

Two for Eternity

Colleagues,

This week in the church year brought us St. Michael and All Angels. So today's ThTh offering has some links with that festive day. It is a pair of meditations, "Two for Eternity." The first one's from Robin Morgan, the second one from me.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

#1

I love eternity

A symphony of dreams

Whispered madly in sleep

Shadowed by life

The other day I found these words on the side of our refrigerator. The front of our refrigerator is the keeper of day-to-day details of life at our house – school schedules, pizza delivery phone numbers, cartoons about Internet use or teenaged drivers. But the side has been reserved for our set of magnetic poetry and so while I waited by the back door to let the dogs in, I found these words.

It wouldn't take much effort to discover who put them together, but I find it pleasant to think that they just appeared, like handwriting on the wall. Of course these words don't much resemble the words on that wall from long ago ("You have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting"). These words are words of hope.

Do you allow yourself to “indulge” in such hope very often? In this officially optimistic society of ours with the yellow happy face as our official symbol, I do find expressions of materialistic optimism, especially when talking to salespeople. But hope? Christians know better than to give in to advertising slogans or nationalistic pride, but somehow we have equated hope with this shallow optimism and as such, have ejected it from our vocabularies.

If we’re honest though, don’t we occasionally sneak thoughts about eternity? Maybe only when we’re gazing out the office window or in that hazy time just before we fall asleep, but they keep coming back, tantalizing us, making our hearts beat just a bit faster. We don’t talk about them in public of course. We’re supposed to be mature enough to do what we do for the sake of the Gospel, we don’t need a carrot at the end of a stick to do our duty.

Yet the writer of Hebrews tells us that “Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding the shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” For the sake of the joy! There was no joy in the suffering, the humiliation of the cross. The joy was in what the cross accomplished for us, what Jesus had to look forward to seated next to throne.

The joy of the Lord is what gives us the strength to do what we’re called to do. Hope through joy is not about sitting on our fannies waiting for pie in the sky. Hope is what makes us able to carry our crosses today even when all around us seems to be falling apart. Hope gives us the courage to say to our weary and cynical world, “Jesus is Lord” and then live lives that express God’s reality on earth...now. Hope endures.

So, indulge yourself. Think about the City made of pure gold, clear as glass. Think about the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. Think about the tree of life that bears twelve kinds of fruit, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Think about this new Jerusalem where nothing accursed will be found any more.

And if someone asks you the reason for the hope that is in you, you'll know who to tell them about. The One who endured the cross for the sake of the joy set before him, the One who gave his life so that we can live with Him for all eternity, the One who calls us to serve the world because of the joy set before us. Go ahead, try it. But be careful – hope is contagious.

Robin J. Morgan

#2

At the graveside, August 26, 1998.

Milton Richter in memoriam

Our Bethel Pastor Yancey has already mentioned the two worlds in which Milton lived—the Jewish and the Christian. Born and raised in the Jewish community here in St. Louis and then marrying Alice and getting mixed up with us Lutheran Christians. That combination (mixed up or a good mix?) is signalled in his name: Richter, the German word for the 7th book of the Hebrew Scriptures—Shophetim in the original. Judges is the English title. Milt would have fit right in with those Shophetim, each of them unique—some strange, some wonderful, some both—each like nobody else on earth. And then his first name, Milton, the great poet theologian of the Christian tradition.

I want to take the letters of his first name, **M-I-L-T-O-N**, as my outline for this meditation here at his graveside.

M is for Mensch. Milt was a Mensch in the full Yiddish meaning of that word—a genuine, an authentic, human being. A Mensch is a human being as God intended. An image of God, one mirroring God to those of us who interacted with him, a great guy, sent into our lives by God.

I is for Impish. Milton was impish. Regularly there was that smile (or was it a smirk?) on his face. Regularly at the Sunday liturgy at Bethel Lutheran Church Milton and Alice would be a pew or two behind me. When it came time for the Passing of the Peace, he would usually get out of the pew before I did and come up to mine. We'd clasp each other's hand and offer God's peace to each other—often in Hebrew: Shalom aleka. And more often than not, that impish smile would come over his face and he'd say: "I've got one for you." And at the Kaffeeklatsch later in the undercroft he'd tell me his latest joke. Which leads to "L."

L is for laughter. Milton could laugh. Could he ever. Those jokes we exchanged—I'd occasionally have one for him too—were occasions for uproarious laughter. Even when they were the sort that ought not really be told in church—not even in the basement. During the week we'd each then pass around the new one we'd gotten from the other and then report on this at our next exchange the following Sunday. Milton the Mensch was a man of laughter.

T is for Two Traditions—Jewish and Christian. They met in Milt just as the two parts of the capital letter T do. Sometimes it was the Jewish vertical line supporting the Christian horizontal one. Other times it was the Christian vertical supporting the Jewish horizontal. In Milton they were both together as they were for the first Jewish followers of Rabbi Jesus. And that

leads me to the last two letters, the O and N.

O is for the One God of the Jewish Shema. “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” That was Milt’s confession, and in his case he linked this core Hebrew confession to the letter N.

N is for the Nazarene, the Jewish Jesus. Milt was a Mensch who was also hooked on Jesus, whom we Christians call the veritable son of that One God of the Shema. Only once in our tete-a-tetes did Milt ever tell me about his Jesus-connection, namely, that he’d asked to be baptized 11 yrs ago just as our previous pastor, also his dear friend, Al Buls, moved into retirement. But he swore me to secrecy until his death. Typically Milt, he didn’t give me much detail, and was not so pious that he couldn’t add a quip or two while talking about it. Important was: he linked the Shema with Jesus—like the two parts of the letter “T”—one supporting the other.

Conclusion: If Milt should at this very moment impishly push open the lid of this casket before us, we’d not be surprised to hear him laughing and to see him make the letter “T” with his two hands. His life was that double witness. And if he were to speak once more, he’d encourage us to stay focused on that “T” for the rest of our own lives. Loving the One God of the Shema in communion with the one Jesus. Milt lived on that combination. His life tells us that we can too.

Edward H. Schroeder