

## **Reflections, July 2009**

### **Thursday, July 30, 2009**

Rationality sometimes means one thing to the powerful, another to the vulnerable.

The University of Chicago Hospitals, situated in the heart of the city's South Side, are working with clinics in surrounding neighborhoods to create a health-care network operating under the hospitals' oversight. The idea: give poor South Siders, mostly African-Americans, good health care in their own communities.

The network also aims to reduce the number of poor African-Americans coming to the hospital's emergency room for non-emergency health care.

Eminently rational. But poor black people on Chicago's South Side distrust University of Chicago rationality. To some of them, the network looks like a way to limit access to the world class services provided by a great teaching hospital.

When I went to the University, in 1976, no Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) trains or buses went into its neighborhood, Hyde Park, after 7 pm. The University, wielding its influence with the CTA, had walled itself off from surrounding neighborhoods, all of them poor and black. The University wanted its students, and their families, to feel safe. Eminently rational? Maybe. Ancient history? By some measures. But it's part of a long history that's made some South Siders skeptical of University of Chicago rationality. An even longer history has made vulnerable people the world over defensive when powerful institutions make big plans and invoke lofty principles to defend them.

### **Thursday, July 23, 2009**

My sister Anita and I disagree about radio. I like NPR, she likes the CBS news outlets. We make good-natured fun of each other's preferences.

From a time earlier than I can remember, Anita sat me in front of the TV to watch the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite. Anita, with Cronkite's help, taught me to care about the news, and more generally, about the larger world beyond the confines of my mother's household. She left for

California when I was 10. For years afterward, I watched Cronkite religiously, partly to stay informed, partly to feel close to my sister across the miles. Anita, and Walter, both helped me gird on strength for the challenge of leaving my mother's house when the time came to do so.

Anita's loyal to CBS news radio because Walter Cronkite worked for CBS, and because of what he meant to us. I find myself switching over to WTOP, the local CBS affiliate, more often these days than I used to. Partly it's because I'm not always in the mood for long-format stories. Sometimes I just want a quick summary or a punchy commentary. Partly it's for the same reason I watched Cronkite every night after Anita left. Walter's gone now, and he took a small but important piece of my family's history with him.

### **Thursday, July 16, 2009**

The church often disappoints us, but occasionally rises to its high calling.

Twenty years ago, Margaret, an older woman from my English-speaking congregation in Chicago, invited the kids participating in our summer youth program to the Methodist campground in a Chicago suburb where her family owned a cottage. The campground had a pool, and our young people looked forward to swimming in the afternoon after volleyball and a nature walk in the morning.

Most of the kids, though not all, were Latino. One of them, Ricardo, was big, dark-skinned, mean-looking—and very sensitive. After a few minutes of swimming, he came to tell me and the other adults that some of the other kids were making racist remarks. He had tears in his eyes. Other young people from the program confirmed Ricardo's story.

Margaret heard it. She went straight to campground management, told them she owned a cottage there and made an annual donation, and insisted they put a stop to the comments. A manager gathered all the kids using the pool, told them the campground didn't tolerate racist language, and stayed around to enforce the edict.

If Margaret had had her druthers, there would have been no Latino congregation in her church. But there was, and she came to see the care of their kids as part of her church responsibilities (the process included a little grumbling: "I guess I have to think about inviting them to the campground, right, Father John?"). When the time came, she stood up for them. Recent

controversy about a private pool in Pennsylvania that revoked the memberships of some African-American and Latino youth made me think about her. She's long gone now, but what she did that day reminds me that every once in a while, the church does what it's supposed to do.

### **Thursday, July 9, 2009**

Sometimes, Jesus focuses on the "big picture." Before raising Lazarus (John, chapter 11), for example, he makes several prefatory remarks to ensure that the audience gets the intended lesson from the miracle about to occur. He has larger purposes, a larger mission, in mind.

When he addresses the dead man in his tomb, though, his focus shifts. The "small picture," what's right in front of him, fills his consciousness. "Lazarus, come forth," he says, and when Lazarus emerges, "Unbind him, and let him go." Hearing the account of this extraordinary event, one imagines Jesus concerned exclusively about releasing Lazarus from the bonds of death, not about the lesson anyone might draw from his resurrection.

I've been thinking of Robert McNamara, who died earlier this week. The best and the brightest of the best and the brightest, he specialized in the "big picture": the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War; statistical analysis; strategic doctrine. Late in his long tenure as Secretary of Defense—too late, irredeemably late, in the view of some—he recognized the disconnect between his intellectual categories and the "small picture" of ground-level realities in Vietnam and in the U.S.

No "big picture" ever does justice to human reality. Concepts and theories help us, but only if we know when to set them aside. Sometimes, God asks only that we pay attention. Robert McNamara couldn't do this when doing so mattered most, and it seems to have haunted him for the rest of his life.

### **Thursday, July 2, 2009**

Shakespeare's King Lear wanted to distribute his territories among his daughters while he was still living, so that he could "shuffle, unburthen'd, toward death," free to hunt and feast, boasting and boisterous, no longer bound by royal responsibilities, with his loyal retinue.

He wanted to go to "Neverland," we might say. Lear was a mythic king and a tragic hero. Michael Jackson was king only of pop, and self-proclaimed at

that; his life had tragic elements, but not many would call him a hero. Still, Lear and Jackson had a few things in common. They were stars. People from all walks of life projected their hopes, needs and fears onto them. They both sought refuge in unreal worlds. Neither found what they sought. For both, refuge turned out to be indistinguishable from self-indulgence, and disengagement brought tragedy.

“Oh, that I had wings like a dove!” wrote the psalmist; “I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee to a far-off place ...” But he couldn’t, and most of us can’t. We make our little escapes, always knowing we have to return to the fray. Remembering Lear, watching the spectacle unfolding around Michael Jackson’s death, we might learn to count this limitation among our blessings.