



Happiness Pursued

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In these last 'dog days of August' Nancy and I have two marvelous things to look back upon and one event looming shortly. Our first grandchild had her first birthday (in which celebration we joined) and our daughter Beth got married (an event over which I joyfully presided). What's looming is Tom's marriage to Eve Greenfield on September 5th, and we'll be present for that too. There's the old rabbi's acerbic summation of life's meaning: "You're born," he said, "then you get married, and then you die." Well, that's a bit truncated. There are other moments that splash out joy and celebration, and that percolate through with moments of life's affirmation. And moments like these are coming in a gusher for us this summer.

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But even as we celebrate personally (and enthusiastically!), there are things that do sour. I am not a pessimist by inclination. I enjoy joy. I enjoy helping others find it. People deserve to be happy. God's message to humanity, as the Arabic term has it, is a *bushrah*, a celebration of good news, a joyful thing. The American Declaration of Independence proclaims that the revolution of the erstwhile British colonies back in the 18th century was dedicated to establishing the right of all individuals to 'life, liberty and *the pursuit of happiness*.' And that's one reason why I'm a proud American. Happiness, like life and liberty, is an inalienable right ... at least the pursuit thereof.

During our celebratory July journey, Nancy and I put some 4,000 miles on our rented car. We saw a great swathe of America between Detroit and Minneapolis and back through Michigan's Northern Peninsula. We met a lot of people in restaurants, in taverns, in parks and ... well ... just along the way. And we saw people determined to assert their right to life, to liberty and to their pursuit of happiness. We did not meet any who wanted anything else. Or was that just fluke of good luck?

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That 'good luck' is one of the things that amazes. Just look at those who try to propagate fear and hatred in American and western society! Waiting for us when we returned to Cyprus was a correspondence between a dear friend and a heckler who, in this context, we will just call 'Noname'. In that correspondence, Noname confessed to having been appalled that two of my colleagues and I had dared criticize (of all things!) the Israeli Defense Force for its well-documented atrocities in Gaza. For having done so, he labeled us Anti-Semites who had, single handedly, corrupted the Reformed Church in America! Perhaps unadvisedly I wrote to him, and I will not burden you with his vicious little comeback. But he did strike a nerve.

We do need to *think*. *That's* the nerve Noname struck (because he had obviously given up the effort himself). Thinking is a God-given gift. Every human being has the capacity. But it does amaze me how many people fail to exercise it. Noname is just one example (a real case of a short circuit, that one!). But more ominous is the case of Erik Prince who, sharing Noname's irrationality, founded and owns the *Blackwater* (now re-branded *Xe*) paramilitary group that still works for the US State Department. *Xe/Blackwater* has committed several high profile atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Mr. Prince (check http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_Prince), a politically very well connected individual in Republican circles, has expressed his ambition to eliminate Muslims and the Islamic faith around the globe. That the Obama administration continues to employ this group is not only a shot in the foot for President Obama's global strategy, it is just plain wrong.

Let's ignore the ravings of Noname. Let's even put Prince on the back burner for a moment. What has quite dazed me is the current debate (if one can call it that) about President Obama's plan to reform the broken American health care system. It has degenerated into verbal thuggery of the Rush Limbaugh variety that dovetails neatly into the physical 'Brownshirt' sort of intimidation that Americans don't quite know how to handle. Two things have amazed me in the health care melee (and it is more a punch-up than a debate). There's the opposition's throwing mud at inclusive health care systems in other countries. It has especially pilloried the British National Health System. But it has gone beyond that into castigating the Obama mandate on a broad range of issues that include, *inter alia*, the administration's policies in the Middle East and Obama's effort to ease tensions with Muslims.

Take a broad-bladed paddle. Stick it into the festering mix, and just slap it around using fear as the driving force behind the strokes and see what miasmatic odors bubble up to the surface. It's a failsafe recipe for anxiety-ridden confusion. We stop thinking; we just react. The Church used fear during the Middle Ages to build its cathedrals; Reformers used it as a cudgel when it came to hand. And fear turns to hate in a flash. Pope Urban II used it when he launched the Crusades with the signature phrase, "God wills it!" The fear of Islam seemed to turn to hate for all Muslims in an instant, and it's still not far from us. Erik Prince is the classic contemporary example.

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As readers of these meditations will know, Nancy and I have been graced by a variety of magnificently positive interactions with Muslims both recently and over the years. And we wonder ... yes, we do! ... whether our reporting these rather touching and indicative interactions have had any effect at all. Is the West — and particularly is America — so intimidated by the howitzers of hate unleashed by the likes of Rush Limbaugh, the 'Brownshirt' brigades that have now been enlisted, and the very real guns of an Erik Prince that there's really nothing we can do but sit back and yield to this rash of fascist thuggery that seems hell-bent upon transforming the American nation, which began as a once statesman-like revolution against 'man's inhumanity to man,' into something that's quite fearsomely gauche and ugly?

Let us remember the Revolution for 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness!' It's not a bad heritage. Even for those of us who were historically in opposition, it was, in the afterglass, a very British sort of revolution. Indeed, it was a very *global*

sort of revolution. It's not over yet. The agonies in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Palestine, for all their cost in human life, are struggles in the same theme.

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“OK, so now explain Islamist radicalism!”

Not being an Islamist radical myself, I am somewhat at loose ends. All I can say is that Islamist radicalism has a family resemblance to its Christianist, Jewishist, Buddhistist and Hinduist counterparts. (The suffix, -ist, indicates something that claims affinity but is clearly not the same.) Mr. Limbaugh is, for the time being, my case in point. Hate is both exportable and shareable, and it can become a very physical thing. Limbaugh's mental violence cannot be seen as an innocent exercise of free speech. It is a criminal thing. It has a nasty physical translation.

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Nancy and I recommend seeing again the rather magnificent movie, *The Kingdom of Heaven*. In the end the two main historical characters (both, admittedly, heavily fictionalized) — Balian of Ibelin and Salâh-ud-Dîn (Saladin) — meet in a dialogue that, in essence, vindicates the veneration of human life across the Muslim-Christian divide. Both agree that — political considerations weighed and accounts tallied — human life is the primary value both share. It is a Muslim-Christian crossover point. Salâh-ud-Dîn could have avenged the slaughter of all Muslims and Jews in the ‘Holy City’ perpetrated in 1099 by the soldiers of the First Crusade with a counter-massacre. He could have done that. But he didn't. In his conquest of Jerusalem in October 1187, this Kurdish captain of the Muslim army chose to be as compassionate as was politically possible under the circumstances. Thousands of Jerusalem's Christians were given safe passage out of the war zone. Thousands of others, it must be said, were sold into slavery. But history agrees: there was no massacre.

The movie focuses upon the theme of Christian religious bigotry. But it also adds to the mix Christian and Muslim compassion for the powerless, their religious affiliation notwithstanding. And, in the end, that is the theme vindicated for the contemporary audience, and that is what makes this such an important movie.

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Among those celebrations that I would like to affirm in our personal lives, I also want to celebrate those Christians, those Jews and those Muslims who have affirmed their commitment to the transcendent value of human life, to peace, to justice and to mutual understanding across historical divides. Considered as one growing family in my mind, they are far more important and far more ‘Christian’ than Noname, Mr. Prince and Mr. Limbaugh. And I hope you agree: We must have a celebration of peace ... a peace that banishes bigotry and hatred ... a peace that celebrates life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.