

"ALL THE WORDS OF THE SCROLL..." A EULOGY FOR DANIEL BERRIGAN by CHED MYERS

Let me begin by putting things plainly. None of us would be gathered here—neither Catholic Workers nor IHMs nor any of us other assorted feral Christians—were it not for Dan's showing and telling of the gospel. The political spaces he opened through his public witness, the theological imagination he ignited with his pen, the language he gave us in a time when lies are sovereign—all these have helped us find just enough courage to embrace something of the Way.

And here you are again with us, Daniel, blowing the dust off sacred scrolls long buried in the cellars of a compromised church, blinking bemusedly at our pretenses of discipleship, refusing to concede an inch to imperial shock and awe. I want to honor you tonight by talking about three aspects of who you are to us, knowing that these words will capture but a few fragments of the kaleidoscopic treasures you have given us over the years.

I. AN AMERICAN BARUCH
"And Baruch wrote down again all

the words of Jeremiah from the scroll that the king had burned in the fire..." (Jer. 36:32)

The last thing the Risen Jesus said to his disciples before he was, like Elijah, swooped up into the heavens, was that the life and death of the church would depend upon our literacy in the prophets. In his famous Emmaus Road story, the evangelist Luke reports that "beginning with Moses and all the prophets Jesus interpreted the scriptures to the disciples" (Lk 24:27). The verb here is *dieermeenen*, an intensification of the word from which we derive the term "hermeneutics" (or, the art of interpretation). In every other appearance of this verb in the New Testament, it means to translate from one language to another (Acts 9:36), especially the interpretation of ecstatic tongues (1 Cor 12:30, 14:5, 13:27). The risen Jesus is here patiently translating the counterintuitive biblical wisdom of the prophets into language his demoralized disciples can fathom. In what amounts to the first Bible study ever in the life of the church, Jesus makes it clear that the prophetic tradition is *the* lens through which to make sense out of the national history. Israel's prophets were forever engaging the way things were with the vision of what should



Dan celebrates mass for the sister houses



The children bless Dan

be: questioning authority, making trouble, refusing to settle, interrupting business as usual, speaking truth to power, giving voice to the voiceless, stirring up the troops, getting the natives restless, picketing palaces. For being the inconvenient conscience of the nation, they were accused of treason in times of warmaking, jailed, exiled or killed. Then, once disposed of, they got a national holiday or a street named after them. Canonized, and thereafter ignored (Martin, King, Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, *presente!*). But it is *they* who teach us how the story should be read, says Jesus. The prophetic witness, however maligned by those in power, represents the "hermeneutic key" to the whole tradition. Luke reiterates the point later in Jesus' upper room appearance to the cowering disciples. "Then he opened their minds, that they might understand the scriptures" (Lk 24:46a). The two verbs here tell an interesting story. *Dianoigo* else-

where in the New Testament refers to the opening of deaf ears (Mk 7:34f), or a closed womb (Lk 2:23), of blind eyes (Lk 24:31), or of a hardened heart (Acts 16:14). The verb "to understand" meanwhile (*sunienai*), means to bring together the data—to "connect the dots," so to speak. In the New Testament it is usually employed to describe those many situations in which disciples are *unable* to make such connections (e.g. Lk 2:50; 18:34; Acts 7:25). Both verbs are specifically connected in the gospels with the story of the call of Isaiah, in order to remind us that we refuse to understand the prophetic Word because we are unable or unwilling to change our way of life (Is 6:8-10). The prophets exhort us; for example, to defend the poor even as we lionize the rich. They assure us that chariots and missiles cannot save us, even as we cheer them on. They urge us to forgo idolatry even as we compulsively fetishize the work of

our hands. Above all, the prophetic Word warns us that the way to liberation in a world locked down by the spiral of violence, the way to redemption in a world of enslaving addictions, the way to true transformation in a world of deadened conscience and numbing conformity, is the way of nonviolent, sacrificial, creative love. None of which polite religion or society is remotely interested in. Which is why Jesus had to "translate" the prophets for his companions in their historical moment. And why we have needed Dan to do the same for us in ours.

With his keen eye for finding text in context and vice-versa, and exegesis both with his life, Dan has helped us shed our denial, connect the dots, and get off our couches. I recall vividly the first time I heard him at the Newman Center in Berkeley. I was a new convert to the faith, intrigued by the gospel but aghast at the church, searching for some version of the tradition with backbone and balls. It was the bicentennial year, and the national myths were running hot and heavy. Dan, however, was talking about America as Babylon, reading Revelation and the newspaper synoptically. I left knowing I'd heard gospel, and was never the same. As the philosopher Paul Ricoeur said, texts are mute until an interpreter gives them voice.

In his study of Jeremiah 36 earlier today Dan reviewed with us the story of how the prophet, having been given an official ban and bar letter, commissioned his amanuensis to write down his oracular condemnation of Judah's foreign and military policies, and to proclaim it in contested public spaces, at crucial political moments (36:2f). Baruch offered Jeremiah's Word to whosoever would have ears to hear, and bore the wrath doled out by those who didn't.

Dan has been a kind of American Baruch, listening carefully to the prophetic Word, inscribing it lovingly and declaring it publicly. He has also accompanied it underground when it was pronounced heretical to the logic of national security (36:15-19). And when the rulers of State and church alike have whittled the scrolls of hard truth-telling into the courtroom firepit in contempt, Dan too has obeyed the prophetic mandate to commence writing it all down again, over and over for as long as the denial prevails (36:20-28).

So have you handed on to us the tradition of "biblical readings of America," from Bonhoeffer and Stringfellow, from Heschel and Merton, from Dorothy and Fannie Lou, from Irish mystics and Jesuit martyrs, from all who have been keepers of the Word since Jeremiah and Baruch. Thank you Daniel, faithful translator and scribe of good news in hard times.

II. POETIC VISION, PRIESTLY ANIMATION

"Let the wise hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill to understand mashal and figure, the words of the wise and their riddles." (Prov 1:5-6)

Dan has also had a voice of his own in this work, a unique eloquence that has itself made an extraordinary impact. His poetry and mastery of metaphor have animated discipleship communities of resistance and renewal to an extent none of us can fully or fully fathom. This weekend has included Dan's reflections on Ezekiel 37, a text that bears witness to the power of a carefully chosen image to reveal the truth of things. It is a text that also illuminates Dan's own vocation, because of which he holds a special place in the history of movements for social change.

Namely, Dan and his co-conspirators have singularly helped rehabilitate the prophetic tradition of embodied symbolism in public space. Catonsville and King of Prussia rattled the dry bones of American opposition culture to life again. These powerful and provocative experiments in making the Word flesh represent a watershed in the tradition of nonviolent direct action. Homemade napalm was a cipher that unmasked death: "Forgive us for burning paper instead of children." And there was the poetic instrument of resistance and hope: "To beat swords into plowshares the hammer must fall." These symbols remind us that mere rational discourse does not suffice to challenge the murderous reign of technocracy. Pentagon and Plowshares witnesses have helped knot bones of conscience back together to struggle for life in the valley of death.

Bill Kellerman (a Methodist disciple of our Jesuit) rightly called such actions "public liturgy," and it stands to reason that they would have been born out of a priestly imagination. This redeployment of the old sacred stuff of blood or ashes or bodies has renewed our tradition, and changed forever the way we view our Christian vocation of evangelism before the Powers (Eph 3:10).

Of equal importance is the way that Dan's literary corpus has undergirded these practices, maintaining a poetic/mystical vision at the center of the work of peace and justice. The perennial temptation for activists is to force the connection between organizing and efficacy; to evaluate our work according to empirical results; to link our hope or despair to this or that drift in the political currents. Dan, on the other hand, is forever insisting that there is no simple relationship between our action and divine redemption; like Gandhi we must remember that we only sow seeds and leave the fruit to God. Separating our deeds from our dreams is an opaque veil of unknowing, the consciousness of which keeps us from becoming that which we oppose. This is why we should always endeavor, as one of Dan's riddles put it, to say "yes and no to the whole damn thing."

Because Dan understands the difference between the "dead letter" of managerial logic and the life-giving Spirit of political imagination (II Cor 3:6), his writing and acting tend toward the parabolic. It is important for us to appreciate this, impoverished as we are by

continued on page 6

capitalism's relentless advertising fantasies, commodity fetishism, and religious spiritualizing. The Hebrew word for parable, *mashal*, comes from the root *m-sh-l*, meaning "to be like." In one poem Dan writes:

Under glass, in Met museum
this day I saw
a bird of paradise
outspread
the grandiose, grotesque
book of Kells

In this simile the book of Kells "is like" a bird of paradise. It cannot obviously be apprehended literally, but neither is it "spiritualizing" (both referents are, after all, quite terrestrial). The figure of speech illumines the illuminated manuscript, and we are invited to perceive the Celtic truth even more richly and deeply.

Jesus was on that kind of mission, to get us to see the world differently: "Do you have eyes, yet fail to see...?" (Mk 8:18; see 4:10-12). His pedagogic purpose was twofold:

1) to unmask the illusions his audience had about the status quo and their place in it; in order to

2) open their hearts and minds to what he proposed as an alternative—what he called the "Kingdom of God" (itself a metaphor that could just as well be illumined by comparison to a mustard seed as to the eye of a needle).

Today we would say that the social function of such parabolic discourse is to "deconstruct" and "reconstruct" consciousness. At this Dan is a master craftsman.

Theologians rightly insist that all language about God is necessarily metaphorical, an assertion that deeply offends modernists,

rationalists, and imperial engineers. But the truth is, *only* metaphors—carefully chosen, of course, and preferably biblically grounded—are strong enough to bear the horrors of the militaristic State, elastic enough to encompass the divine dream of liberation, and big enough to surround the deepest hopes and fears of disciples.

Nothing less can inspire and sustain action that would be simultaneously revolutionary, nonviolent, and humane. Critical analysis, philosophical idealism, or ideological fervor alone cannot hold together the person and the political, the past and the present, or faith and life. Thank you, Dan, for a poetic vision that has energized us to transcend the tyranny of imperial realism, and for your priestly mediation of undomesticated mystery, a refuge for imagination that can never be locked down by the Powers.

III. ELDER AS GRANDFATHER OAK

"For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be..." (Is 65a,22c)

In traditional societies, elders would sit beneath the oldest and largest tree in the camp and there adjudicate community conflicts, offer spiritual counsel, and spin sacred stories of the people to help them remember who they were. The Bible

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knows all about such noble trees: Abraham (Gen 12:6f; 18:1), Gideon (Jud 6:11), and Elijah (I Kg 13:14, 19:4) for example all encounter angels beneath their shade. So did the native Chumash here in Santa Barbara.

At Casa de Maria retreat center we are surrounded by a forest of venerable canyon oaks. Their

twisted limbs dance in every direction; their canopies filter sunlight like a heavenly haze; their leaf mulch provides both carpet and incense. When walking among them in the still of the night one knows one is not alone. They are the living heart of this land: *robles santos*.

I reckon that the old ways placed elders under such trees because one mirrored the other. The grandfather oak rains down acorns, gives shelter to seedlings, and stands strong (though not unscarred) through all the storms, wildfires, and dry spells brought by the turning of years. So too the elder: sower of seeds of new life, nurturer of the young, a sentinel who refuses to yield to the seductions, distractions, and withering pogroms of life under empire. Until one day both fall to the ground, only to continue to nurture the soil of the future. Thus does Daniel sit among us: an oak of an elder, skin as thick as bark, leaves that can prick, a reach that defies gravity, providing cover for whoever would sit with him.

I’ve said before that you Catholics are a bit “retarded”—by which I mean you haven’t been quite as damaged as Protestants by all the dehumanizing structural adjustments, technological messianism, and scientific demythologizing wrought by the totalitarian ideology of Progress. You are holding on to some of the old ways—the belief, for example, that saints (living and dead) accompany us on this journey. You even presume to ask for their help!

This I take to be ancient wisdom that is desperately needed by those of us impoverished by modernity, bereft

of trustworthy elders, and without saints that set the compass and pass on understanding like an heirloom. Sainthood is not about nostalgia, nor is this eulogy about sentimentality. These former lifeways, not least the responsibility pressed upon us by the Fifth Commandment, are the taproot of our faith. So do we honor our elder here, without apology or embarrassment.

Like a towering oak, Daniel, you have been a kind of *axis mundi* in our lives, offering communion with both heaven and earth. We would not be here but for your faithful work and witness. Thank you for showing and telling the Way—scribe, poet, priest, elder. May we, as Ezekiel once put it, become transplanted twigs from your graceful branches, to one day bear similar fruit and offer hospitality, as you have for more than a half century, to all those seeking respite from the imperial storm (Ez 17:22f). Ω

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