

## **From the Heart about the Heart of the Matter**

### **HOPE, JUSTICE AND PRAYER**

**by Barry Morris**

Those of us who are committed to social justice as an authenticating exercise of our faith are always in danger of burning out. For this reason the life of prayer has remained for me a source for renewed energy and hope. Prayer reminds us, first, that the work of justice is God's, and that only God can bring in the Kingdom and second, that we must avoid inertia, and take action. With St. Francis, we recognize that we are instruments that God graciously deigns to use.

My life of prayer began with my paternal Grandma Lilly, who taught me bedside prayers and modeled relatively succinct table graces. My mother had died and Grandma Lilly took over the domestic tasks of my family. Ably improvising, she drew on the well of her own experience. She knew suffering well, as she was abandoned early by her father, the grandfather I never met. But from this experience she developed her characteristic compassion. I recall that "What a Friend we have in Jesus" was one of my Grandma's favourite hymns. Roberta Bondi has described prayer as the exercise of relating to God as Friend (*Memories of God*) and truly I have come to sense and intuit prayer ever so slowly out of this friendship conviction.

While Grandma Lilly kept the home fires burning, my father got very busy on the road and seemed to court one apparently eligible woman after another. At the time I felt threatened and vulnerable; with hindsight, I now see the selfishness of my reaction. In contrast to my grandma's modelling of prayer, my father irrepressibly worked *ad hoc* lectures into the graces, while I daydreamed about food and post-meal wanderings. With hindsight I can see that my father was a source of invaluable

insight to me. Apologizing, he expressed a death-bed sense of regret that I had been left alone too much.

A backward glance also reminds me of the encouragement received from my maternal grandmother, who taught me the importance of just showing up. Too often she was given the “silent treatment” by her workaholic husband, whose own orphan-experiences (due to his father dying from a coal mining-related accident on Vancouver Island) bored a deep wound in his soul. My maternal grandparents never missed one of my anxious baseball games. There was solace, too, offered by an accepting, patient, live-in housekeeper who understood the reality of dark moods and the challenge of living through them. She helped me learn that, sometimes at least, waiting in hope leads to the lifting of the fog.

I think of prayer as yielding space to the Holy One, so that, willingly, perseveringly, the sharing of space may be possible. Ah, the warm thermal current flowing from the witness of those desert mothers and fathers who so persevered! What do we do, when we pray for justice, other than yield space for and to the Holy One, in hope that justice may have a chance to occur? Such hope is more than wishful thinking; rather, it is a willingness to be present to life lived here and now. I experience prayer via the summoning mandate of the Kingdom of God, and with many of the similar groanings of which Paul speaks in that favourite Romans 8 passage. How often I seek the steadfast goading of aroused hope, and the promise of refreshment (though often scattered, cluttered and distracted) in centering prayer or meditation.

It is seldom prayer alone that moves and accompanies me. Justice and hope are two other gentle goads. Justice has been crucial ever since I came to recognize people who are “more sinned against than sinning” and began to share time with them. I

first packed a University of British Columbia petition to keep the student fees affordable, by going door to door in two of the more affluent residential areas of Vancouver. I became convinced that attending the lunch meetings and forums of both the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) could not be enough. There were great moments when, as a seminary student, I participated alongside young southern Blacks in marches led by Martin Luther King, Jr. This participation got thornier when the cause moved north into the big cities and close to my school, Chicago Theological Seminary. It helped that classmate Jesse Jackson was around to cajole us, in and out of classes.

In those heady days I witnessed the harnessing of power which helped to make justice a real possibility and I took on some of the door-knocking in political campaigns. One poll on which I had worked long and hard was won by the margin of a single vote! This was maybe because I finally persuaded a last voter to come out, seconds before that poll closed. I related to the long-term, professional campaigns of the Industrial Areas Foundation, where communities forged alliances with churches, labour unions, non-profits and civic groups. About this time I got my introduction to Reinhold Niebuhr, beginning with *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, and learned from his emergent Christian realism.

I have looked long and hard for mentors – people whose own lives of intensity and integrity convey sustaining encouragement. I call upon such mentors in imagination, through reading old and new journals, through free association in prayer, through constructed litanies, and via this writing exercise. I am thankful for this bequeathed passion for justice, even in the face of fragmentary fulfillment. Today I worry a lot, though, about the decline and not so benign erosion of the commitment to justice in

the once-mainstream churches. I affirm, on the other hand, the re-emergence of this commitment to justice in some of the evangelical communities that I see participating in Vancouver's *Streams of Justice* network.

At a recent bi-annual "Energy from the Edges" gathering on the rock of Newfoundland last autumn, I pressed some of the attending community, many of them urban ministry and lay workers, to articulate their core insights: what did they think would nourish and animate them for the long haul? would such insights differ from my own current emphasis of *hoping justice prayerfully*? For most, this was not yet a central concern. A few did resonate with the questions of how not to "burn-out," and how to stay meaningfully connected with colleagues or otherwise elusive mentors.

More than a few of us will likely hang around – paid and/or volunteering – in ministry beyond the once predictable exit at the mere age of sixty-five. I thus think of another of our colleagues, Keith Whitney. When he was with the Fred Victor Mission in Toronto a generation ago, Keith vowed to stay there for the rest of his life, practising a faithful public ministry. He kept his vow, perhaps reflecting something of the Benedictine "vow of stability," a vow that sustained Thomas Merton, too, to stay put, in and out of his wanderlusts.

Ministry can be lonely and isolating, sometimes arising from frustrated projection by the self-righteously inclined. But it need not be so. I am grateful, therefore, for theologies that link hope, justice and prayer – and also for the human passion and longing that underlies and animates these mainstays of the life of faith. In my mind, this combination of vital factors feels like being grounded in those simple table and bedside prayers of my Grandmother Lillian Morris, so long ago.

necessity of the institutional? Or, to rephrase Milbank's question, how according to the Illich-Taylor model, does one comport oneself in an enfolded way *vis-a-vis* institutions or codified rules? If institutions and rules are inescapable for earthly politics and ethics, how does Incarnation reshape them agapeically? Or, alternatively, what does an "embodied" institution or law look like?

I think these are important questions to ask of the Taylor-Illich perspective, not simply to point out the shortcomings of the view, but rather to identify possible points of departure for further political, moral or theological engagements. Of course, we should not be surprised that Taylor offers no easy answers here given his recognition that the eschatological character of Christianity implies that humans live in the "not yet," in a time when the extent of God's reconciliation in the world remains not fully disclosed.

Though it may be a shortcoming of *A Secular Age* that it does not provide any straightforward answers on this issue, the book does present an interesting point of departure for those interested in the various intersections of religion and politics. At the very least, one major achievement of Taylor's book is that it highlights the ways that Christianity itself is implicated in the sidelining of the body, characteristic of secular modernity, and equally importantly that it directs its readers to valuable religious resources that can remedy the movement to excarnation. In all of this, he departs radically from those who conceive of secularity in terms of the mere subtraction of religion, a view which *A Secular Age* demonstrates to be far too narrow.

— Carlos Colorado