

“When Trouble Comes”
A Post-Hurricane Reverie

July 15, 2005

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Whew! What is it with life these days? Some trouble always looms on the horizon. If it's not one thing, it's another. We see terrorism overseas; book burners in New Mexico; an Idaho sex offender and kidnapers in our own country; and red states versus blue states. I think everyone feels besieged. And then, hurricanes and tropical storms turn our local world upside down and backward with uncertainty, inconvenience, physical exhaustion, danger, and gnawing anxiety.

So, this Shabbat Eve I wonder and want to ask you *your* opinion: when trouble comes, do religious people respond differently than the those without faith's strength?

I recall a time when I was a boy of about eight years old in Glen Burnie, Maryland one summer day. My good friend, Raymond Stinchcomb, and I decided to build a balsa wood airplane model on the front steps of my home. All went well, until we ran out of glue.

Raymond insisted that we had to stop and beg our parents take us to the five-and-ten-cent store to buy more glue. I insistently disagreed. Why, we could simply substitute the Dupont glue with a jar of honey! Raymond felt this unwise and looked dubious, to say the least. I ran inside to get the jar of honey and we began to pour some of it in the lid on that summer day. Looking at us across the street from her front porch stood little red-haired Jeannie Moore – the neighborhood goody-goody. She had watched the entire proceeding and called out to warn me, “Eddie Paul, you’re going to get in trouble!”

Though it'd seemed like a good idea at the time, guess what? She was right! Before long, swarms of honeybees came for free samples. And, I did get in trouble. My mother had to scrub the entire porch down with hot water to rid our entranceway of the busy bees. The moral? Trouble comes (and you can't build an airplane with honey). But, live long enough and troubles surely will come. So, what do we do?

Adults call this the question of theodicy: God's justice in dealing with the human family. Time and again we hear about the innocent suffering of children; the tumor that strikes a beloved one; a senseless accident that ends the life of a beautiful child; or a freak occurrence of nature. On one Rosh Hashanah evening, a Jewish family of five in Kansas City, Missouri drowned when their car stalled in a flash flood. Sadly, they were on their way home from services.

Let's unpack this important subject for just a few minutes this Shabbos Eve.

Through the years, humans have offered several predictable explanations in the face of trouble:

- I. “Well, you must have done something to deserve it.” When presented with the old idea that misfortune punishes us for our sins, I ask myself, “What did those 1.5 million Jewish children do to deserve Auschwitz? Or those screaming peasants to the merit the massacre at My Lai? Or for that matter, the starving children of Darfour?”

- II. Second, some assume that “God must have had his reasons for visiting us with torment.” I understand that the 1924 novel by Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, will be made into a movie soon. In it, a young Catholic priest wonders why a rope bridge over a chasm in a small Peruvian town suddenly breaks one day, causing those crossing to plummet to their deaths. Was it a sheer accident, or did God will that those people should die like that?
- III. Third, still others believe that “our suffering will make us into better people.” Do you believe that? The old sea captain said that he never wanted to experience the terror of a storm at sea. But after having experienced it and survived, he wouldn’t have missed it. We can learn from the terrible things that happen to us, but I do not believe that a loving God – one that wants us to be better people – sends such horrors into our lives.
- IV. Fourth, when all else fails, some people just say “suffering liberates us from a world of pain and leads us to a better place.” Such talk makes me nauseous. Evil is evil and it is very real. Nothing can convince me that a child belongs in a grave, rather than in the embrace and care of its parents.

These assumptions make a great difference as to the kind of God we ultimately decide to worship and in whom to believe. Rabbi Harold Kushner put it so well in his famous book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*:

It may sound very shocking and very radical, but if you have to choose between a powerful God who is not kind or just, or a just God who is not all-powerful, which is more religious? Which is a greater religious virtue: being powerful, or being kind?

So what shall we think when trouble comes? Why does it happen and how do we deal with it?

- A. First, God made us free human beings and we can absolutely elevate or mess up our lives. We may eat, drink, or smoke bad things. And even worse, we can use honey to make a model airplane, instead of waiting to go to the store and buy the proper glue. We are free to rob, shoot, mug, and terrorize innocent people.
- When people ask me where God was during the Holocaust, I reply, “No, the question is where were we – the human family?” We can sin or save.
- B. When trouble comes, we ought to remember that sometimes, it is simply cause and effect. Nature is morally blind and without values. A tumor has no conscience. Certain fronts and weather conditions; or temperature variables; or trade winds and ridges; or whatever can cause hurricanes and tornadoes. The laws of nature don’t exempt nice people.
- C. Here’s another thought: when trouble comes, sometimes it’s simply a lack of *Mazel* – just plain old bad luck. Then how shall we respond when trouble comes? Religious people often ask themselves these questions:
1. Can we accept an imperfect world?

2. Can we love it anyway? It's the only world we have, after all.
3. Can we learn to respond to a God who is less than omnipotent and almighty?

Says Kushner:

I can worship a God who hates suffering, but
cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can
worship a God who chooses to make children
suffer and die for whatever exalted reason.

4. Another question: will we use our God-given ability to love and to forgive; to pray and to serve; to give when we have received; and then fashion these as the survival tools needed to thrive in an unfair and imperfect world? Who are you in life: a guest or a host?

Says the Hasid of the 19th century: "Human beings are God's language." God has enlisted us – you and me – to finish His creation. The choice between compassion and terror; between civility and chaos; and between love and indifference lies in our hands.

You and I are "God's own language" – God's way of reassuring everyone on this frail and vulnerable planet that we are not alone and never will be. Who knows what the new week will bring? The weatherman says perhaps Hurricane Emily! What else awaits? This, only, is clear: when trouble comes, you and I, and God – the Divine Friend – will see it through.

Amen