SENSE/MEANING/VALUE: THE CASE OF CHALLENGER ---- ELLIOTT #2029

It all started as I was passing a television set and, hearing the countdown of the 25th shuttle flight as it was happening, paused and remarked "It will always seem awesome to me." Seconds later, it seemed so awesome my knees buckled: what I thought would be routinely up and on was suddenly up and over. The image burned into my inner eye as the most powerful visual hermeneutic since Holocaust & Hiroshima. Instantly the motor-mouthing began in fugue with all-speeds and all-angles re-playing--hours, days, ad nauseam, the horror hardly lessening with the numbing repetition. So who wants to read a thinksheet on it? I feel moved to write one, and I hope you want to read it.. ...but we're in a time of antipunditry; few have any appetite for anybody who lays on left and right with his opinions, which in this case are:

1. When the awe turned to horror, which is awe in the form of revulsion and threat, my mind invisbly exploded in parallel with the visible explosion I couldn't remove my eyes from. Every idea that popped into my head came full-clothed in its own appropriate feelings; and I found myself feeling guilty that this first involuntary, then willed complex occupation had diminished the horror and sorrow and grief I first felt and shot prayer arrows through to the most afflicted--the crews' families and the millions of watching schoolchildren and their teachers and all whose hearts-heads-hands are in the space program. WARNING: Remember this first comment when, upon reading further, you're tempted to think me impersonal or cold or "judgmental" or uncaring or cavalier or joking.

2. The sky was empty, a 5th-grade-teacher's heart was empty, and the church was empty when, having discovered his emptiness in the presence of his horrified children, he decided he'd have to go to church Sunday (three days later). After worship, I said to him "I haven't seen you here before, have I?" He: "I don't go to church, but I had to this morning, and this one is closest to my home." The conversation didn't end there, but my account of it should, because here I want to make only the point that tragedies seismic enough to shake the foundations of one's life-paradigm, the picture that makes sense of all other pictures, moves some people toward the Meaning that swallows up the Mystery, the reverse of the tragedy in which one's meaning-world, private or public, has been swallowed up by the mystery of evil that retrojects the cosmos into chaos, converts sense into nonsense, meaning into absurdity, and value into nothingness, the abyss of the senseless, the meaningless, and the valueless.

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3. Yesterday (13Feb86) in Jerusalem, Anatoly Shcharansky, the day after nine years in gulag, said the darkest hour is when you're put on a psychic rack (my analogy) and stretched between the promise of freedom and the threat of execution. Challenger had so many promises to keep, and only nine miles to go before all were blasted by an ever-present but seldom-conscious threat of annihilation: on earth you may make many mistakes and survive, but in space not even one. The margin between life and death is paper-thin--in this case, boostercasing-thin. Our beating hearts are at every moment up against the ultimate, and sometimes an event of world-notice-size reminds us of the fragility and brevity of life (and nudges that 5th-grade unchurched teacher to get himself at least to church if not to worship; ie, to take his existential vacuum into the presence of at least a Hopeful Mystery).

4. A Jan/85 Gallup Poll showed Americans only 26% believers that God is in charge (though 64% "believe in God"). For sophisticates, I'd say 5%; and, as the media are controled by sophisticates, you'd expect--and you got--almost no God-references (or even religious references) in the coverage of Challenger's death (except, of course, in the coverage of the funeral/memorial services). Christa McAuliffe's deep and explicit religiousness was made nothing of except in the religious press, where I caught one reference to her telling her congregation "There will be 8 of us on board: Jesus Christ will be with us 7."

5. Abyss anxiety exists in every human being at least from the first experience of the fear of falling. How swiftly a human being or group of human beings can pass from confidence to dread, from feeling secure to feeling up against nonbeing. Religion as social phenomenon intensifies both feelings so as to render all of life in between and at both ends (both ends of the feeling scale, and both ends of life) noteworthy, impressive, and illumined from beyond all that's human. In this sense, Holocaust & Hiroshima & Challenger were profoundly religious events, and the last the most religious in this narrow sense. Holocaust gradually dawned on world consciousness, beginning with GI pix of liberated deathcamps; Hiroshima's cloud took days to appear on the world's eyeballs; but Challenger's image took less than a day to become visible to more than half the humans now alive on our precarious planet. Instant travel from ecstasy to extinction!

6. Ecstasy to extinction: "Since we all gotta go, that was a neat way to do it"--how many times did you hear something like that? Our health-conscious, hypochond society has as much horror of dying as the ancestors had of hell. Hell preaching was (and is) much more useful in inciting to repentance and conversion than is the prudential appeal to steel your souls by good religion for the medical horrors that probably await you at your life's end even if you have a "living will" (your signature to defend you against the "heroic measures" that will be mindlessly applied with state-of-the-art medical technology if you don't signature-defend yourself ahead of time). Note that this fear-shift from hell to "heroics" is also a shift of attention from soul (inner life, consciousness) to body (outer life, your bio-reality), and that this shift more than parallels the sense-making shift from "God" to "Evolution." Further note that whereas the former fear led to fat priests and thus to anticlericalism, the present fear has led to fat physicians and the present antimedicalism (eg, two astronominal numbers vis-a-vis malpractice suits: of cases, and of $ settlements).

7. Hubris: "Art thou high? Thou shalt be cast down." Genesis 11.

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Titanic II? The unsinkable sank,.... Overconfidence leads on to carelessness and the overriding of underlings' warnings (in both cases)....Vietnam II? In both cases, "can do" = "should do" (reinforced by Hilary's "Because it's there" as his explanation for his scaling of Mt.Everest)....Bragging that our liftoffs are public and thus courageous whereas the USSR's are secret, did we push our luck into excessive-risk derringdo in sending up a teachernaut (1) to make space-travel look perfected and (2) to glue America's small eyeballs to the tube ("identifying" with their own teachers)?....Browning wasn't "into" hubris with his "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what'a heaven for?" But stretching to the limit puts you in danger of overreaching, as multitudes of self-damaged joggers have discovered. Is "manned" space, at this stage of technology, more stunt than science?

8. "From success," say the French, "one learns nothing." So what are we learning from Challenger's death? Maybe the recovery of a little respect for the abyss, nothingness, zero. (In the year 1,000--which has 3 zeroes in its writing!--the Ind. mathematician Sridhara recognized the importance of zero, starting the world into the math revolution that made Challenger possible....Another astonishing fact: That same year we find the first mentions of attempts to fly or float in the air. And of course this: The year 1,000 was itself a world-class event in Christendom because of the widespread expectation of the End of the World and the Last Judgment. And that very year the Chinese perfected what through permutations became the solid propellant in the booster that failed on Challenger: charcoal+sulphur+pot.nitrate=gunpowder. Oh yes: It was also in 1,000 that Leif Ericson discovered the coast Challenger blasted off of, viz, the western Atlantic.)...A whopping failure, a big zero, may refresh us by cutting us down to size, Size 0, "that you may know that I am the LORD" (to use the drum-beat motif of Ezekiel).

9. Hold in with Ezekiel here: "We must have been doing something wrong" is the standard Hebrew-prophetic first thought face to face with tragedy past and present and even (in the case of Ezekiel's cities & nations about to be destroyed) future. Too easy? Sure, but the alternative is to forego moral hermeneutics, the effort to motivate humanity/people/persons toward the good by making connections between specific nongood behaviors and specific nongood ensuing circumstances (results viewed theistically as punishments). Without the courage of the Hebrew prophets, one escapes into the categories of (transmoral) tragedy and (amoral) mystery and poetry --all three categories useful hermeneutic tools, but insufficient for our religion's understanding of the moral seriousness of life in its particulars as well as in its overview....I've seen "It happened because we were bad" (though not those words!) nowhere in media reports of the aftermath, not even in the religious press....

....(10) For example, Jas. Wall's CHRISTIAN CENTURY editorial (2-5 Feb86) "A Nation Is United and Touches Mystery." He illustrates what I may call heuristic hermeneusis, the search for the best concentric semantic circles for explaining/interpreting/using the effects of the stone dropped into the quiet pool (in this case, the fragments fallen into the Atlantic). The first, quoting Bellah, is chauvinistic: Challenger is said to have been a "moment of profound national unity" set over against (and here Bellah does his thing, HABITS OF THE HEART - wise) our rampant American individualism. Why only national unity? Did not much of the world come to a common gut (as with the death of JFK)? And is this national unity

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morally significant if left without moral interpretation? The prophets in the Bible never passed up a chance to scold for God, often representing God as scold through them: who now is scolding the Am. people for Challenger, triumphing for God that our pride has been cast down, calling us to repentance? Such behavior would of course be in bad taste so soon after Challenger or always anytime, right? Is national pride the invisible engine that is driving the visible space-engines? Or are we so entertainment-oriented that we need super-events (Super Bowl, Live Aid, et al)? And what is the hype % in Challenger in comparison with thr Super Bowl, said to have been seen by 100 million though gamewise it wasn't worth watching? Wall's editorial, instead of being Biblical, is me-too religion-hype. Sad. The CHRISTIAN CENTURY ought to come up with more bite, displaying the Bible's irritation and alienation from the common life of whatever country: Jews & Christians are constitutionally whinners, complainers against whatever is in the name of what should/will be, viz, "the Kingdom of God." Biblical religion promotes a holy whine disconcerting both to worldlings and to marginally faithful devotees.

11. The President's just-right eulogy displaced words expressing sky-ecstasy from successful flight to fatal flight (30Jan85 NYT, the underlined words being those he quoted). In comparison with this standing-before-God-in-death, Carl Sagan, high priest of Cosmos as God-substitute, sounded erector-set tinny-hollow. Challenger put a pause in our programs of human pretension, which should fail if we will not otherwise come to God. "I wear this world seriously and lightly" an old saint recently wrote me. And Christa McA.'s priest, the Sunday after, said Let's learn before God from this to "value life." Walk through the door of Tragedy into Mystery, but then (with Dante) walk through the door of Mystery into "the Love that moves the stars." Wall well says "To be locked into the surface of an event is to lose touch with its larger meaning," and art helps us "reach for a higher truth." And I don't mind a smidgin of heroistic puffery, though it's more grating in a religious leader like Wall than in somebody who has to run in elections. (And here he verges on self-contradition: He says Americans are individualistic, then says those 7 "presented themselves to us as gifts...became 'heroes'...much larger than life.") In contrast, the NYTimes editorial (30Jan86) avoided Wall's chauvinism, estheiticism, heroization, and bathos and drew solid lessons from the tragedy, including the "error" of "dragging all those children through disaster."

Tribute: Airman's Sonnet

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 (AP) — President Reagan, eulogizing the victims of the space shuttle explosion, drew upon a sonnet, "High Flight," written by an American airman killed in World War II.

Mr. Reagan ended his statement on Tuesday by saying, "We will never forget them nor the last time we saw them this morning as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God."

The words were paraphrased from a sonnet by John Gillespie Magee Jr., a 19-year-old volunteer with the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was killed in action near Britain on Dec. 11, 1941.

The sonnet reads:

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark, or even eagle, flew;
And while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

12. Maieusis: (1) an involuntary abortion with thousands of midwives, and (2) bringing what else to birth?....13. Global death-fascination. ...14. It's a shorter step to God from Woody Allen's mournful "Stardust Memories" than from Carl Sagan's "We are made for the stars!"