

Blowing on the Coal of the Heart

The Rev. Dr. Richard Speck

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Several years ago, my wife, Janet, brought home from work a video tape which she wanted to see. The tape was part of her in-service education for the Hospice Program where she was a new employee. This tape featured Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I watched it with her to hear this eloquent speaker discuss how to cope with tragedies which people experience. Kushner also discussed the concepts of good and evil. Good he said came from God, but the source of evil was harder to place from where it came.

For as long as we humans have had consciousness, we have been trying to explain the reason for tragedy occurring in our lives. Some of it is brought upon our selves by our own actions. It was Agatha Christie who said, “There’s too much tendency to attribute to God the evils that man [and woman] do of [their] own free will.”

But not all of the trials and tribulations can be accounted for by human causes.

Kushner is just one of the latest to have a go at this perennial question of where do bad things come from which we don't deserve. As he was discussing the concept of good and evil, Kushner mentions the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible. For you Biblical scholars, Job is a part of the Hebrew wisdom literature. The book of Job was written somewhere between the seventh and fourth centuries before the common era. It probably was placed in its final context as we read it today during the Persian period around the year 540 B.C.E.

Job is the story of a man who was upright in the sight of God and who is tested by God as to his faith. You have probably heard someone mentioned as having the patience of Job. Job took all that God did to him and never once cursed God for his misfortune. He was much more patient than most of us ever dream of being. I sometimes have trouble waiting for the light to turn green. Job

challenges God to explain himself to Job. In the end, God tells Job that Job can't comprehend the meaning or purpose of God. Job repents and is rewarded with having all that was destroyed returned to him again with interest.

Kushner also mentions the verse play J.B. written by Archibald MacLeish in 1958. I don't know how many of you have read the play, but it is a marvelous treatment of the issue of good and evil using the Job story. What struck me was a line that occurs on the last page of the play. Kushner lifts this line up as a more fitting ending to the Job story.

But before I tell you the line and its meaning for me, let me describe the modern version of the Job story. The time is now, the place is an old circus tent corner where a side show of some kind is set up. God is played by Mr. Zuss, the balloon salesman and Satan is played by the popcorn vendor, Nickles. They provide the theological and philosophical commentary of the play as well as some of the humor.

Job is played by J.B., a multi-billionaire who has got it all – think Bill Gates - lovely wife, five beautiful children, big house, servants, successful business. In addition to his being extremely wealthy though, J.B. is also an honest and decent human being. J.B. has everything that one could hope to have in life and is content with his lot.

Zuss and Nickles spar as God and Satan over whether J.B. will curse God and die if he loses everything he possesses – his family, his business, his health. Nickles thinks that he will and Zuss believes that J.B. will be faithful to the end.

The opening scene has J.B.'s family sitting down to a Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings. Sarah, J.B.'s wife, is concerned that the children aren't thankful enough for all of their good fortune. J.B. states that what we receive comes as a gift of life from God. He thinks that God is just and fair and we get what we deserve. Sarah thinks that their happy situation is a result of J.B.'s faith in God. She fears that if they forget this, the family will

suffer dire consequences as a result.

And sure enough, the family suffers. Nickles/Satan is given permission to afflict J.B. with disasters to test his faith. The following scene has the family receiving word that the oldest son has been killed by an anti-personnel mine after the end of a war similar to the Iraq War or Bosnia. Then two more children are killed in a car accident while on a double date. Sarah wonders aloud what they had done to deserve the loss of three of their children. She asks why God did this to her innocent children. J.B. says that they have to take the evil with the good of life, stuff happens. He refuses to blame God for their tragedy.

In the next scene, one of the two remaining daughters is raped and killed by a young boy. J.B. says that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. His faith still hasn't been diminished. Then the last remaining daughter is killed in an explosion during an air raid or nuclear bomb blast which also destroys all of J.B.'s wealth and home. J.B. is reduced to living in the ruins of his house

with torn clothes and abject poverty.

Finally, J.B. becomes covered with hideous sores all over his body. He continues to believe that God would not punish without just cause. What he doesn't understand is what he has done to deserve such ill fortune. Sarah rebels at this line of reasoning. She says: "If God is just our slaughtered children stank with sin, were rotten with it. . . They are dead and they were innocent. I will not let you sacrifice their deaths to make injustice justice and God good."

Sarah leaves J.B. and he is visited by three "comforters" who try to show him the error of his ways. The first tries to get J.B. to admit his guilt saying that J.B. must have done something wrong. J.B. replies that he is innocent and still claims that God is just. The second comforter says that we are not responsible for what happens to us because we are ignorant of the forces which cause us to act. This is a deterministic stance where we are pre-determined in our actions due to genetics and societal influences. J.B. rejects

this argument as well saying that we do have freedom of choice as human beings. The third comforter tries to convince J.B. that humans are inherently evil creatures and corrupt, thus in need of repentance. J.B. rejects this assumption of human nature as false theology also. He can't believe in the depravity of the human race. This is a very Unitarian Universalist position of believing in the inherent worth and goodness of humanity.

Finally J.B. demands an audience with God to understand why these terrible events have happened in his life and his wish is fulfilled. God asks J.B. the questions which are found in the Biblical Job asking him if he understands the power and purposes of God. J.B. replies that he realizes that he spoke without understanding God. He states that now he understands his human situation and recants his questions as un-knowable. This is where the similarity between the book of Job and the play ends. MacLeish adds a more fitting conclusion to the story.

The last scene has Sarah returning to J.B. She comes bearing

the tender shoots of a newly sprouted forsythia bush. She found them springing out of the ashes of what had been the town. Sarah says: "You wanted justice, didn't you? There isn't any. There's the world." When asked by J.B. why she left him, she replies, "I loved you. I couldn't help you any more. You wanted justice and there was none--only love." They cling together and J.B. states that it is too dark to see. Sarah then makes the speech which sums up the play for me. "Then blow on the coal of the heart, my darling. . .Blow on the coal of the heart. The candles in churches are out. The lights have gone out in the sky. Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll see by and by. . .We'll see where we are. The wit won't burn and the wet soul smoulders. Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll know. . .We'll know. . ."

"Blow on the coal of the heart." What I hear when I read these words is a statement of what it means to be a human being. I agree with Sarah that in this world we inhabit there is no justice in how our lives are affected. We live in a universe full of random

occurrences where events happen which weren't foreseen and could not have been avoided. The automobile wreck, the drive-by random shooting in a school yard, the terrorist bombing, flooding or hurricanes all bring misery upon our lives.

What sustains us throughout these tragedies is our capacity to give love to one another. Love is the most precious of our actions which makes us human. In J.B.'s deepest agony and despair, Sarah reaches out to him and gives of her love to him as the only gift which will ease his pain. "Blow on the coal of the heart" she enjoins. Keep our love alive and we may make it through this world yet without surrendering to our despair. The bond of love will sustain us through the hard night of the soul.

There is no guarantee implied that our life will improve some day. After J.B. has had his faith in God's justice sorely tested, all that is left to him is the love which he and Sarah have for each other. If he is to go on living, he must have some hope that will bear him up.

Isn't this true for each of us? Don't we all face the uncertainty of life and its trials with a search for hope that tomorrow might be better? And what sustains us in this hope? I think that it is the "blowing on the coal of the heart" that does it. As families and as a church community, it is the love we share that keeps us getting up and moving forward in time together. How does this church blow on the coal of the heart for one another? How do you care for one another?

Love is an activity, not a passive effect. Love is the activity of giving, not receiving. One gives of one's power and strength to another much as Sarah gave her love to J.B. This experience of giving leads to a heightened feeling of vitality and joy in the giver. One feels more alive and over-flowing and more in union with the world when one gives of their love.

The song "The Rose" expresses this same sentiment.

Some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed,

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Some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed,
Some say love, it is a hunger, an endless aching need,
I say love, it is a flower and you its only seed.

It's the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance,
It's the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance,
It's one who won't be taken, who cannot seem to give,
And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.

When the night has been too lonely and the road has been too long,
And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong,
Just remember in the winter far beneath the bitter snows,
Lies the seed that with the sun's love in the spring becomes the
rose.

The first verse describes what others say love might be.
Love might be a river that drowns or a razor that cuts the soul. Or

it might be a hunger which is never quenched. The song states that love is a flower and the human is the seed from which it will grow.

The second verse brings in the actions which will keep love from growing. It is the person afraid to take a chance or to risk failure in a relationship with another human. The man or woman who remains isolated and separated from others and refuses to give of himself or herself will never find love. We stay separated from one another out of fear.

Psychologist Erich Fromm states that this awareness of human separation, without the reunion by love is the source of shame, guilt, and anxiety. The deepest need in humans then is to overcome this separateness, the feeling of isolation. The existential question is how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement.

The final verse is the universal hope that all will be able to find love. In one's deepest despair like not being able to see the light as J.B. can't, when the night has been too lonely and the road

has been too long, when the weight of the world is bearing down on your shoulders, there is yet a hope present. Even in the dead of winter when all seems the most desolate and forlorn, there lies in the ground underneath the promise of the flower blooming with the rays of light in the spring. In the human heart there lies the seeds of love which will bloom with the love which comes from giving it away to another. "Blow on the coal of the heart. . .it's all the light now."

Love, says Fromm, is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love. We are concerned for their needs and feelings. It is the responsibility to respond to the needs of another human being. It is being ready to care for the other. Love is a respect for the unique abilities of the other person, to allow them to unfold and grow without exploitation. And finally, love is knowing another person in their entirety to the core of their being. It is experiencing the union with another person and knowing what true loving is. The only way to full knowledge is in the act of love

transcending thought and words. Each of these four attitudes is mutually inter-dependent. It is the mature love which contains all of them. This is what true community looks like.

Dick Gilbert said, "I need you. You need me. I know it. You know it. What are we waiting for?" We only have each other. So we are left where we started with Job. Life isn't just or fair. We can never answer the question of where evil comes from to disrupt our lives forever. We can only cope with its after effects through the love we give and receive from others.

We are much like Sarah and J.B. in our lives. We can never explain the winds of fortune which sweep over the events of our days. But we can give and receive love which will sustain us through those dark moments of the soul when the candles are out in churches and the lights have gone out of the skies. We can remember the flower which waits to bloom becoming a thing of beauty. "Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll know...we'll know..." What are we waiting for? Amen.