



## *Celebrating Mortal Flesh*

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The path of this September has been a bit rock-strewn for us. A couple of our good friends have gone through (and, thankfully, emerged from) serious illness. While concerned for them, I endured my six-monthly cystoscopy, a male rape experience if ever there was one (but, oh! the ecstasy when the nurse removes the catheter). Subsequently I submitted myself to the brutal experience of an MRI scan, and the results were even more scary than the scan itself.

My urologist had me return to hospital for a second cystoscopy in two months, and ... phew! ... he reassured Nancy and me that my cancer was still contained, there was no tell-tale excitation of nearby lymph nodes, but it was still high time to begin thinking about replacing the offending bladder. I've lived with this condition for eleven years now, and Nancy has had to live with *me* through it all and for the past forty-five years. It's time to be finished with it. And the procedure for doing that, sparing you the gory details, is among the more successful tricks that the mechanics of medical prestidigitation have come up with in recent times. And I will undergo surgery in late January in Germany. *Jah wohl!*

Listening to the news of our fragile world of late, though, I know that my condition is downright paltry. I didn't have my skull crushed by a steel-shod rifle butt as a Burmese Buddhist monk did in Rangoon the other day; nor did I die as a child in an aerial bombardment on a village in Afghanistan, my limbs scattered about higgledy-piggledy. I don't live in Iraq or in Gaza or in the West Bank where sudden death is a daily and an utterly banal occurrence. We, Nancy and I, live in a comfortable and safe hacienda in Cyprus with all the mod-cons we could possibly want and more, and our financial future is relatively secure. But I am, none-the-less, suddenly very aware of my mortality.

Jim Prins, my revered English professor at Hope College, once confessed to me, after having had a skin cancer removed, "Lew, once you've been brushed by the malady, you don't think the same any more." I am, after all, approaching the statutory three score years and ten with unwonted rapidity, I've been 'brushed by the malady', ... and at sixty-six I'm still not a grandfather!

Isn't *that* a strange thought?

We do look at the next-to-next generation with hope. *I* certainly do, even though at the moment we're a bit short on 'stock' (as it were). But on what grounds do we do so? Is it because we glimpse a spark that might become the light at the end of the dark tunnel of human perversity both in our magnificent children and the more magnificent progeny we hope they bear? Is it that we see in them the prospect of our genetic immortality that holds promise to reach out to the ends of the universe? Or do we believe that the next

generation will have been warned and will have learned from our mistakes and they'll fix our blunders? Because, out there, there's a species thing — our human awareness — and our mortality contributes to it.

There's a sneaking suspicion that there may be something like the *immortality* of the human race. We were created in the image and likeness of God, for crying out loud! What's serious science fiction all about other than to contemplate the good and the bad of the unforeseeable future ... the otherwise imponderable fortunes of the 'image of God' in the human species ... the fortunes of the human person 'created in the very best form' that God could devise, as the *Qur'ân* expresses it? Which is, of course, to say much the same thing.

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My elder Kuwaiti brother, Haider al-Khalîfah, when he hears that a person has died, often mutters, "*Maskîn*." That can be taken in one of two ways. It can be taken to mean, 'Poor chap; he finally bought it.' Or it can be taken in the sense that, in the eyes of God, we are all stripped down to our bare human essentials. We are all *masâkîn*, the impoverished ones. With Haider there's no telling. Whether it is as 'poor chap' or as the stripped down human soul, it's all about the same, isn't it? We must all face our individual mortality at some point, and better we do it with certain degree of equanimity and dignity than with terror. And it has always been a curious point to me that Muslims (and folk of other religions) do this far better than do Christians ... by and large.

*Innâ li-llâh wa ilay-hi râji'ûn* (to God we belong and to him we return) say Muslims in condolence, and they add as they leave, *Fî-kum al-baqiyyah* (in you is the continuity). And they're saying two things. First, the 'best form' belongs to God, and, second, we survivors continue the human enterprise that belongs to that 'best form'.

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I'm not trying to be morbid here. Quite the contrary! We mortals have a marvelous heritage and a burden to bear. Over the millennia of our evolution and over the thousands of years of our dialogue with the divine, we have been given a task to execute. It has to do with our moral responsibility toward our fellow human beings before God and toward our environment and ... yes ... also toward ourselves. I suspect that we Americans (and a good many others of late) have inverted the first and third radicals in this sequence. That, of course, begins to erode the 'moral' thing. It belongs to a phrase I heard the other day: the 'dark side of capitalism', the 'me first' greed that fires extreme consumerism and exploitation and has led, quite logically, to the American sub-prime mortgage crisis that almost brought down the world stock markets (also vigorous expressions of that greed). And, in light of mortality, that is just the height of stupidity.

My neurologist asked me the other day (I'm making friends with a lot of medical folk these days), "People have no qualms about holding more than one passport. Why, then, do we have a problem with people holding other religious persuasions than ours?" In the context, I had to confess to her that I held two 'religious passports', one Christian and the

other Muslim. The second amplifies the first. One always begins at the beginning, and my Christian identity is prime. But becoming better linked to Islam has made me more profoundly engaged as a Christian ... better informed and more articulate. I told her — and she a good Greek Orthodox Christian — to hold on to her thought. She may yet be a peacemaker on this sadly divided island.

Greed, of whose genetic signature bigotry is a by-blow, is the antithesis of becoming reconciled to our mortality. And greed is so horribly short-sighted and so utterly banal and barren of human soul. I think of the Buddhist monk in Rangoon with his brain-box stove in by a rifle butt, of the shattered bodies of children in Afghanistan, of the senselessly slaughtered men, women and children in Iraq and Palestine, and I remember my own fragile frame. The medical mechanics tell me that my frame, for the time being at least, is fixable. In the end ... five, ten, fifteen, twenty years down the line ... it will poop out, though. If greed is my life's motive I'd grasp and grapple for all I've got left and demand more as though by right. But that, by the gospel that is my life, is not just undignified ... it's horribly wrong. Martyrs there are for grand causes, and the Burmese Buddhist monk is one of them as are the civilian sacrifices in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine.

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Here it is, folks! Baring the destroyers of earth, the architects of misery and fear, and the cynical manipulators of mind (and money), who voluntarily give their allegiance to the no-god of greed, I lift my glass to all mortal flesh — all those, both the victims and the valiant, both this generation and the generators of our far distant human future, who are born in God's 'very best form', the veritable simulacra of the divine. They are, above all, my heroes, those whom I will nominate before the Lamb as God's beloved. To them belongs the dawn that I and most of us will never see but only sense in a baby's grasp upon our little finger.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.