* from the verb *yas^{h}ar* to be level, even, smooth, straight [Is.**40**3; & "Sharon," a plain]; adjective *yes^{h}arim* the upright, those who are on the level, who level with you, being on the same level; "equity" is 10x in KJV, 14x in RSV, & [my impression, there being no concordance yet] even more often in REB)....Two parables of equity: (1) Here on Cape Cod, Helen Luedeking, with her pastor's help, is offering free housing for AIDS persons & their families. "They are not victims....They are ordinary people who must try to live with the fact that they have the virus & must...fight for their lives and those of all others who have the disease." It's hard work for Helen. She's 93. And deaf. And blind.... (2) Oliver Sack's SEEING VOICES is about a Martha's Vinyard community half of whose residents were disabled (genetic deafness) but nobody was handicapped, for everybody in the village could sign....Harold, I haven't looked into that fat folder labeled "Wilke...." I wonder what's there? Grace & peace,