

Reflections, July–August 2010

Wednesday, September 1, 2010

It's a custom for many Latinos to "vestirse de luto"—dress in mourning attire, usually black or dark gray—for a year after the death of a close family member. To the rest of us this might seem quaint, or extreme. But it clearly and publicly marks the beginning, and the end, of the season of acute grief. As such, in my observation, it helps people "move on" at the right time.

It used to be a custom for our nation to begin a war by having Congress declare it, and to end it with a surrender ceremony and a peace treaty. We haven't done this since World War II. Partly as a result, President Obama's speech last night didn't, and couldn't, assure us that the war in Iraq is over. We want to "move on," but can't quite figure out how, or even if we should.

Beginnings and endings vex us. We struggle to know when, and how, to move on to the next stage of personal or communal life. Many of the public markers have fallen into disuse, or disappeared completely. We have more options, or are told we do, and this further complicates the process.

I propose we spend some time in this fall's Adult Forum talking about beginnings and endings of all sorts: birth and death, start a career and retiring, caring for an aging parent and a newborn child, starting a communal endeavor (like a war) and ending it. We begin on Sunday, September 12 at 9:30 in the Parish Hall, and we'll spend the first couple of sessions discussing what topics we'd like to cover in this area, and who might like to make a presentation or lead a conversation. I look forward to our journey. Join us if you can.

Thursday, September 9, 2010

Yesterday my sister Anita and I traveled to Logan, Ohio, where my father was born 100 years ago this Saturday, and where he lived with his family till he was 5 or 6. We found an area with some houses, churches and a Post Office that likely dated to my dad's time there, and we imagined he might have walked on the sidewalks or gone to the P.O. with his parents.

Briefly, but powerfully, I felt like our presence there, on that day, had been silently expected for a very long time. No one knew us, of course, and we

knew no one. But the people I felt were expecting us were not visible to the eye of flesh.

This might have been just a burst of sentimentality. Even if it was, though, the Bible tells us that the heavenly Jerusalem keeps silent vigil over all of us in our peregrinations, awaiting our arrival since before time began. In the sleepy town of Logan, where my dad was born a century ago, the curtain that hides the heavenly city from our sight seemed to get briefly lifted. I'll remember our short visit there for a long time.

Thursday, September 16, 2010

I sometimes attend meetings of the Wednesday Morning Clergy Fellowship. Most members lead predominantly African-American churches east of Rock Creek Park in the District. They help me keep up with goings-on outside the world of Episcopal churches in Northwest. Mostly, though, I go for the preaching that ends each session.

Yesterday the preacher, Rev. Mangrum, spoke of an older man, poorly educated but deeply Christian. A younger man, maybe out of curiosity, maybe to taunt the older man, asked him what he knew about God. "Not much," said the older man, "but what I know, I know."

Most of us espouse "openness," and try to practice it. "What I know, I know" doesn't sound very "open." But some beliefs lie beyond our power to question them. These are the things we know in the way that the old man knew what he knew. We certainly can't bring ourselves to be "open" about them. In fact, sometimes we know them at a place so deep within us that we don't even know that we know them ("unknown knows?").

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, perhaps countering Descartes, wrote, "Eschew make-believe doubt." Any genuine openness has to start from the premise that about some things, including the most important things, we're closed. Only God, or the blunt force of reality, can open up these parts of us. Rev. Mangrum's friend knew this, and didn't have any trouble saying so.

Thursday, September 23, 2010

A clergy acquaintance of mine used to call every once in a while when I was

in Chicago. He talked mostly about issues of the larger church, some of which I should have kept up with, but didn't: developments at "815" (the address of the Episcopal Church's central office, on 2nd Ave in New York); who was running for bishop, and where; and, occasionally, gossip about church leaders. If I didn't have a reason to end the conversation quickly, I'd try to think of one.

Several years ago he came to Chicago for a meeting, and we had lunch. He talked about the usual subjects for awhile, then reminisced about a priest friend who had encouraged him to pursue ordination. I was listening, but not very closely, and it took me a little longer than it should have to realize he was crying. "I'm so sorry," he said; "I don't know where that came from."

I don't either, but I know a little about Fr. Smith's (not his real name) ministry. He had many frustrations, no less bitter for having been partly of his own making. He aspired to high positions of leadership in the church but never reached them. My heart went out to him that day. As is true for most of us, things hadn't worked out for him as he dreamed they would. He probably found the sense of importance that eluded him in his incessant talk about "815" and bishops. My heart still sank a little whenever I heard his voice on the other end of the phone. But I tried—not always successfully—to listen a little more closely when he called.

Thursday, September 30, 2010

Large swaths of D.C. look pretty good these days. Spiffy buildings, public and private, new and remodeled, abound. Also, parts of the District government are working more efficiently and schools, overall, are improving.

Many people who voted against the incumbent mayor in the recent primary agree with this assessment. Things are getting better, and the Adrian Fenty deserves a lot of the credit. But he lost anyway. In my view, that's because a large question hangs over the District: Who will benefit from all this progress? Many residents believe they won't. They're expecting others, attracted by improvements, to move in and take over.

This is neither a new nor an unreasonable view. People without much in the way of power or resources have always gotten anxious when things start to improve: "This place doesn't belong to us anymore," they think. Time and events have often vindicated their fears.

They don't have to, though. This latest iteration of the question "Who will benefit?" hasn't been answered yet in the District. The American tradition of communities organizing to meet their own needs and control their own destinies might be attenuated, but it's not dead. Poor communities in D.C. can still take ownership of schools, community centers and other neighborhood institutions—yes, even the brand-spanking-new ones that seem to announce a New Day for New People. They can invest time and talent, making these institutions work for their communities.

We should all exercise vigilance, to make sure presumptive Mayor-elect Vincent Gray encourages DC's most vulnerable residents to do this, and delivers services and resources to support their efforts.

Thursday, October 7, 2010

When I was young, many of the adults I looked up to seemed utterly self-assured. If doubts or anxiety haunted them, they never showed it, or I never saw it.

What an unpleasant surprise, then, to get this far into adulthood and still feel insecure about so many things. I usually do a decent job of dissembling, but I get anxious about almost everything I'm involved in.

We can't banish anxiety; there's something to worry about at every stage of life. We can, though, come to see anxiety as kind of gift. Properly managed and channeled, it keeps us aware, watchful and engaged.

Sometimes I wish the adults who shaped my young life had taken me more into their confidence, shared more of their worries with me. Maybe I would have been more prepared for the unsettling persistence of anxiety in adulthood. Certainly my generation values self-disclosure more than the one or two that preceded it. In the end, though, each way of engaging the anxiety of the human journey has its own value, and its own wisdom.

Thursday, October 14, 2010

Bible scholars often invoke the "scandal of particularity." The "scandal" lies in the selection of particular persons, places or times for God's word to be spoken, or God's love and power made known—and not others. Our questions in response include: "Why them and not us?"; "Why there and not

here?"; "Why then and not now?" or "Why now and not then?"

We confront this scandal often, but rarely more directly than in the rescue of the Chilean miners. Why them, in that place, at this time—and not the Seigo or Upper Big Branch miners in West Virginia, not to mention other miners who've died since the April disaster, or the hundreds (at least) of miners who die every year in China?

We try to suppress these questions. We want to rejoice with the Chilean people, and we do. Tears came to my eyes, and to the eyes of millions, when we saw the trapped men emerge. But the questions press themselves on us.

There are sometimes partial answers. In the case of mining accidents, we might find them in the relative scope and effectiveness of regulation, or in preparedness, or lack thereof, for disaster.

Besides being partial, though, these answers don't help us get our minds and hearts around the divine presence so clearly manifest at Camp Esperanza. So clearly manifest, yes, and so yearned for and welcome; but also so elusive, unpredictable, beyond the grasp of reason or science. In the scandal of particularity, something essential about God, simultaneously agonizing and liberating, comes to light.

Thursday, October 21, 2010

Some of us Americans permit ourselves a snicker when we hear about troubles in France.

Recent turmoil stems from President Sarkozy's initiative to raise the base retirement age from 60 to 62. Like many of us, perhaps, I've caught myself thinking, "How spoiled can you get? I'd be thrilled to be able to retire at 62!"

As always, though, we should be careful about what and whom we mock, even secretly. I'm no economist, but it seems pretty clear even to me that the current recession requires us to lower our expectations, in sundry and difficult ways. Neither our citizens nor our leaders have demonstrated much aptitude or appetite for this endeavor.

The U.S. has always embraced, or at least we've told ourselves that we embrace, enterprise and entrepreneurship. The French seem more focussed on a "social welfare" model. Just as our aspirations overlapped extensively at

the time of our own founding, though, so we face some of the same challenges now. Regarding the tough challenge of scaling back expectations, it looks like they've got a head start on us. We pray for them, and especially that there may be no bloodshed as leaders and people alike grapple with our shared reality.

Thursday, October 28, 2010

In Adult Forum we've been talking about beginnings, endings, and the time in between, focusing in recent weeks on retirement and the aging process.

Our conversations put me in mind of Dr. Walter Heischmann. He was the superintendent of schools for the Columbus suburb where I grew up. When I was a junior in high school, and Dr. Heischmann was nearing retirement, he asked me and a few other students to form a Superintendent's Advisory Group. We were honored by the request. If Dr. Heischmann didn't take our ideas seriously, he certainly pretended well.

A.L. Guesman, the high school principal, regarded our group with thinly-veiled suspicion. He was responsible for the school's day-to-day operation, and was in mid-career. He usually had a quick, well-prepared rebuttal for student suggestions, comments, or complaints.

Not surprisingly, we liked Dr. Heischmann a lot; Mr. Guesman, not so much. Dr. Heischmann made us feel important, and I think of him very fondly to this day. In the intervening years, though, I've had institutional responsibilities similar to, though on a much smaller scale than, Mr. Guesman's. Right in the middle of things, he had to be guarded. I understand him better now than I did then. Dr. Heischman, one step removed from the horde of teenagers for whom Mr. Guesman had primary responsibility, and nearing the end of his career, felt freer to cross boundaries. Beginnings, middles and endings bring different challenges, and different blessings.