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IV

POLITICS AND SPIRITUALITY

When an individual has enjoyed thirty years teaching about religion, it should not be surprising that he will draw upon this knowledge, to the extent that it applies, even when running for public office. On the days when the campaign took us out on the road, traveling from place to place and from voter group to voter group, I had an acute sense that the experience could be likened to that of an athlete who is engaged in cross-country running, or the steeple chase, or even the marathon. That is, "running" for political office seems to be the appropriate description. It is a run -- a run through a field of barriers, obstacles, and other challenges that can be measured according to specifiable degrees of difficulty. There is a starting point, and a pre-established guaranteed finishing point. The finish line is more time (date) than place. One knows that one has, say, one hundred twenty more days to run, which in so many ways can appropriately be identified with a pregnancy. How many times were we consoled with this observation, "well, if a woman knew the pain would be forever, she'd never allow herself to get pregnant." Indeed, when the campaign going gets tough, one reassures oneself of the fact that the race is temporary and of scheduled duration. It doesn't simply go on and on, ad infinitum. Moreover, the contest is decided on the basis of judgments made during the course of one's running, which judgments are assessed and delivered by others after one has stepped over the finish line. Though polling information is sometimes useful, one can never

know the outcome precisely until the votes are in.

In athletic terms, running for elected office is very different, say, from needing to subdue an opponent in a wrestling match, and from getting on base and scoring runs in a baseball game, and from impressing judges, say, in swimming competition. There are skills involved, but there is no real consensus as to which of them are most instrumental. Training is involved, but the training guides function like travel guides to foreign cities. They can propose and suggest avenues of approach, but without being able to promise successful arrival at the desired destination. By the end, of course, it is always a two-person race: oneself against one's opponent, or, perhaps, as significant, the self one was before one ran against the self one must become in order to run successfully. There is interesting interplay at both levels. And what makes all of this so intense is that both dynamics are played out in a very public arena, which accords most critical prominence to the psycho-social modality. No one else can run in one's place, or on one's behalf, and yet one's running is primarily representational. And the images that are created can assume a kind of timeless quality. Edmund Muskie had a brilliant career -- in Maine before he became nationally known, as a United States Senator, then nominee for Vice President, and even as Secretary of State. But on March 27, 1996, the day after he died, the third line of his obituary referenced the time that he stood in the snow on a street corner in New Hampshire, and, after describing how much he had been hurt by published remarks about his wife, shed tears publicly. From that day forward, each time Edmund Muskie's name came up, this scene was automatically and vividly called to mind. And it was an event that occupied less than ten minutes in the course of a highly dedicated life of distinguished public service that reached over a span of over eighty years.

The invocation of analogies from athletics also situates a run for political office within a framework that carries clear religious and/or spiritual overtones. After all, a deliberate journey through barriers, obstacles, and significant challenges, accompanied by a sense of ordeal, is the kind of human action that meets the requirements of pilgrimage, which subject has inspired a considerable body of analytical and interpretive trans-cultural literature. Pilgrimage is what devoted inquirers do in pursuit of insight or enlightenment. It is what persons in need do to secure healing. Pilgrimage is what believers do so as to locate themselves at those places of distinctive magnetism so as to find refreshment and nourishment. Pilgrimage provides passage into the realm of experience. It is a distinct "going forth," which, as Victor Turner and others have illustrated, is surfeited with ritual ambience. There are some truths that are inaccessible in stationary position; these require action and motion. Pilgrimage is about movement.

A host of examples come quickly to mind. John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress is probably the most obvious one, but there is also Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Rudyard Kipling's Kim, the stories of D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, and Patrick White, and the very impressive series of contemporary "travel books," the best known of which is The Lady and the Monk by the sensitive and brilliant writer, Pico Iyer. In the prototype, Pilgrim's Progress, Bunyan likens the experience of a properly-directed life to that of an extended journey, marked at every stage by the quality of challenge that requires virtue or its opposite. And Joseph Campbell has written a classic portrayal of the human journey, under the title The Hero With a Thousand Faces, that has the same force. In each, the protagonist is called upon to go out to meet the call of adventure, which adventure requires a triumph over significant danger, following which there is a

celebrated return to home with the protagonist possessing the fresh insight that the journey/pilgrimage made accessible.

All pilgrimage literature testifies that the journey is necessarily inconvenient and arduous, but the goal is of such incomparable value that the sacrifices are deemed worthy. An essential element in the goal is the opportunity to "see the truth with one's own eyes," and to recognize it to be truth. This implies that the truth that is consequent to pilgrimage is accessible in no other way. Thus, the pilgrim is impressed with the realization that if he/she does not respond to the call to the journey, a life-defining opportunity will have been missed, and will never become available again. The acceptance of the terms is attached to the prospect of reward or blessing, which, of course, can never be guaranteed. The risk is that the journey is not only laborious and manifestly inconvenient, but, in numerous ways, is also life-threatening. The dangers it imposes are real. But the pilgrim knows that there is no other route to the enlightenment that he/she has been invited or persuaded to seek.

Thus, for Bunyan, Campbell and other pilgrimage chroniclers, there are distinct stages, or stations, along the way. Campbell identifies three categorial ones: departure, initiation, and return, each of which is characterized by distinct stages and deliberate sequences. Other analysts of pilgrimage literature term the three phases: separation (referring to the start of the journey), the liminal stage (referring to the journey, or to the movement, itself), and reaggregation (referring to the homecoming). In the Campbell formulation, "the hero" returns home after coming successfully to terms with realities that can only be found away from home, and there is a joyful celebration. The same consequence is made explicit in Pilgrim's Progress. When the race is over, and all significant obstacles have been overcome, there is singing and rejoicing, and the pilgrim is made recipient to an extraordinary blessing.

I am suggesting that the run for political office is like pilgrimage in a number of ways. It is directed movement. It requires total involvement. The movement and the involvement create a strong sense of community, in that one is accompanied on the journey by persons who are dedicated to the same cause and/or to sustaining the pilgrim. Thus, such pilgrimage groups are made up of persons from all walks of life, representing all economic strata, and a wide variety of backgrounds. All form a bond for the sake of the success of the journey, for which all are willing to make the requisite sacrifice. In varying degrees all have switched worlds in order to be in the company of pilgrims on the journey. Styles of dress are simple. Institutional support structures are primitive. All that qualifies as being luxurious or otherwise expendable is jettisoned, so that the movement can occur without unnecessary impediment. And the bonding is as strong as anything the participants had previously experienced. This is why campaign activists, when talking about their experiences, tend to highlight one campaign that was extraordinary for them. Wherever it happened, whatever the political season, this was the normative pilgrimage, the one in which values and stamina were tested. And the recollection of who actually got the most votes sometimes occurs as an afterthought.

I have vivid memories of picking up each day's assignment from the campaign scheduler, getting in the car that would take me/us to our destination within the district, arriving at the designated neighborhood in which we were scheduled to walk precincts, or of walking into the room to meet another group of voters. On and on -- and on and on -- it goes during the course of a political campaign, day after day after day, usually from early morning until late at night. I have vivid memories of longing for nightfall, when we could gather with others bonded with us, usually around a fire on

our patio, to swap stories about the events of the day. I remember the comfort of night, which afforded one the opportunity to rest so that the same sequence could be resumed as soon as morning comes.

In pilgrimage terms, I will never forget the final day of the campaign. My wife Lois, two of our three children, our son-in-law and grandson, and I were loaned a large GMC Suburban van for the final three days of the campaign, which we used to try to cover every town and city in the 22nd District. Of course, we couldn't stay very long in any one of these locations, but we did make contact with voters, shook hands up and down the main streets of each place, and tried to fan the enthusiasms of as many people as we could excite or encourage. The most exhilaration came, however, when we knew that the time for campaigning had ended, and that we were finally free to return home. We began singing and shouting, while recalling the long weeks of the campaign. We began swapping stories of the difficult times as well as the uplifting times. We played music tapes we had enjoyed before, which had been put on hold when campaign-driving time was used as campaign-strategy time. And we began singing -- singing for joy, singing because of the relief, singing because the finish line was near. And during the final fifteen minutes, as the GMC suburban simply hurtled its way back into Santa Barbara, it was almost as if the outcome of the election was already known to us. We had survived. Indeed, we had prevailed -- prevailed over an election process that could easily have exploited us, prevailed over all of the accusations that we didn't know how to be credible political candidates, prevailed over all of the advice (much of it professional, some of it costly) about which we had been dispositionally suspicious. It was as satisfying

a period of time as I have experienced, and it was crowned by our entry into El Paseo Restaurant where our supporters had gathered, with music, good food and drink, and our family. To run for political office is to place oneself in a race, the completion of which, almost regardless of the outcome, brings both satisfaction and excitement. To realize that the race is over is to sense that life can begin to return to some sense of normalcy. It's why those who devised the liturgical year made provision for the exciting, uplifting, exhilarating high holy days, to be followed by days when the human spirit could simply take refuge in what is most appropriately called "ordinary time."

We say it is like religion, because religion gives such prominence to journeys and pilgrimages. Indeed, it is even appropriate to conceive of the function of religion as lending periodisation to time, and then to inserting qualitative gradations into this periodisation. How better to insure that the days of one's life are distinctive, that life itself has purpose, and that there can be perceptible progress toward the goal. Religion, in short, enables humans to measure their life, which, of course, includes examining one's life, which, as Socrates noted, is the essence of the vita contemplativa. The degree of soul-searching that belongs to politics, particularly in the heat of the campaign, is not unlike that that is fostered in religion. The difference is that religion provides a standard, or some authorized vectors, in relationship to which the search is conducted, while the vectors that are most prominent in politics are the numbers that tell one how it appears that one is doing relative to how one's opponent is doing.

There is another side to all of this that becomes apparent when politics is looked at via an awareness of the dynamics of religion. We refer to the mendicant character of political life, that is, to the fact that the person running for elected office pursues that goal while begging for support monies. In traditional reli-

gious terms, a mendicant is a person who renounces the ownership of personal property, and, sometimes in very austere fashion, relies on the good will and charity of others for his/her daily needs. Mendicants belong to all religions that have monastic traditions. In Buddhism, for example, a mendicant is a one who begs for bread. Within Christianity, the Dominicans and the Franciscans are the most prominent mendicant orders, but Carmelites, Servites, and lesser known groups belong to the category as well. The mendicants journeyed from place to place, requesting alms, and engaging the people they met in their teachings concerning the meaning of life. They renounced personal possessions and mundane pursuits to win a higher crown, which they understood to be their obligation in life.

Admittedly, unlike the monks, the political candidate is not sent out with no more than modest clothes, a begging bowl, and sacrosanct teaching, but the imagery is similar. The politician, by comparison and contrast, asks for money from virtually everyone with whom he/she comes in contact, even those people whom he/she may not know at all. A person indicates an interest in running for political office -- as I did -- and the question is: are you willing to spend at least six (or maybe eight) hours per day asking for money? If not, it's as if the would-be candidate is resisting the most-singularly defining vow. If so, one is welcomed to the field, accorded a kind of group blessing, and sent out with a list of potential financial supporters. The challenge is to reach as many of them as possible before the electorate registers its vote.

If politicians saw themselves as mendicants, they would have a much clearer picture of what the run for office requires. But, for many candidates, this is by far the most difficult challenge of all. For, to put oneself in the posture of having to ask for money -- both for one's cause and for oneself --- is to place oneself in subjec-

tion to those persons who are willing to be supportive. To be subject to them is to carry the obligation to do their bidding. Perhaps politicians can find the proper consciences to deliver on these obligations. But there has to be a sense of gnawing reluctance to give up one's self-dependence, and all of the confidences that are sustained therein, in order to be faithful to a mendicant's vocation. When the monks agreed to mendicant's vows, they were counseled to look to God for all of their needs. God's bounty would provide, and there would be signs of such beneficence on days the monks least expected it. For politicians, the situation is rather different. Without gifts of money campaigns cannot move forward. Apart from adequate support, a candidate cannot win a political contest. The support a monk seeks, however, is affirmation of the way he/she trusts the universe is ordered. That is, he/she lives by grace, the support of others, and the bounty of whoever rules this earth. In politics the same transactions have become so completely tarnished that they become bane rather than blessing, impediment rather than facilitator, and the element of the process that is most vulnerable to exploitation.

So far, in this chapter, we have addressed the question of the relationships between politics and spirituality by focusing specifically on the dynamics of running for office. We have suggested that there are similarities to journeys and pilgrimages, topics that attract keen interest within the world of religion. We have also suggested that the politician's role is similar to that of mendicant monks. Each is dependent upon monetary gifts from others in order to survive.

What we have not yet addressed, however, is the way in which the content of politics and the content of religion carry similarities. Both religion and politics are intent on pointing toward the way the world ought to be. That is, both religion and politics feed on idealism. Each is designed to motivate individuals

to seek what is best, highest, most inspiring. The content of each is directed toward the realization of aspiration.

In this regard, it is not surprising that religion and politics have often formed informal partnerships. Republican politics today, for example, is nearly synonymous with the ideals and principles of the Christian Coalition. And there are heavy doses of "liberation theology" (and old-style social-gospel theory) in the incentives that propel the Democrats forward. All of this says that politics lend pragmatism to religious ideals, which ideals are more representative and constitutive of the society and culture than anything else.

The big question here is why has the religious side of progressive politics been so quiet or dormant in recent years? From the other side, the television evangelists, Rush Limbaugh, Bill Bennett, and others have all been expressing themselves to national radio and television audiences. From the progressive side, there has been little if any talk-show sponsorship. Yet, the progressive movement is not without spiritual sensibility. After all, this is the party of the Rev. Jesse Jackson. It is the orientation to public life that can count Hillary Rodham Clinton's "politics of meaning" among its theological achievements. It is not devoid of spirituality. Rather, when it came into being, its tenets could hardly be expressed without invocation of significant religious and/or spiritual language. But it doesn't seem to be this way any longer, and at the very time that the life of the spirit seems most vulnerable and commands most attention.

How should it happen that the books listed most prominently on The New York Times weekly best-seller list are books on the subject of spirituality? During the week that this paragraph is being written, that list

places Thomas Moore's Care of the Soul, M. Scott Peck's The Road Less Travelled, and its sequel Further Along the Road Less Travelled, Marianne Williamson's Illuminata, together with Jack Canfield's and Mark Victor Hansen's Chicken Soup for the Soul among the fifteen books that sold most copies nationally. On the same list is Crossing the Threshold of Hope by John Paul II and The Book of Virtues, by William Bennett. It is arguable, of course, that the latter two entries should be classified as conservative rather than progressive documents. But we cite them here not as illustration of the direction of current American politics, but as further evidence of the strong pull contemporary America feels toward spirituality. In this regard, it is important to note that Norman Lear refers to the requirements of the life of the spirit in virtually every public interview. Lear's point, it seems, is that human beings today are experiencing a profound disconnect between the materialistic, superficial ways in which they are conducting their lives as distinct from some tacit recognition of that which is most fundamental to them, namely, the life of their souls or spirits. Lear has asserted that too much of the criteria for success and happiness in our society proceeds by quantification: we measure our well-being by the numbers -- dollars earned or acquired, miles traveled, square footage owned, weight gained or lost, et al. Of course, one can dispute some of the contentions, and even question their bases from within this growing body of literature and social and cultural commentary. The point is that in an age alleged to have become secular, the discussion of spirituality has become prominent in contemporary American life. The books that address this subject are being sought and read carefully, and the teachers and practitioners are being readwidely consulted.

Think what would happen if the spiritual force that is inherent in the interest

in such books like Peck's The Road Less Travelled, Williamson's Illuminata, and, say, the writings of Matthew Fox were to find expression in politics. The problem is that much of this "new age spirituality" is very individuated in focus and intention, and has not yet assumed strong collective responsibility. But there is no reason why it shouldn't, and there is no reason why it couldn't. Indeed, this, it seems, is the missing link. Those who view life from the progressive side have not yet found the formula to link their politics and their spirituality. A lot of them who are into politics are not tuned into spirituality. And many within the spiritual movements are not yet respectful of politics. In fact, in some instances, progressive spirituality has been established in lieu of meaningful politics. The disdain for politics is a manifestation of a much more pervasive disdain for institutional life of most kinds. Numerous 1960s and 1970s spiritual and political enthusiasms were born out of "question authority" incentives. This is how the counter-culture acquired both strength and ambition. To function in a counter-fashion one must raise challenges against the status quo, and this translated into a severe questioning of the legitimacy of prevailing institutions. It seems ironic, or does it, that the criticism of professional politics and professional politicians that surfaced dramatically in the 1994 election can be interpreted as the conservative version of the same counter-culture motif that progressives advanced a decade or two earlier. The strong anti-government sentiment follows the same sequence. First, in the 1960s, the progressives expressed themselves against an entrenched national government that was institutionally resistant to the anti-war fervor that developed dramatically. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan came to power preaching that government (particularly in its federal form) was indeed the people's enemy. The same thesis was advanced in 1994, but this time it was focused on the government over which the Clinton Administration and the Congressional Democrats

held power. All of it, from the 1960s to the present, can be interpreted as clear, unmistakable expression of a deep and growing dissatisfaction with what government stands for and symbolizes. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that those who find their entry into political involvement via anti-government, anti-institutional sentiments are not quickly going to transfer such deconstructionist sentiments into active involvement in the political process. In other words, if the mode of one's attachment to politics is deconstructionist, one will not be easily persuaded to come out in strong favor of any political candidacy. Rather, the tendency will be to keep one's distance, protect one's detachment, and prevent one's personal freedoms from being diminished or qualified by potentially debilitating intrusions.

Much "new age" spirituality can be portrayed in precisely this way. That is, it came into prominence in opposition to or contrast with the prevailing conventions of the time, all of which were enjoying the benefits of built-in social, cultural and institutional supports. "New age" spirituality provided its practitioners and devotees with real alternatives to the status quo. That is, instead of making a selection from among various institutionally-sanctioned religious and cultural possibilities, "New Age" spirituality enables its advocates to fashion something innovative or otherwise special. The advent of "New Age" spirituality signals that orientations to life need not be restricted to that finite set of possibilities that enjoy authoritative sanction. New-agers find such sanctions to be restrictive and stultifying, robbing that which is most deeply and distinctively human from discovering and realizing its legitimate fulfillment. Thus, the discovery of the secret (or, most frequently, the secret wisdom) of life requires one to resist the diminishing powers of everything that enjoys institutional legitimation. It is easy to understand, therefore, why persons whose most significant experiences in life

are identified within "new-age" frameworks, and by "new age" nomenclature,

~~will not rush to involvement in a political process that is regulated by the mani-~~



festly partisan self-interests of the political parties and conducted by the combative

modes of engagement that "new age" spirituality was created to transcend and leave forever behind.

The tragedy is that progressive politics requires the very sorts of spiritual nourishment that "new age" sensibilities can provide. But if the partnership is to occur there must be significant movement from both sides. That is, those who know and practice the new spirituality must develop some real respect for the political process, and those who are involved in politics must recognize that politics itself does not provide sufficient spiritual (or even convictional) nurture to qualify as the vision by which the people will be resourcefully and reliably guided. From this vantage point, politics is primarily instrumental. It is more instrumental than substantive. It provides the collective mechanism by means of which certain goals are reached, certain achievements are advanced, and certain aspirations are realized, but politics does not contain or possess those goals, achievements, or aspirations. It would be a grave error to look to politics itself to provide vision, as if the contents of the venture could be deduced or devised by the mechanism. Politics does not define issues, but brings them to the people's attention and develops collective strategies by means of which deliberations concerning their propriety and impropriety will take place. This is why a politics devoid of spirituality is so vacuous, and why vital political positions are almost always formulated in association with strong religious or spiritual themes. It is not at all surprising, in this respect, that contemporary Republican politics takes a large share of its content and inspiration from conservative Christian theological priorities. Nor is it surprising that, following the disappointing elec-