

FREEDOM, ANGST, AND DISCIPLESHIP

THE COALITION FOR BAPTIST PRINCIPLES

BIENNIAL BREAKFAST MEETING

PASADENA CA

JUNE 27, 2009

KEN: There's wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea,
There's a kindness in God's justice that is more than liberty,
And the love of God is greater than the measure of my mind,
And the heart of the eternal is wonderfully kind.
Freedom, I celebrate--
Open fields and endless sky.
Freedom, I long for this--
To dare, to dance, to fail, to fly.

JANE: This is my first time being a part of the Coalition for Baptist Principles, but it does fit me very well. Christians are forever needing to work on being decent human beings and this group of people does that work...and I need it. It is at the heart of this coalition to encourage in one another the strength and maybe the finesse to be movers and changers and supporters of redemptive causes. You encourage the freedoms in one another that enable every one of us to be fully alive and full of grace. Being freely and gracefully human is the cause we Christians work on every day.

Thirty years ago, my friend Mike and I discussed the difference in our experience of freedom. Mike had been a wild and crazy motorcycle boy who had found faith with a very conservative point of view. He told me that it was a comfort to him to live with church rules which were a safe haven from his earlier self-destructive behavior. He was grateful to have the church impose limits on him like a tamed pony is comfortable in the close boundaries of a corral. Hearing him talk like that made me restless and claustrophobic. I needed to have the gate always open so that I could be the pony who tosses her head and frisks in and out of the corral whenever I want to.

I had grown up very differently from Mike--in a family obsessed with doing 'the right thing. We separated ourselves from ordinary people around us lest their very ordinariness compromise our dedication and thereby our "Christian witness." If we lived up to ideals, then obviously they were set too low and must be raised to more ideal levels. Even as a little girl, I felt weighed down by responsibility. I valued dutiful choices, but I became aware of an increasing desire to make the very same choices without daily moral fatigue, without so much fear of failure, without the neurotic desire to outrun other people. In my thirties, after a time of spiritual exhaustion, it gradually dawned on me that there are heroic projects that can be undertaken in the world on any given morning that involve superhuman effort, more resources than I have, burnout, or a martyr's death by evening. God does not select me to do all of them. All of these causes and crises and problems and possibilities lie out before me, and all of them are holy callings. I must find some clarity about what I am called and not called to do over and over again.

Recently, I learned about a study done by researchers at Harvard who followed almost 300 men over a period of 72 years (the longest longitudinal study ever). The doctors and scientists examined, interviewed, and analyzed the subjects, hoping to find some answer to the age-old question, "Is there a formula--some mix of love, work, and psychological adaptation--for a good life?" It struck me that the quest for a good life, a significant and valuable life, a serving and saving life...is the labor of Christians.

What is it that makes us happy? What is successful living? What choices shall we make that lead to fulfillment and triumph? It turns out that evaluating any one moment in a life can be deeply misleading. All of that data on someone's human condition is ambiguous and continually changing. Traits, temperament, relationships, environment, and luck or lack of it are none of them reliable predictors. Being able to adapt to challenges flexibly and creatively is useful, but not a guarantee of success. Some traits and behavior seem successful and are ultimately not. Some arguably weak choices play out well. Then again, some admirable choices result in tragedy.

Long-time director, George Vaillant wrote several books on the data. He said that sometimes the most inspiring triumphs were studies in hardship. Sometimes men with supportive families natural talents, strong careers, and grand reputations committed suicide or fell off track with mental or physical illness. Sometimes a very dysfunctional person proved to be very remarkable. Dr. Vaillant concluded: "Their lives were too human for science, too beautiful for numbers, too sad for diagnosis and too immortal for bound journals." (JWS in *The Atlantic*, June 2009)

KEN: Choices, seems I'm always left with choices;
Seems that every time I choose,
It only leaves me with another choice to make.
Weary, Lord I get so very weary,
And I can't help wishing somehow
You had given me an easier road to take.
If I say I am refusing to decide,
If I say I'm gonna just let this one slide,
I'm gonna lay me down upon the ground
And let the winds of change blow over me;
Then when I wake up from my sleep,
I will look at myself, And I'll weep
because the choice I made to lay me down
Will make a wind-blown piece of driftwood out of me.

Has been, every is becomes a has been
And all at once I come to realize
The moment that I thought was there is gone
Silence, advice is swallowed up in silence;
And I'm left standing with my choices
And I wonder if you've left me all alone.

JANE: As a Christian how do you answer this...does a successful life follow from a set of right choices? Can one even say who has a good life? Many of us are ordinary. Are some of created to be mediocre? There is a snobbishness in that question, isn't there? It sounds like we have some sort of checklist that informs us that certain traits are valuable and others are not much needed. It is human nature to classify things into categories--this can be used and that can be ignored or discarded. But what nonsense is it to estimate the value of a life?

Do some of us live unremarkable lives? Yes. It's not unkind to say so. But the Christian calling in us can keep whispering a disturbing question: *Was I not called to stand out?* Did my fate lock me out of greatness from the start? Was I not bright enough, not talented enough, not strong enough, not lucky enough? Or...*was I called to stand out* and the call was ignored or resisted? Hence, was I not selfless enough, not disciplined enough, not enduring enough, not loving enough? Some longing to be a hero, or a mentor, or a grand talent rises in me. I can, I don't, I should, I can't. I do try...often enough the pieces do not come together. A teacher of mine wrote: "Our sociology, psychology, and economics--that is, our civilization itself--seem unable to estimate the worth of people who do not stand out. That's why "success" takes on such exaggerated importance: It offers the only way out of the limbo of the middle. The media pull you out only when you are weeping after tragedy, raging on-stage, or posing for an opinion; then they drop you back into the melting pot of undifferentiated mediocrity." (Hillman, *The Soul's Code*, pp. 225-225)

Wait a minute! Being in the mediocre class requires a comparison that sizes you up according to norms and charts and bell curves. You would only be mediocre in relation to something or someone else. We compare ourselves to other people almost every day, but it's mostly unproductive. A unique combination of body, mind, temperament, traits, environments and happenstances shape into a person-specific character in you. You are one-of-a-kind soul. Character has evolved in you that is unique to yourself, that has an eccentric way of *seeing the world*, and therefore quite a unique way of *being in the world*. I'm not using the word, soul, here as a religious word, but as an idea that points to your process of seeing and being and becoming. There is drama and mystery in that.

As a one-of-a-kind soul, you will have a one-of-a-kind set of callings. There will be times in your life when the job that you do, the relationships that you must tend, or the ways you spend your days will run counter to your true self. Those are not callings. There is not and never will be a holy calling that asks of you success over integrity. Callings often change as we go along, as we are able to understand them differently, but there is not and never will be calling that lets any one of us be irrelevant to the world's meaning.

Nevertheless, I am not at ease. My sister says that I suffer from oldest child syndrome, that lots of people don't labor over life in this way. She says that I should lighten up. But I suffer a yearning. I am 67 years old, but I dream of unfinished life as though there were a debt that I owe to myself and maybe to the world I lack... completion. When I finish living and become only story, I want that story to have chapters in it that I have not written yet. I have fantasies of being in the world in some more useful ways, some more satisfying ways. I would have to be different to live that longed-for life. I would have to change. I rehearse for change and dread it at the same

time. And it is not clear to me whether my fantasies of change are optimistic--or disastrous indications of the God complex that I had when I was young.

This is the arena where we learn grace. For all the limitations placed on us by circumstances, **freedom waiting for flight is at the very heart of our being human and Christian.** It is not granted by the permission of others nor set aside because we avoid it. If I can change nothing about circumstances, nevertheless I can freely choose who I shall be in relation to them. I may not be conscious of my choosing, but choices are always being made even when I'm not aware of making them. Every choice I make is either a movement toward freedom or a movement away from it. Do you experience this with me--that freedom is both wonderful and dreadful? A holy gift and a fearful challenge? Isn't it sometimes more comfortable to stay in the corral with the gate locked than to run out into the wide, wide field? Does it come down to this? *Nothing ventured...nothing gained...*

KEN: Nothing Ventured, nothing gained,
Delight and danger, pleasure and pain,
Open fields and endless sky,
I could run the great race,
I could fall on my face,
I could leap off the cliff,
I could fail,
I could fly.

We're bound away on a long long journey,
Who knows where the road will end,
We're bound away on a long long journey,
Surprises are waiting just round the bend.
We're bound away on a long long journey,
The road is long but together we will rest,
We're bound away on a long long journey,
The answer to a riddle is our quest.
And the riddle says,
"Finding leads to losing, Losing lets you find,
Living leads to dying, but life leaves death behind,
Losing leads to finding, that's all that I can say;
No one will find life another way".

Open fields and endless sky,
Freedom, I long for this--
To dream, to dance, to risk, to fail, to fly.