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16. Teaching and Learning an Option for the Poor

The Book of Job and Belief in a Just World

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Introduction

According to Eliphaz, the first of Job's friends to speak to him in his misery:

Reflect now, what innocent person perishes?
Where are the upright destroyed?
As I see it, those who plow mischief
and sow trouble will reap them.
By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his wrath they are consumed (Job 4: 7-9).¹

¹ All scripture quotations are taken from *The New American Bible*, Revised Edition (2011).

Bildad, the second of Job's friends to speak, echoes this theology of just reward and retribution:

Does God pervert judgment,
does the Almighty pervert justice?
If your children have sinned against him
and he has left them in the grip of their guilt,
still, if you yourself have recourse to God
and make supplication to the Almighty,
should you be blameless and upright,
surely now he will rouse himself for you
and restore your rightful home (Job 8:3-6).

Zophar, the third of Job's garrulous friends, follows suit:

If [God] should seize and imprison
or call to judgment, who then could turn him back?
For he knows the worthless
and sees iniquity; will he then ignore it? . . .
If iniquity is in your hand, remove it,
and do not let injustice dwell in your tent,
surely then you may lift up your face in innocence;
you may stand firm and unafraid . . . (Job 11:10-15).

The logic of Job's friends' speeches seems to go like this:

1. God is just and rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.
2. Everything that happens is the will of God.
3. Therefore, those who suffer are receiving their just deserts.
4. Job is suffering, therefore Job is guilty.
5. If Job were to admit his guilt, God would reward him by restoring his health, wealth, and family.

The problem with this theology, of course, is that it does not conform to human experience, and therefore only *seems* to save the appearance of God's justice. As Job protests over and over again, as if speaking on behalf of every innocent victim of injustice, we have done nothing to deserve this suffering. It is the genius of the book of Job to challenge this theology of just retribution.

The Belief in a Just World

This ancient classic of world literature was composed some 2,500 years ago but remains relevant to questions of divine providence and human misery today. About 50 years ago, the Canadian researcher Melvin J. Lerner began exploring, in a series of experiments, the psychological phenomenon he called "the belief in a just world," which bears a striking resemblance to the theology of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Simply stated, as Lerner puts it in his seminal 1980 book, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*, "A Just World is one in which people 'get what they deserve'" (11). Lerner suggests three sources for this

phenomenon. First, of course, sometimes there *is* an apparently causal relationship between a person's actions or attributes and his or her life experiences. Sometimes good people do lead rewarding lives and sometimes the lives of bad people do end badly. And that seems right, so we turn that observable pattern into an interpretive perceptual schema. As Lerner puts it, this schema is part of our cultural wisdom, as expressed, for example, in morality tales and folk wisdom, such as the fable of the industrious ant and the self-indulgent grasshopper, but sometimes elevated into world-shaping perspectives, such as the "Protestant Ethic," famously identified by the social theorist Max Weber. In a phrase, "Good triumphs over Evil." Marshall Dillon always wins the draw.

A second source of "the belief in a just world," suggests Lerner, is simply "That Is the Way Our Minds Work." "Our minds try to fit together all positive events, traits, and attributes in the same 'object' or unit, and similarly bring together all negative cognitions. . . . In this way we create a relatively stable world for ourselves, comprised of univalent objects" (14). Thirdly, and this seems the most potent explanation, "people want to and have to believe that they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in the future" (14). If Job is right and his suffering is undeserved, then it is not only his friends' conception of God as just that is at stake, but their sense of control over their own lives. If a righteous Job is vulnerable to such suffering, then so are they. If the victim is undeserving, what kind of universe are we living in? If I cannot be certain my own piety, hard work, honesty, and thrift will guarantee me a decent life, what is the point? Better to blame the victim and keep my belief in a just world intact.

Rational and Non-rational Tactics and Protective Strategies

Actually, Lerner indicates there are several ways people negotiate the experience or perception of undeserved suffering. People employ both rational and non-rational tactics to mitigate threats to "the belief in a just world" (19). He describes the first rational tactic as "prevention and restitution." Even in the individualistic culture of the United States, we have created a myriad of "social devices [both public and private] designed to prevent or reduce the devastating effects of unjust suffering and deprivation" (19). We pay taxes and make donations toward these ends. And as individuals we sometimes come directly to the aid of an unjustly suffering neighbor. Who knew that good-cause fund-raisers such as a bake sale or spaghetti feed or 5-K run could be an expression of belief in a just world? A second rational tactic for dealing with disconfirming evidence is to accept our limitations. If our resources or circumstances are such that we simply cannot respond in the manner of prevention or restitution, then we do not hold ourselves accountable. The adage, "To know and not to act is not to know" is problematic in a media-saturated globalized human community. The far-away victim's suffering may be unjust, but at least I am not unjustly irresponsible if I cannot relieve it (20).

Lerner also identifies two tactics he calls "non-rational" or psychological defenses, the first of which he names "denial-withdrawal." Out of sight, out of mind. Avoid people or communities or news sources that might present cases of unjust suffering. If you stumble into such a situation, "get the hell out of there." Or, and this is a second non-rational tactic, "reinterpret the event," which can be done in three ways (20). Reinterpret the outcome. Poverty, we might tell ourselves, has its compensating rewards, such as learning to enjoy the

simple pleasures of life. Or reinterpret the cause, which seems to have been the principle psychological mechanism operating in Job's friends. "If it is possible to attribute the victim's fate to something he did or failed to do, then the sense of justice is often satisfied" (21). In a phrase, blame the victim. The rape victim was wearing provocative clothes. The humanities graduate with no job and a mountain of debt should have majored in business. The disappeared investigative journalist should have known better than to take on that crime network or that repressive government. A third way to employ the non-rational tactic of reinterpretation also blames the victim, but not for what they do or did but for who they are, for their attributes, for their identification as a certain kind of person or as a member of a certain group. Lerner writes that "in some subcultures, Jews, gypsies, blacks, Catholics, hillbillies, are normatively defined as 'inferior' human beings," and although they may seem to be acting normally, it is likely that they have harmed someone in the past and so deserve whatever suffering they now endure" (21).

In addition to these various forms of rational and non-rational tactics, Lerner also describes what he calls "protective strategies." Justice may not be immanent but it is ultimate. Cancer is a terrible disease but medical science is making great strides. Racism has not disappeared but it is no longer legally sanctioned. Or as the legendary coach Vince Lombardi is reported to have said, we did not lose, the game just ended too soon. We can even extend the time frame for justice ultimately: your reward will be great in heaven! A second protective strategy is the creation or perception of not a single just world but of several worlds of which ours is only one. There is the world of the "beautiful people," the privileged elite, who seem to have everything necessary for a happy life. Its opposite is the world of victims, the poverty-stricken, the crippled, the losers, those destined to suffer just as the beautiful people seem destined to thrive. Neither world is ours, where people by and large and in the long run can and do get what they deserve. Unlike the beautiful people, we have to work for our quotient of happiness, but unlike those destined to misery, we have a fighting chance. As long as we inhabit *our* world faithfully, diligently, we can assume a certain degree of justice, somewhere between fantasy and fear, if not on Rodeo Drive then certainly not on Skid Row. I believe in Main Street, USA, a reliably just world.

"Everybody's Whole Life is Planned by the Creator"

One of the most provocative and persuasive findings regarding "the belief in a just world," and one especially relevant in the context of the book of Job, concerns 29 young people who had recently been crippled for life when they were interviewed. One individual had not formulated an opinion about his situation. Seven subjects saw their fates as a matter of chance: accidents happen. The remaining 19 of the 29 subjects interpreted their fates positively while two interpreted their fates as punishment. An example of the former would be, "Since the accident, I've learned an awful lot about myself and other people" (Lerner: 162). And for the majority of the positive 19, almost two-thirds of the original 29, their "good ending" was linked to a religious perspective. As one subject said, "And it's sort of like Job, you know. [God] put things in front of you and shows that you can overcome" (162). As another subject put it, "everybody's whole life is planned by the Creator" (162). And since the Creator is believed to be good and just, this subject believes he can find goodness in his otherwise tragic or even punitive fate. Furthermore, as other studies have

found, belief in a just God may lead to the belief that, “In effect, there are no innocent victims, no injustice, in the ultimate scheme of things” (164). Back to the theology of Job’s friends.

Surprisingly, class differences in “the belief in a just world” do not conform to what may be our expectations. According to Lerner’s research, “those in the Upper Middle Class are more likely to view the economically and social deprived in our society as victims” (169) than are the deprived themselves. Lerner suggests that these people “are realistic enough to recognize and admit that this is a very imperfect world, and there is often a good deal of injustice” (170). The deprived themselves may not have the psychological wherewithal to see the world so realistically. Belief that the world is just may be necessary to their sense of agency in a world that may otherwise seem to be aligned against them.

Lerner concludes his book on a more optimistic note. He observes that “If it is true that a central concern in people’s lives is maintaining the belief that they live in a Just World, and that a variety of acts which we appropriately label as cruel or indifferent stem directly from their attempt to protect this belief, it is also true that this commitment remains a powerful untapped source for generating constructive social change.” He even goes so far as to say “The desire to maximize one’s own outcomes is a relatively trivial motive in people’s lives, that gains its importance only as it enters into the person’s concerns with deserving and justice.” Here is the riddle with which he ends his book: “At times, people feel that justice is served when people’s needs are most effectively met; at other times, people’s deserving is seen as relative to their effort, their contributions to a task, their station in life, what they can win in a fair situation. And this is “inextricably bound up with the way people decide who is in their ‘world,’ and what place they have in that world” (194).

Who is in My World? A Theology of Justice Pedagogy

In the space remaining, I would like to address this last statement of Melvin Lerner as a pedagogical challenge especially to Christian colleges and universities committed to social justice and one that has deep theological roots. If the challenge is to educate and form the way our students, the vast majority of whom come from Main Street, USA, decide who is in their world, or whether they will allow for any connection between their world and the world of victims, there is no substitute for direct personal encounter, through community-based service-learning programs, whether academic or para-curricular, or through immersion experiences in poor or marginalized communities, whether for a few weeks or a full semester. I have written about the importance of personal encounter to this project in my book, *Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice*. That book narrates examples of such encounters from my own life, and the lives of Pope Paul VI, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, often referred to as the second founder of the Jesuits in the wake of Vatican II, and in the lives of my students. It articulates such encounters between residents of just and unjust worlds in the context of Aristotelian *phronesis* or practical judgment, the Catholic Social Action tradition, and especially Ignatian pedagogy. It treats this long trajectory as best understood as a social practice as articulated in the philosophy of virtue of Alasdair MacIntyre (see also Bergman: 39-56). In the book, I explore three university pedagogies in depth: long-term cross-cultural immersion, academic service-learning in local settings, and the teaching of moral exemplars, remarkable men and women who have straddled the worlds of privilege and oppression in

order to make both worlds more just. The book explains how, since 1995, I have developed the Justice & Peace Studies Program at Creighton University as one credible embodiment of this theory of justice pedagogy. Allow me to direct you to that book for the full argument and particulars.

What I do not explore in that book are the theological roots of this pedagogy, which I would like to explore by way of Gustavo Gutierrez's *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. At the fount of Gutierrez's book is the question, "How are we to talk about a God who is revealed as love in a situation characterized by poverty and oppression?" (xiv). His preliminary answer is that biblical revelation "assigns a privileged place to the simple and the despised" (xi). Or more fully, "The scorned of this world are those whom the God of love prefers. This is a very simple matter, but for a mind that judges everything by merits and demerits, worthiness and unworthiness, it is difficult to grasp" (xii). This would seem to be the point of the book of Job's portrayal of the theology of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Gutierrez might well have said, in the language of Melvin Lerner, for a mind that believes in a just world, this divine preference for the victim is difficult to grasp. As he pointedly remarks, "An entire social and religious order is hereby turned upside down." He is also quick to add that "The ultimate basis of God's preference for the poor is to be found in God's own goodness and not in any analysis of society or human compassion, however pertinent these reasons may be" (xiii).

Gutierrez believes that the literary device of the wager made between God and Satan, the accuser, that sets the context for Job's suffering, can be interpreted as follows: "Can human beings have a disinterested faith in God – that is, can they believe in God without looking for rewards and punishments?" (1). God wagers *yes*, that Job will continue to believe in him even when his world turns profoundly unjust. Job will denounce the day on which he was born, but he will not deny God, even though he feels abandoned by God, nor will he make a false confession. Despite the admonitions of his three friends, he perseveres in believing that his suffering is unmerited, undeserved. But how could that be if the creator of this world is just and demands justice of his people? This is an especially poignant question for Gutierrez, who is at pains to point out that the text insists repeatedly that "Job is one who practices justice in his social life" (4). Job is just, but he "is not a patient man, at least not in the usual sense of the word. He is rather a rebellious believer. His rebellion is against the suffering of the innocent, against a theology that justifies it, and even against the depiction of God that such a theology conveys." Gutierrez further points out, in a nice rhetorical turn that is at the heart of his book, "But if human beings cannot be condemned in order to defend God, neither can God be condemned in order to defend human beings" (14). Is there any solution to this apparent theological riddle?

Two Ways of Talking about God

Gutierrez argues that the book of Job offers no ultimate solution – God is mystery – but rather a better way to talk about both creature and Creator than as either just or unjust. He proposes that the book of Job offers, and Christians need, not one all-encompassing language but two distinct and complementary ways of talking about God. These two languages correspond to

Two major shifts of viewpoint [that] take place in Job's way of speaking as he tormentedly rejects the doctrine of retribution in light of his personal experience. The first occurs when, at the instigation of his friends, he broadens his perspective . . . and realizes that the issue . . . is not simply the suffering of one individual. The real issue . . . is the suffering and injustice that mark the lives of the poor. Those who believe in God must . . . try to lighten the burden of the poor by helping them and practicing solidarity with them. The speeches of God occasion the second shift: Job now understands that the world of justice must be located within the broad but demanding horizon of freedom that is formed by the gratuitousness of God's love (16).

These two major shifts in Job's perspective point toward what Gutierrez calls "the two closest approximations to a correct language about God: the language of prophecy and the language of contemplation" (16). Elaborating these two dialectically related theological languages is the burden of *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*.

As to the first language, although Job is usually categorized as wisdom literature, Gutierrez points to chapter 24 as thoroughly prophetic as it includes "the most radical and cruel description of the wretchedness of the poor that is to be found in the Bible . . . [as well as] a harsh indictment of the powerful who rob and oppress the poor" (32), whose daily life is a dying, so that their oppressors may legitimately be called murderers (33). This is "a step on the way to correct talk about God: a God who, as Job knows in the depths of his heart, wants justice. That is why Job can believe that in practicing justice he is doing the will of God. But this kind of talk about God – talk that may be described as 'prophetic' – is inadequate" (48-49). "Job's call for justice is legitimate, and Yahweh is committed to justice. But if justice is to be understood in its full meaning and scope, it must be set in the context of God's overall plan for human history, for it is there that God grants self-revelation," whose "entire work of creation bears the trademark of gratuitousness" (67).

As Gutierrez puts it: "The main idea has now been established: in the beginning was the gratuitousness of divine love," which is – not retribution – "the hinge on which the world turns." In his speeches, "God will bring [Job] to see that nothing, not even the world of justice, can shackle God; this is the very heart of the answer" (72). Gutierrez elaborates:

God wants justice indeed [as the language of prophecy insists], and desires that divine judgment (*mishpat*) reign in the world; but God cannot impose it, for the nature of created beings must be respected. God's power is limited by human freedom; for without freedom God's justice would not be present within history. Furthermore, precisely because human beings are free, they have the power to change course and be converted. The destruction of the wicked [as the theology of retribution and "belief in a just world" would seem to demand], would put an end to that possibility (77).

Gutierrez sums this up provocatively: "the all-powerful God is also a 'weak' God" (77). In the language of 1 Kings 19: God was not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in a still small voice (78).

Indeed, it is only in the language of contemplation, which embraces God's gratuitousness, that it is possible fully to understand, in the language of prophecy, God's preferential love for the poor (88). To put it somewhat more practically, to speak contemplatively of God's grace does not mean "that God does not look for a certain kind of behavior from human beings. . . [F]aith finds expression in works, but these works [as the pious and righteous Job discovers] do not become a claim upon God, for if they did, they would betray their own meaning" (90). "Mystical language expresses the gratuitousness of God's love; prophetic language expresses the demands this love makes. The followers of Jesus and the community they form – the church – live in the space created by this gratuitousness and these demands" (95). This space can also be described as a third language, "a synthesis of the prophetic and the contemplative and the only appropriate way of talking about the God of Jesus Christ," and that is the language of the cross (100).

Conclusion

If the Christian university arises genuinely out of the Christian church, which arises out of the space between prophecy and contemplation, between justice and gratuitousness, then personal encounter with the victims of injustice today, in the myriad ways Job appears to us in our globalized experience, in the poor and marginalized whom Mother Teresa memorably called "Jesus in distressing disguise," must be at the heart of our academic practice. This service or immersion in the world of the victim certainly does not preclude time spent in the classroom, the library, the laboratory, or online – indeed it demands it – but it does put all those more typically academic pursuits in their proper context. My book, *Catholic Social Learning*, describes some pedagogies appropriate to that task. In this essay, I have offered both a psychological and theological articulation of why such personal encounters with the victims of injustice are properly understood not as peripheral to higher education in the context of Christian faith but at its very core. Our students should be encouraged away from the non-rational strategies of denial-withdrawal or of blaming the victim for either what they did or for who we think they are, and toward the rational strategies of prevention and restitution (which sounds a bit like prophecy) but also of acknowledgment of personal limitations (a rather plebian way to talk about the language of contemplation). The point is not to believe in a just world but to help create one.

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