



## *Profoundly ... Trivial*

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Every year we come to these days ... the 'dog days of August'. Unless you live in the southern hemisphere (in which case, I presume, they are the 'witching days of winter'), August can be 'the pits'. But our resident and very fecund female cat, MOE ('Mother Of Everyone' ... né 'Miss One Eye'), has managed to bring to us in these days yet another lovely but very wild and skittish gray kitten that we really thought she had lost. She herself is perhaps the ugliest cat on this island — one eyed, one-toothed and scrawny beyond description — but also perhaps the most long-lived. She is a survivor *par excellence*. And now we're working on trying to seduce her latest offspring to join our little covey of cats. No dogs! Dogs, love them though I may, are just too dependent. Betrayal of my childhood though it might be, but give me a semi-wild cat any day. They are self-administering. I'm thinking of naming our new addition Haggai (provided he signs on the dotted line) because that's what I call him whenever I see him: 'Hey guy!' Unless, of course, 'he' turns out to be a 'she', in which case she might gain the sobriquet of 'Charlotte' after her great-grandfather, Charlie.

This very delicate observation has led me to think about small things ... about how pets interact with people, and about how people get along with each other and learn to accept one another's foibles. In our personal lives it is not so much the great events that affect us. Little things do.

In recent days the Iraqi national football (i.e. soccer) team battled through to cop the Asian Football Cup. A more innocuous event there may never have been (because the event was abysmally administered and poorly attended), but in Iraq it was the first piece of untarnished good news the country had had in God-only-knows how long. A team of Kurdish, Shî'ite and Sunnî athletes battled through against all odds to win the final match against Sa'ûdî Arabia. The Iraqis ... *all* Iraqis! ... won, and the Iraqis ... *all* Iraqis ... rejoiced. Trivial? Perhaps. But it was a moment of trans-sectarian and trans-ethnic bonding. And that, in Iraq, is not trivial these days. It is profound.

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I am not a soccer fan, David Beckham in Los Angeles (along with his glitzy 'Spice Girl' wife) notwithstanding. I still try to catch the baseball and *American* football scores whenever the BBC sees fit to announce them. I'm a Chicago White Sox fan (because that's what my father was before me) even though I've not the foggiest idea who's who in their line-up or any idea about where they are in the standings. And I do feel a bit left out of the American sports scene most of the time except when Barry Bonds tops Hank Aaron's homerun record, or there's a doping scandal (which may be just a variation on the theme), or when some star quarterback of an obscure expansion team gets caught up

in a dog-fighting scam he's running. *That's* world news, believe it or not. But these are the things that absorb us in the dog days of August, trivial though they are.

We quite forget that there are men and women risking their lives in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan for reasons that we have also almost forgotten. The fight's become the thing itself. The reason for it has been engulfed by partisan politics and trivialized beyond belief. And that's what's truly sad. Because the lives laid down, the lives taken, the daily suffering, the billowing bigotry that fuels the fanatic, the fear and the anger that festers among the common folk, the gargantuan humanitarian crises, the ineptitude of governments, less and less do they have any meaning, and the inertia of violence and misery takes on a life force of its own. Tragically ... trivial. *Profoundly* ... trivial.

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What has fascinated me of late is that the grand principles of statesmanship and the uses of power have been trumped by the trivial and the mediocre. We place burdens upon domesticated beasts of burden. Call them 'public servants'. We expect them to perform like 'Silver' in the old Lone Ranger movies, that most magnificent of stallions, but they don't. What they do is bray a lot.

Some years ago, while I was working for the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), I was asked to go to Geneva, Switzerland, to participate in a dialogue under the auspices of the World Council of Churches between the Sudan Council of Churches and its counterpart in Southern Sudan. Apart from the encounter itself, in which mine was a very small voice, I observed the WCC in action. What I observed was that the WCC, top to bottom, had no more pizzazz than did our much more modestly funded but *equally* flawed MECC. And it was an eye-opener. 'Hey ho Silver!' didn't apply in Geneva any more than it did in Beirut. We were all playing with trivia and mediocrity.

Why should not the same principle apply to the UN or to the American government or to any other organization on earth? Mediocrity is the name of the game. The trick is to find *competent* mediocrity. And that, indeed, is a trick, because mediocrity is so easily corrupted. We're not looking for inspired leadership. That kicks up guys like Adolph, Joe and Mao. No. We're looking for competent mediocrity with a *conscience*. Trivial? Perhaps. But that's *good* trivia.

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But I digress.

I've just translated an article by a Moroccan scholar, Sa'îd al-'Alawî, on how the Muslim community has dealt with the issue of political legitimacy. And right at the outset he threw in a reference to an event that took place under the portico of the Banî-Sâ'idah on the day the Prophet Muhammad died. Al-'Alawî blandly noted that everyone knew about this incident and so he did not have to elaborate. For my part, I was lost. His point was clear enough: this was the first post-prophetic political event that defined how

Muslims have dealt with political legitimacy ever since. But of the event itself I'd not the foggiest notion. And, so, I found out about it.

You kind of have to get into the picture just as I had to do. I'll give it a 'go'.

The center of power in Arabia when the Prophet Muhammad died in 632 was the sprawling oasis settlement of al-Madīnah. On the day the 'Light' was extinguished everything was up for grabs. With Muhammad no longer a physical presence, the whole coalition of tribes he had put together throughout Arabia (but not least in al-Madīnah itself) started to unravel. And the gathering under the portico of the Banî-Sâ'idah was just symptomatic of that.

Muhammad had made no deposition regarding a successor. The *Qur'ân*, his book, did not comment about the political future of the Muslim community. Except in very broad stroke, the *Qur'ân* pays almost no attention to politics. There were simply no guidelines or precedents for what should happen next. Improvisation was the name of the game and not a little mediocrity. So, in the crisis, the leaders of the *Ansâr* (those native to Madīnah who had allied themselves with the Prophet and his Meccan immigrants) gathered under the shade of the Banî-Sâ'idah's portico to thrash out the thorny problem of political succession. And they elected a person, one Abû-'Ubaydah Ibn-ul-Jarrâh, to lead them.

Forewarned, at that point Abû-Bakr and 'Umar, two of the most prominent Meccan immigrants and close friends of Muhammad, arrived on the scene. Both belonged to the old Meccan aristocracy and to the tribe of the Prophet. Abû-Bakr was not only a friend but also the father-in-law of Muhammad, and had very high standing among all Muslims. He spoke eloquently to the gathering under the portico. At the end of his oration he grabbed the hand of Abû-'Ubaydah and of 'Umar, and proposed a choice between them. There followed a vigorous and heated debate. At a crucial point 'Umar grabbed the hand of Abû-Bakr, kissed it and pledged his fealty to him. And that closed the debate. Everyone followed suit. The unfortunate Abû-'Ubaydah was assassinated by a mob almost on the spot, but the issue of succession was resolved. The accession of the first Caliph of the Muslim commonwealth, Abû-Bakr, was baptized with blood. It was, at the time, almost a trivial and a very Arab inter-tribal affair. Its reverberations, however, have been quite fantastic. The incident spelled the difference between Islam being a negligible historical religious blip in an Arabian backwater, and it's becoming a world religion sustained (very mundanely, it must be admitted) by a sprawling and oft-fractured world empire.

Al-'Alawî wants to stress, from the very outset of his study, that the issue of political legitimacy has never been a religious issue, even in Islam. It is a matter of the right maneuver at the right moment ... a very pragmatic and utterly mundane business in which Providence may well have had its role to play.

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Once I had unraveled the affair of the portico of the Banî-Sâ'idah, it again struck me how very trivial events can have momentous, even profound, repercussions. Who knows?

MOE's little gray kitten might one day conquer the world. If we can elect George W. Bush to be our grand panjandrum, then why not Haggai the Gray? I will then have proprietary rights over world empire. Whee! Almost as good as being Dick Cheney!

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.