

## ***Reality, Grief, Hope – Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks***

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Extract: ***Hope and Despair*** (pp113 -128)

**Not unlike the society of ancient Jerusalem after the destruction and in the midst of the displacement, our contemporary society is at the brink of despair.** I have said of ancient Jerusalem that it was "near despair," as the buoyant hopefulness of Yahwism guarded against complete despair. In our contemporary case, I do not think we have yet reached the point of complete despair- and this because, I suggest, we have managed to sustain our ideology-induced denial. Where denial flourishes, there may not be complete despair!

And yet there are important indications of despair among us, not least the amorphous anxiety that recognizes in inchoate ways that the old world in which we have felt comfortable, safe, and in control is slipping through our fingers. That anxiety is variously directed against Muslims, immigrants and gays, as though any of these populations were the cause or agent of our world of loss.

We may identify two very large grounds for despair that permeate our common life. First, it is clear that our society is based on an extravagant use of fossil fuel that is unsustainable. It is unsustainable because the supply of fossil fuel is noticeably finite, but also because its use, while we still have ample supplies, is massively destructive of the very world we most want to inhabit. The unsustainability of such a political economy of course touches everything; our imperial military enterprise depends upon it, as does our inordinate standard of living that specializes in consumer commodities made possible by cheap labor elsewhere in the world.

Second, it is clear that the modern project of Enlightenment rationality, with its anthropomorphic "turn to the subject," cannot keep its promises of safety and happiness. That "turn to the subject" has benefitted us greatly; it has, however, eventuated in a vigorous individualism that has trivialized the common good, that has reduced major societal needs to technical problems, and that has neglected the infrastructure that is indispensable for a viable common life.

It is clear that limitless, undisciplined use of fossil fuel, coupled with Enlightenment rationality, provides the distorted content of the ideology of American self-perception. It is equally clear that such a package of loyalties and practices have generated a social reality that is remote, for most people, from "the American dream." Our public leadership, almost without exception, has no capacity to imagine outside the categories of these loyalties and commitments. The outcome is the conviction, mostly not articulated, that we are living on borrowed time. As a result, our shrill public discourse is mostly the insistence that we should continue to do what we do, only better, only more vigorously and more adamantly, assuming that if we do so, somehow it will "all work out."

But, of course, our wise despair knows better. And so we have this tension between our professed zeal for continuing what is unsustainable and the hidden broad conviction that in the long run such an effort is futile. We shuttle continually between a broad public pretense and a deep hidden awareness that cannot be talked about. And while we shuttle, the indices of social health and social wellbeing among us continue in free fall. That anxious shuttle is the

seedbed of despair in which denial is no longer possible, because we know better. While we recite the ideology of chosenness, the underneath realities of our common life expose that ideology as empty of generative power. The more we recite and perform the jingoism of the ideology, the more - in our awareness of unsustainability - we cannot trust the rhetoric.

That despair-generating anxiety is acted out in many ways in our society, of which I will identify five:

- Anxiety is acted out as *unrestrained greed*. The assumption is that we live in a zero-sum game in which there are no more gifts to be given, above all no more fossil fuel. The commitment to self-serving wealth has no limit among us, so that the pyramid of wealth and control flows to the few on the basis of the cheap labor of the many. That greed, moreover, is ruthless and is willing to hurt any neighbor who may impede the success of accumulation.
- Anxiety is acted out as *privatism*. The ideology of greed has now made what is for many a persuasive case that government that pertains to the common good and taxes that finance the public good are an unbearable and unnecessary burden. From that it follows that everything from schools to prisons to health care should be privatized, assuring wellbeing for those who have sufficient resources, along with a ruthless triage toward those who lack such resources. The advance of the private self - the possessive individual - at the expense of the common good is given visible form in the Tea Party Movement.<sup>1</sup> But in fact, the bent toward privatism is much broader than that, based on the assumption that the "neighborhood" is an unfortunate inconvenience rather than an indispensable arrangement for viable human life. I suppose that the so-called "survival shows" on television constitute the dramatic performance of privatism in which everything is raw competition, an assumption that lies behind the drama of *The Hunger Games*.
- Anxiety is acted out as *willing violence*. The success of the gun lobby, led by the National Rifle Association, indicates that greed and privatism are prepared to make a ready move to self-protective violence. The shameless readiness of the NRA, in the wake of the tragedy in Newton, Connecticut, to arm everyone is an indication of the profound self-destructive anxiety in our society. That NRA proposal was not met by an appropriately firm rejection by our leaders, but by a caution of cowardice in the face of political risk. The gun lobby is an extreme expression of privatism, in which it is "every man for himself," free to enact violence against anyone who stands in the way. Thus "Stand Your Ground" laws, shot through with macho fear and racism, detract from "the monopoly of force" by the state and allow anyone to practice violence against the neighbor, even with the flimsiest of excuses. Such violence is a feature of privatism that is in the service of greed. Indeed, such violence has become a common assumption of life, expressed variously in eagerness for military combat against any perceived threat, a readiness to torture, and a willingness to execute anyone who offends against the law. There is indeed something ironic and incongruent about the "Right to Life" effort to redefine a fertilized egg as a

"person" with protection for the unborn, while all the "born" must make their way in a barbarism of violence.

- Anxiety is acted out as *nostalgia* for "the good old days" of a simpler life. Thus the favorite political portrayal of social life in the U.S. is still a "mom and pop" venture of small time neighborliness that predictably eschews the complex density of urban life. No doubt Andy Griffith, with his Mayberry, might be the most compelling throwback to face-to-face neighborliness of a gentle sort. And of course, such nostalgia that wants to pretend against the reality of urban life that is peopled with others unlike us is an immense temptation of religious life. The construction of "Whole Life Centers" by "successful" churches constitutes a beguiling attempt to live in a safe, protected, homogeneous community of the like-minded, while fencing out frightening otherness. And of course, "homeschooling," along with "private schools," is a handy aid for such a protected, unreal world. Given the awareness of free fall in our society, one can sympathize with the plaintive wish, "I just want my world back." One indication of the sense of loss was the provocative mantra in the 2012 presidential campaign, "Take back our country." The slogan reflects the sense that someone has seized our world from us, not unlike the way in which the Babylonians seized the world of Jerusalem away from its inhabitants. Nostalgia is an attempt to recover that world that is gone, if indeed it ever existed.
- Anxiety performed as greed, privatism, violence, and nostalgia takes place in the presence of *a pervasive sense of "end time."* Thus a large proportion of current films are now "end of world" scenarios that recognize and act out the unsustainability of the present arrangement of power, access, and goods. Such "end-time" anxiety always plays readily into the hands of religious apocalypticism in which the most aggressively greedy religious enterprises are also the ones that most loudly proclaim that the end is upon us. Even given that exploitative posture, the preoccupation with "end time" is an indication that the present world is no longer felt to be sustainable, an awareness that erupted among us on 9/11.

The unsustainability of the present system of power, goods, and access yields a credo that "It is every man for himself" and "you are on your own." These are echoes of Ayn Rand, now become, via Paul Ryan, a major public philosopher among us - for God's sake, a second-rate ideological novelist who sets the tone for public discourse! The disappearance of the common good may seem like a warrant for making it on one's own, except that for very many people right away and for everyone eventually, "You are on your own" is not an affirmation but a threat. The mantra can be reformulated as "We are abandoned." We are left without resources; we are left without a neighborly infrastructure, without the ultimate guarantees of sustaining grace. If I am not mistaken, the outcome of an awareness of an unsustainable rationality of raw individualism is a counterpoint to the old laments I have already cited:

My way is hidden from the LORD,  
and my right is disregarded by my God. (Isaiah 40:27)

The LORD has forsaken me,  
my LORD has forgotten me. (Isaiah 49:14)

Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?  
Or have I no power to deliver? (Isaiah 50:2)

The sinking feeling of free fall is that

- My way is disregarded;
- I am forgotten and forsaken;
- The saving hand is short.

We do not, of course, voice this matter in such direct theological cadences. But the intent and effect are the same. The loss of old Jerusalem left the survivors bereft, with "All that I had hoped for from the LORD" gone (Lamentations 3:18). In our time, it is free fall; it is free fall without resources, thus witness the current drama of triage among us in every dimension of our public life, including health care, education, libraries, and even grocery stores. And even among those with resources, the chance for private shalom is nil when the public good evaporates. Whether this abandonment is voiced in direct theological cadences as in ancient Israel or whether it is among us left inchoate, the outcome is the same: an unbearable loss of world. Or as Ezra belatedly stated in his prayer:

Here we are, slaves to this day - slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress. (Nehemiah 9:36-37)

His prayer is addressed to God. But Ezra's words constitute an acute economic analysis. Ezra's prayer is an act of hope - but barely! He comes near to despair but not quite, because he continues to pray. He voices the powerlessness of his community. His final word is "distress" - as is ours in this unsustainable circumstance.

#### IV.

**In the midst of near-despair, the prophetic task is to articulate hope, the prospect of fresh historical possibility assured by God's good governance of the future.** The prophetic utterance of promise to the displaced in sixth-century Israel was completely inexplicable, except by the recognition that the word of promise came "from elsewhere," from the verdict and resolve of YHWH. In parallel fashion, utterance of promise in the midst of world loss in our time is completely inexplicable, except it be given "from elsewhere." It is not necessary to have a particular notion of "inspiration and revelation" to make such a claim; all that is required is the awareness that such an utterance might engage the speaker as much as the listener. Such utterance arises in a way that contradicts the evident facts on the ground, contradicts what the listener expected to hear, and contradicts what the speaker intended to say. Thus as despair knows about

world loss in our time, so the work of hope is to conjure and imagine an alternative world now to be given "from elsewhere."

Since I have proceeded in my argument by an analogy from ancient Israel to contemporary U.S. society, I dare one more analogy that may illuminate the work of hope. Jonathan Lear has written a remarkable reflection on the life and destiny of Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow nation of Native Americans, poignantly entitled *Radical Hope*.<sup>ii</sup>

The first part of Lear's book focuses on the loss and diminishment of the Crow Nation as it succumbed to white settlers and the enforcement of the white government when "the buffalo went away." Plenty Coups told Lear that after that "nothing happened." History ended, memory ceased, "the hearts of my people fell to the ground and they could not lift them up again. There was little singing anywhere."<sup>iii</sup> The mood of these statements is not unlike those of ancient Israel: "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept" (Psalm 137:1). The Crow experienced this as death of established social roles, of standards of excellence, and of personal identities.<sup>iv</sup> It is for good reason that the nation lost its sense of life, meaning, and energy. In his section tellingly entitled "Reasoning at the Abyss," Lear reports that the Crow entered a time when everything familiar and reliable ceased and they were required "to live a life that I do not understand."<sup>v</sup>

But what interests us in Lear's account is not the descent into the abyss, a descent like that of sixth-century Israel. Our topic here is hope, that is, the prospect of a future for the Crow Nation. That prospect takes the form of a dream that Plenty Coups had that was received, processed, and interpreted by the tribal elders.

The substance of the dream, hypothesized by Lear, affirmed that:

- all our traditional way of life is coming to an end ... that life is about to disappear;
- we must do what we can to open our imaginations up to a radically different set of future possibilities;
- I need to recognize the discontinuity that is upon me ... I need to preserve some integrity across that discontinuity;
- I do have reason to hope for a dignified passage across this abyss, because God - Ah-badt-dadt-deah - is good;
- we shall get the good back, though at the moment we have no more than a glimmer of what that might mean.<sup>vi</sup>

Lear concludes about the reasoning of Plenty Coups:

It is committed to the bare idea that something good will emerge. But it does so in recognition that one's thick understandings of the good life are about to disappear. It thereby manifests a commitment to the idea that the goodness of the world transcends one's limited and vulnerable attempt to understand it. There is no implication that one can glimpse what lies beyond the horizons of one's historically situated understanding. There is no claim to grasp ineffable truths. Indeed, this form of commitment is impressive in part because it acknowledges that no such grasp is possible. Even so, this form of reasoning shows that a

very peculiar form of commitment is possible and intelligible: namely, that although Plenty Coups can recognize that his understanding of self and world is based on a set of living commitments that are vulnerable, it is nevertheless possible to commit to a goodness that transcends that understanding.<sup>vii</sup>

That substance is matched by an awareness that the medium of this hope is a dream that is elusive and without clarity, thus requiring interpretation. That sense of the dream is a huge "if":

If the dream comes from a divine source and it tells us that our way of life will come to an end and it tells us how to survive the destruction of our traditional way of life, we should expect that there is much about the message and much about the future that we do not yet understand. Still, the message purports to come from an absolute source; and that kind of authority could conceivably provide something to hold onto in the face of overwhelming challenge.<sup>viii</sup>

The sure sense is that the dream comes "from elsewhere." As in the Bible and in many folk societies, dreams are understood as disclosures given with absolute divine authority, the kind of absoluteness that makes the encoded message reliable, even if not immediately transparent.

Lear comments on this hope rooted in the dream:

For Plenty Coups the question of hope was intimately bound to the question of how to live...Thus the issue of hope becomes crucial for an ethical inquiry into life at the horizons of one's understanding.<sup>ix</sup>

The dream gave assurance:

Plenty Coups made a claim: that if the tribe adhered to the dream they would face an inevitable devastation but they would survive. Indeed, they would come out the other side with new ways to live well...Thus his capacity to have that dream and to stick to its meaning is a manifestation of courage.<sup>x</sup>

The dream turned out to be a guide and an experiment to seek a new way of living in the world, a new way that avoided both the resignation of despair and the suicide of resistance to white power, the latter an option taken by other tribes. Thus the dream permits a third way between resignation and destruction:

Thus I think the case is made not just that it was psychologically advantageous not to give in to despair but also that it would have been a mistake to do so. It would also have been a mistake to "go down fighting." The aim was not merely the biological survival of the individual members of the tribe - however important that was - but the future flourishing of traditional tribal values, customs, and memories in a new context.<sup>xi</sup>

Thus the abyss between the old ways that ended and the new ways yet to emerge is now occupied by the dream, an elusive, God-given assurance that required trust in its reliability.

This way of positioning the dream between the old that had failed and the new that is awaited is pivotal for Lear's rendering of the work of Plenty Coups. This act of hope by the Crow Nation on the basis of the dream is indeed

the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.  
{Hebrews 11:1}

It takes no great transfiguration to see that the same structure of hope in abyss is how the faith of Israel was shaped in the utterance of Israel's sixth-century poets. The grief of Lamentations had brought them candidly to the abyss. And the work of reconstruction would begin soon enough. But the crisis in near-despair is that long moment of free fall between. It is that moment that the poet parses in the double use of "moment":

...for a brief moment ... for a moment. {Isaiah 54:7-8}

That moment could not be filled with plans or blueprints or schedules or budgets or creeds or "six easy steps." It can only be filled by that which God gives. And what God gives is elusive at best. Among the Crow Nation, it was a dream. The dream filled the void and provided substance amid free fall. In the sixth century it is song, narrative, and oracle, utterance that is elusive but that is taken to be God-given.

Later on Jerusalem would be reshaped around the Torah so that political power was displaced by Torah piety. But that is later on. Before such specificity, God-given elusiveness is the order of the day. Thus I formulate what Lear traces and what Israel's poets offer in this way:

- Hope is a tenacious act of imagination given in dream, oracle, narrative, and song, rooted in absolute authority concerning divine purpose.
- It is an act of playful imagination with ill-defined and open images that suggest without clarity.
- It is given in an imaginative way, because it is out beyond what we know.
- It is enacted with tenacity; the poets defied "reality" and settled authority in order to voice reality out beyond present arrangements.
- It is, in an audacious claim, said to be the very word of God, the word that "will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8), the word that will "accomplish that which I purpose" (Isaiah 55:11), a word that is "in your mouth a fire" (Jeremiah 5:14), that cannot be held in (Jeremiah 20:9).

That word, enacted in ancient Israel and mediated to Plenty Coups, contradicts all known reality. It summons out beyond the known that is lost. It assures in the midst of free fall that "the end" will not prevail. It anticipates newness not yet in hand.

From this analysis I suggest that the prophetic task now, in contemporary U.S. society, is exactly to perform hope that is characteristically a tenacious act of imagination, grounded in a dream, song, narrative, or oracle, rooted in the

elusive but faithful authority of God. The prophet is the one who dares to speak such a future that is out beyond all evidence. The work is not simply to reiterate old acts of hope, but to be informed by such old acts in order to perform acts that may be grounded in divine initiative.

It is an obvious move to go from the dream of Plenty Coups to the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. What happened when the old poets said "Thus says the Lord" and when Plenty Coups told his dream to the elders is precisely what happened when King reported his dream:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.<sup>xii</sup>

As narrated, the dream is an act of tenacious imagination by King, who risked everything and would not quit. It is a poetic scenario without specificity; and surely King himself had no notion of how to implement the dream. It is, without ever saying so, rooted in the absoluteness of God's purpose. The dream is that of King. But before King, it is God's own dream of new reality. What King does is fill the space in the liminal season of U.S. life between old failed racism and new human community with the cadences of possibility.

The utterance is filled with the implied authority of God that gives the vision moral authority of an intense kind. Indeed, the legislation that followed King's address which has shaped public life gives the lie to W. H. Auden's dictum that poetry does nothing. This poetry - dream, song, narrative, oracle - does a great deal. It provides staying power, moral energy, and courage for the deep season of abyss. It breeds fresh historical possibility in the zero hour.

In the horizon of Plenty Coups, the dreamed possibility was a life other than the old nomadic one that could not be sustained. In ancient Israel, for the poets,

- It was with Jeremiah a new covenantal community.
- It was with Isaiah a new city of shalom.
- It was with Ezekiel a new cleansed temple filled with presence.

And now the prophetic task is not blueprint or program or even advocacy. It is the elusiveness of possibility out beyond evidence, an act of imagination that authorizes the listening assembly to imagine even out beyond the ken of the speaker.

In this liminal moment of abyss in our society, prophetic imagination



- may now dream of possibilities for peace and justice with lesser measures of U.S. hegemony;
- may now dream of a lowered standard of living among us, but with a genuine neighborliness in which all share;
- may now dream of a new cultural pluralism in which the marker is not nation, race, ethnic origin, but the capacity for neighborliness;
- may now dream of a religious ecumenism in which particular faith is deeply held in the presence of other deeply held faiths.

What emerges on the lips of the poet is a new world now being given and now being received.

This way of hope is the work of ministry. Doing advocacy for good causes is urgent. But more urgent, in my view, is the nurture of venues of obedient imagination in which unuttered possibility is uttered, thoughts beyond our thoughts are thought, and ways beyond our ways are known (Isaiah 55:8-9). In such circumstance, walking by sight is likely a return to the old ways that have failed. Walking by faith is to seek a world other than the one from which we are being swiftly ejected (Hebrews 11:14).

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> On the possessive self, see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

<sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>iii</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 42.

<sup>v</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 56, 61.

<sup>vi</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 92-94.

<sup>vii</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 94-95.

<sup>viii</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 91.

<sup>ix</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 105.

<sup>x</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 113.

<sup>xi</sup> Lear, *Radical Hope*, 145.

<sup>xii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," in *Sociology of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Susanne C. Monahan, William Mirola, and Michael O. Emerson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 404-6.