

## **Reflections, May–June 2010**

### **Thursday, May 6, 2010**

Dorothea Lange, famous for her Depression-era photographs, once said, "Photography teaches us how to see better without using a camera." One of today's Morning Prayer readings includes this teaching of Jesus: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness."

We often see both more, and less, than what meets our eye. We see our own hopes and fears, even our own agenda, in whoever or whatever we behold. And, partly as a result, we almost always miss something important about that person or situation.

Photography can help heal our sight. Most of us can call readily to mind Lange's photo of a mother with her child. The anxiety of hard times has etched itself in the mother's face. But, as she gazes into the middle distance, we also see her strength. Think, too, of the Kent State student photographed as she knelt over the body of her dying classmate on May 4, 1970. She's looking for help, but grief, and maybe anger, are beginning to overwhelm her.

In these photographs, and in the best of this art form, we don't really see ourselves. We see the person photographed, with a clarity and depth that eludes our ordinary looking. The power of the image displaces our own fears and hopes, our own agendas, even if only for a moment. And in that moment, the eye becomes the lamp of the body, as God intended.

### **Thursday, May 13, 2010**

The keynote speaker at this week's Diocesan Clergy Convention told a story that brought the house down. Years ago, he attended a diocesan meeting with a lay representative from his parish. About an hour into the proceedings he heard the lay rep begin to sniffle; soon she was weeping audibly. Nonplussed, he put his arm around her and asked, "Betsy, what's the matter?" She stammered through her sobs, "This is the most boring thing I've ever been a part of."

We've all been to this meeting. Bored to tears: if not literally, as in Betsy's case, then at least figuratively.

Still, anxiety seems a greater threat than boredom. Expectations, demands and pressures intensify and multiply, and we can't get a handle on them.

Or can we? Sometimes we ourselves do the intensifying and multiplying. Feeling useless and bored frightens us more deeply than feeling pressed. We embrace the latter, in some measure, to keep the former at bay. Psalm 127, in one translation, says that we "eat the bread of anxiety." The useless meeting probably gave Betsy a glimpse of the void that many of us trust this bread to fill.

### **Thursday, May 20, 2010**

A casual listener could be forgiven for thinking jazz pianist Hank Jones played background music. He certainly wasn't a musical purist. Offered a steady gig with the CBS house band, he snapped it up and played for the Ed Sullivan and Captain Kangaroo shows. Oldest of the musical Jones brothers of Pontiac, Michigan, he died earlier this week having outlived younger brothers Elvin and Thad, both jazz legends in their own right.

The piano is a percussion instrument. Lots of Jones's jazz colleagues played it as such, with a vengeance. But Jones's stock in trade was understated elegance, with a premium on melody.

Listening to his pathbreaking '70's albums with the Great Jazz Trio, though, feels like watching gently rolling waves on the surface of the ocean while knowing that a volcanic eruption thousands of feet below is producing them. Careful attention to Jones's stylings reveals a relentless rhythmic pulse more felt than heard, and unrivaled rhythmic creativity. Anthony Williams (not the former DC mayor), a cataclysmic drummer, accompanies Jones and bassists Ron Carter and Buster Williams on these sides. Jones matches drummer Williams' counter-rhythms and poly-rhythms, snare and tom-tom eruptions, beat for beat, without breaking a sweat.

Jazz improvisation sometimes resembles combat more than collaboration. Players try to undercut and outdo each other. Hank Jones held his own, and more, in these settings. Others toted musical shotguns; he tucked a stiletto in his belt. He needed nothing else.

## **Thursday, May 27, 2010**

Nearly every day in the spring, summer and fall, vendors set up their carts and sell their wares on the sidewalk in front of our apartment building. The National Zoo is across the street, so they sell plenty of DC-themed caps and t-shirts, cold water, hot chocolate and ice cream, mostly to tourists.

A couple of weeks ago, the owner of the cart that sells DC-themed items was talking animatedly with a police officer. I didn't want to eavesdrop, but it was clear that another vendor had infringed on her territory earlier that day. The officer listened (sort of) patiently.

This encounter brings to mind characters and incidents from various religious traditions. Surely some of the disputes the Israelites called on Moses to mediate had to do with where, and how, the entrepreneurs among the multitude could do business. Maybe the first apostles wanted Jesus to say who could fish in which parts of the Sea of Galilee, and when, so they wouldn't have to exhaust themselves fending off intruders. And I'd guess that Muhammad spent some time and energy settling conflicts about the respective sales territories of traveling Saudi merchants.

It turns out that a lot depends on this sort of small-j justice. The ability to mediate disputes between small stakeholders in Afghanistan (farmers, shopkeeper, artisans, laborers and their employers) will play an outsized role in the effort to protect us against terrorist attacks. If the Taliban can create the impression that it does this work more fairly and effectively than U.S. diplomats and soldiers, or better than the national and provincial governments, we're in trouble.

I doubt that the officer in front of my building joined the police force to broker petty conflicts. Grander goals than this are needed to stir the hearts of diplomats, soldiers and nations. But without the modest victories attainable by small-j justice, real peace—in our families and communities, as much as in war zones half a world away—can never take root.

## **Thursday, June 3, 2010**

I'm praying a lot, these days, for Michele Rhee and George Parker, for those whose interests they represent, and for the success of the contract they negotiated with the help of former Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke.

Rhee is Chancellor of DC Public Schools, and Parker leads the Teachers Union. The contract, as far as I can tell, honors two principles: collective bargaining, and rewards for excellence. They often clash, but public service of high quality depends on the affirmation of both.

Collective bargaining guards against abuse, and gives workers a direct voice in the conditions of their employment. But sometimes the contracts it produces establish mediocrity as a norm. Rewards for performance encourage enterprise and excellence. But sometimes they allow managers to reward cronies and punish good workers who don't always ask "how high?" when told to jump. Each principle needs the checks and balances the other provides.

We Episcopalians embrace the Anglican "Via Media." A prayer for our church asks God to guide and strengthen our efforts, so that this Middle Way may be not so much a "compromise for the sake of peace, as a comprehension for the sake of truth." God willing, and through the diligence and commitment of the parties to its implementation, the DC Teachers Contract will fall in the latter category.

### **Thursday, June 10, 2010**

Contemporary Chicago jazz has a special sound. Its best tenor men, Henry Threadgill and Von Freeman, play aggressively, in a rough and rugged style, with supreme confidence (some critics say Freeman blows too hard, putting his sax out of tune—a habit his fans consider part of his genius). The city's premier bass players, from Wilbur Ware to Fred Hopkins, have specialized in playing notes that sound fat and round. And its pianists, Erwin Helfer, "Young" John Young (he's always looked and acted old) and others, serve up fever-dream blues that defy description, but hang together uncannily.

You've probably never heard of any of these musicians. Most Chicagoans haven't either. But their sound, to my ears, defines the city. "City on the Make," Nelson Algren called it. Aggressive, confident, rough, rugged and sometimes overblown and out of tune. Big, fat, round, taking up a lot of space. Feverishly striving, but resting in the timelessness of the blues and, somehow, coherent.

Chicago jazz, post-1960, is definitely an acquired taste. (I'd be delighted to recommend a record or two, but you've been warned.) I've come to love it

because it speaks without guile and, as such, speaks for us all. We're often rough-hewn or in some way out of tune. We sometimes take up a lot of space. We ramble, as if we were ill or dreaming, but our ramblings occasionally make sense. The Chicago jazz masters incorporate these fundamental human realities, so manifest in the city that nurtures them, into a beautifully conceived and executed iteration of a great American art form.

### **Thursday, June 17, 2010**

At the top of the mount of Purgatory, the Christian poet Dante and his virtuous pagan guide Virgil must part company. Virgil can go no further. His ethic, the highest the ancient world could offer, set honor and integrity above all things. Dante's ethic, revealed in the crucified Christ, cherishes these Virgilian values, but subordinates them to mercy.

Virgil could not have asked for mercy, or accepted such if it were offered. In his world, everything hinges on whether people fulfill their commitments and conduct themselves according to their ideals, or fail to do so—nothing more.

In Christian teaching, human honor and integrity matter much less than they do in Virgil's. Our efforts, almost by definition, fall somewhere short of the mark. Everything hinges on God's condescending to redeem them.

Most of our lives, we walk in Virgil's shadow. He's a trustworthy guide. But once we've conducted ourselves with honor and integrity, or failed to do so, he has nothing more to say. When the great pagan poet falls silent, Dante, and Dante's faith, begin to speak. At certain junctures in our lives, times of self-doubt and heightened vulnerability, we're eager to listen.

### **Thursday, June 24, 2010**

I serve on the board of a small non-profit in DC. We're working on procedures for employee evaluation. In the course of a discussion last week, one board member spoke about such evaluations as instruments for changing employee behavior. Another member responded, animatedly, that evaluations concern performance, not behavior.

This response caught my attention. As I've thought about it, Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount have come to mind: "Judge not, that you may not be judged," he says, but adds, "For with the judgment you pronounce

you will be judged ...” The Master seems to recognize what we all feel constrained to acknowledge—that sometimes, we have to judge. A board must evaluate—pass judgment on—the director it hires, and the director must do the same with employees. Not to do so would be an evasion of responsibility. But judgment must be passed on the narrowest grounds possible: not behavior, certainly not character, just performance.

This is not always the case, Occasionally, behavior or even character must come under scrutiny. President Obama’s dismissal of General McChrystal probably took these factors, perhaps even more than performance, into account. But the principle still holds: we are not sufficiently disciplined to prevent our judgment from becoming judgmental, i.e., harsh, unjustifiably sweeping; therefore, we should confine ourselves to the narrowest grounds possible when circumstances require us to pass judgment on another human being, or even ourselves.