

The Primal Angst of Unknowing

Psalm 121

I, like many, have been fascinated by the daily developments in the ongoing search for Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 that is already into its ninth day. I don't recall anything quite like it. Despite all the technology of our times and the amount of global surveillance that exists, no one can figure out what exactly happened to the missing airplane.

This unfolding drama would almost be comical if it wasn't so tragic. We get different impressions on a 24-hours news cycle for what the evidence is and what might have occurred. Malaysian officials finally admitted yesterday what many have suspected—that the plane was, in effect, hijacked by one of the pilots or by someone trained in flying a Boeing 777. This comes after a week of speculation and contradictory reports that have ranged from a catastrophic mechanical or structural failure, to terrorism, to hypoxia causing sudden death on board. Out in the public and in the blogging spheres, some are convinced it's the work of space aliens, while fans of the TV show "Lost" are hoping it's a publicity stunt for a resurrection of the series with another flight having crash-landed on some remote island.

None of this is surprising, as I read in *The New York Times* the other day:

"A main ingredient for rumor generation and transmission is uncertainty," said Nicholas DiFonzo, a social psychologist at Rochester Institute of Technology and author of *The Watercooler Effect*.

Also fueling the intense interest is the suggestion of continuing danger. “Anything that even hints at making us feel less secure or threatened evokes our attention,” Dr. DiFonzo said. “It’s hard-wired into us.”¹

So with the new theory about a likely hijacking, uncertainty and danger are only heightened as half the world tries to figure out this tragic, yet intriguing, mystery.

The mystery, though, takes on a personal tone when you consider the families of the passengers, many of whom have been gathered in a hotel in Beijing awaiting answers. How does one make sense of what has happened, not only as an aviation mystery, but more significantly to them, in terms of moral and spiritual meaning? How does one cope with the unknown, with all the primal fears and worries wrapped up into every thought and feeling? Even if the plane (or its wreckage) is found and an ultimate cause is determined, how does one make sense of it emotionally, spiritually, and existentially? How does one go forward without being tortured by the cruel absurdity of it all? What could hope look like to them during these very bleak and discouraging days?

Frankly, the same might be said about those who lost loved ones in the building explosion and collapse in East Harlem a few days ago. What would you say to members of the Spanish Christian congregation who suffered some of the losses? How does one find consolation and hope in God when you’ve been dealt such a traumatic and senseless blow?

There are never easy answers, are there? Faith and trust in God are much more complex and spiritually challenging when circumstances are relatively meaningless and seemingly without

¹ Erik Eckholm, “Theories Grow Without Facts on Lost Flight,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2014.

cause. The common religious clichés, such as “Oh, they’re in a better place now,” or “God wanted a special angel in heaven so he took them!” or “God has a greater purpose in mind; we just can’t see it!” are often well-meaning, but insensitive and certainly don’t satisfy everyone who suffers in sorrow. It would be better to say nothing at all than respond with religious “pablum” which makes it sound as if this tragedy was a good thing and God is the one behind it all. Victims would be apt to say, “Don’t speak to me about divine love, if this is how God *chooses* to act!”

Needless suffering is not something easily explained. Christian Wiman, who wrote *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, employed the word “contingency” when he mused and brooded following the diagnosis of his own rare cancer. In the original essay that expanded into the book, he wrote about his quest for meaning and religious faith, but in a manner that recognizes there are no simple proverbs or formulas that should explain away human suffering or get bandied about as spiritual truth.

The book began with a story about a woman he knows named Adele, who at sixty and recently divorced recognized her long-held faith was falling away because of the loss.

How can a love that seemed so fated fail so utterly? she wonders. How can a love that prompted me toward God become the very thing that kills my faith? Once it seemed love lit the world from within and made it take on a sacred radiance, but somehow that fire burned through everything and now I walk lost in this land of ash. If God by means of love became belief in my heart, became the faith by which I lived and loved in return, then what should I believe now that my love is dead? ... All I feel is that the life I felt, the love that once scalded me toward God, was a lie.²

² Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*, 2013, pp. 15-16.

I am familiar with stories like this, where the loss of a significant love in life results in a similar loss of faith and trust in God's love. There's a correlation between the two. Psychologically, it's easily explained insofar as much of what makes us human—intellectually, emotionally, and relationally—helps to create what we perceive spiritually. Our entry point into a relationship with God comes through our imagination, which is influenced by so much of our experience in life. A broken relationship with someone we love can tarnish whatever seems real to us about divine love. Parental or priestly abuse of any type can ruin the spiritual intimacy one might desire with God. Likewise, those who suffer terrible grief over the death of a loved one can struggle to find meaning and comfort when someone tries to reassure them of God's presence and love. When the love that has seemed the most real to us has changed significantly or is lost all together, then the sense of divine love can often go the same way.

That's what Wiman meant when he used "contingency" in relation to anything about God, recognizing it is experienced with uncertainty because our human capacity to realize or recognize divine presence and meaning is contingent on the circumstances we are in, the emotions we feel, and the experiences of our lives. Thus, nothing is absolute or guaranteed through the filter of our human senses and imagination. That's why traumas of any type affect our sense of God's presence. The awareness and appreciation of purpose and meaning within human consciousness is always uncertain and changing.

Wiman chooses to embrace that uncertainty.

Contingency. Meaning subject to chance, not absolute. Meaning uncertain, as reality, right down to the molecular level, is uncertain. As all

of human life is uncertain. I suppose to think of God in these terms might seem for some people deeply troubling (not to mention heretical), but I find it a comfort. It is akin to the notion of God entering and understanding—or understanding that there could be no understanding—human suffering. If Christianity is going to mean anything at all for us now, then the humanity of God cannot be a half measure. [God] can't float over the chaos of pain and particles in which we're mired, and we can't think of [God] gliding among our ancestors like some shiny, sinless superhero. ...No, God is given over to matter, the ultimate Uncertainty Principle. There's no release from reality, no "outside" or "beyond" from which some transforming touch might come. But what a relief it can be to befriend contingency, to meet God right here in the havoc of chance, to feel enduring love like a stroke of pure luck.³

There's something very honest about this that I find compelling, i.e., what is human and what is divine are intermingled and contingent upon each other—what is divine is made incarnate within human life and its limitations. For faith to be meaningful at all, it must exist within the dynamic flow of our life, changing from experience to experience, from stage to stage and age to age, from condition to condition, integrating with our awareness of what is real and not kept inert in an ancient paradigm or unaltering creed.

It also puts a slightly different slant on our typical understanding of what incarnation means, religiously speaking. Christ, known as the Incarnate One, may not have been for humans to imagine what God is like, as much as it was to express the dynamic and changeable way God's Spirit is present and experienced within humankind. This would help explain why the theology and presence of Christ in the early church was focused on and expressed through those who gathered in his name, with many faces, gifts, and backgrounds. It was only later in time that "incarnation" became focused entirely on Jesus Christ.

³ Ibid., pp.16-17.

However, if we could recover what I believe is the earliest notion, incarnation is not about humanity discovering God in Jesus alone, as much as it's about God being present *within people* and in what human beings experience on a daily basis. Incarnation means that God is even found in the primal angst of our unknowing—the times of meaninglessness when we don't know what is going on—in the bare agony of our souls, as Jesus so poignantly expressed on the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

This sense of incarnation—of contingency—that God is revealed through human experience and limited understanding, that an awareness of God is largely contingent on what we are capable of grasping in a given moment—helps me better understand and appreciate the assurance of the providence and protection of God, especially in those times where we are traumatized and no sense of faith is meaningful or even helpful to our troubled souls. A reading of Psalm 121 demands this line of interpretation, otherwise, it does little more than proclaim *a great lie* about God's protection “from all evil,” who will not “let your foot be moved” or allow the forces of nature to “strike you by day...or by night.” Human experience would simply contradict that, and to claim otherwise is, as I mentioned earlier, a cruel “comfort” for those who are suffering great loss.

Frankly, the people of Israel from ancient times through the Holocaust would have to laugh at the notion that they were “protected from all evil.” Israel's own tumultuous story is evidence alone God didn't shield them from tragedy, genocide, exile, pestilence, or pain. Israel has embodied human suffering, as both a victim and a

perpetrator. So how could anyone take this Psalm seriously, at least on face value?

Yet, it does speak to us when we employ the sense of contingency—God being present within human beings, within human history, and within human strengths and limitations. For Israel, repeatedly it held true when it included their will to survive and the time it took for eventual restoration and renewal. The reality of God’s presence for Israel wasn’t through some miraculous supernatural intervention into history (those are only the mythic tales); instead, it was evident in their individual and collective courage, their resilience, their persistence, their desire to restore what was lost, and their willingness to rebuild their lives in the wake of common disaster. It was God incarnate in their lives, an awareness that rose and fell contingent on their attitudes and circumstances. God’s Spirit inspired great leaders in periods of reform and renewal and prophets when they were in periods of trauma and spiritual decline. Only in the broader perspective of time was it possible to look back and see evidence of the presence of YHWH throughout all their experiences—the mountaintop highs to the wilderness lows. Their spiritual awareness of divine guidance was contingent on how much the people of Israel could grasp the presence of divine love and mercy in each and every circumstance. At times faith was fertile and vital; other times, it seemed barren and meaningless.

I have to believe that this is how God is still present to us—incarnate, within human experience and mortal limitations, an awareness contingent upon our outlook and emotions at the time—but as present and real as the air we breathe and the pulse of life

within us. Even in those times when God seems distant and little more than a lie—in the primal angst of unknowing what is true and what is not, what is real and what is not, and what is hopeful and what is not—God has taken up residence even in our hearts of unbelief. God has chosen to be present as the pulse of life in human beings at the risk of remaining unnoticed and, at times, even despised.

For me, I liken it to a mother's or father's enduring love at its best, who has given birth to someone beautiful and worthy of love and care in spite of the traumas and terrible turns that life often takes. It may be a silent, unassuming love that will do nothing more than be found in a person's arm that embraces one with a broken heart, or in the hands that prepare and carry a meal of comfort food, or in the listening ear and mournful heart of one who shares the tears and grief of one who has no answers or hope in the anguish of sorrow. That's how much trust and love and compassion the One who gave us life has for we who suffer so.

In those moments when the primal angst of life simply overwhelms us, knowing this truth will be a great mercy and, perhaps, enough to help us carry on.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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*My sorrow's flower was so small a joy
It took a winter seeing to see it as such.
Numb, unsteady, stunned at all the evidence
Of winter's one imperative to destroy,
I looked up, and saw the bare abundance
Of a tree whose every limb was lit and fraught with snow.
What I was seeing then I did not quite know
But knew that one mite more would have been too much.*

Christian Wiman