

On Penguins and the South Bronx

No one can be whole in a broken world.

—Larry Rasmussen, 7 October 2003

One of the most enjoyable evenings I have spent in class was the night Larry came to respond to student questions about his book *Moral Fragments and Moral Community*. It was enjoyable as a scholar, a teacher, and a colleague. Although he and I team taught the ethical methods seminar the year before, I was taken once again with the thoughtfulness and care in which he reached back in time to make relevant for the present how he understands community and justice. Yes, he confessed that when all is said and done, these two deeply moral and deeply spiritual ideas are what mean the most to him as a scholar, person of faith, and earth creature.

I first came to know Larry's work in his presidential 1990 address to the Society of Christian Ethics in *The Annual* of the Society. Here, he carefully worked through the dynamics of power. Not so surprising given that he holds the Reinhold Niebuhr chair here at Union, but he breathed new life into Niebuhr's power analysis. Larry looked beyond Niebuhr's cynicism in what he called the standard account of power to a more nuanced view that allowed for the cynicism, but also pushed for a more egalitarian and more biblically based view of power, one that is shared. Clearly showing his interactions with Beverly Harrison and other feminist ethicists as well as his own deeply held respect for sacred narratives, Larry argued that only viewing power from the frameworks of it being a good thing, relational, or privilege is flawed. He rightly points out that the standard account of power does not hold true for the power of love or friendship, how nature works, how our bodies function, or the power of Jesus Christ. With true Minnesotan arid wit, he concludes that the standard account of power describes the power of God badly.

Larry opts for a different trinity of power: nothing happens apart from power, the need to move from the doctrine of sin to the doctrine of creation, and that we must both reclaim and name the language of the Spirit. I agree with each of these, but it is the second theme that I highlight here. I do so because as I consider Larry's work and have watched him work in the classroom and in meetings, I find that this theme is the coal that provides the fire for Larry's ideas. His work is founded on a

deep and abiding belief in the grace of God. He also places all of us squarely in the midst of creation—so much so that justice and community are imperatives for him because we must be about healing the brokenness of creation—a brokenness that we all participate in with pickaxes from time to time. In a simply lovely and profoundly analytical passage in his commencement address for Trinity Lutheran Seminary in June 2003, he brings this together:

All peoples everywhere, together with the rest of creation, are born to belonging and are gathered into one in God as the grains of wheat scattered on the hill become the bread of life and the fruit of the vine becomes the cup of blessing. These are the visible and tangible signs of the sacramental commons that, by God's grace and as God's gift, is ours in earth, air, fire, water, and one another.¹

In these allusions he uses to Marty Haugen's hymn, "As the Grains of Wheat,"² Larry captures the very essence of a thick doctrine of creation, or as he puts it in this commencement address, the hymn of all creation. Encouraging us to think more about the power found in a thick doctrine of creation, Larry wants us to think about the patterns of power that set limits to the use of power we have as earth creatures. In other words, just because we *can* do something does not mean that it is inevitable that we do it. This raises questions for him that stretch from the rainforests to toxic waste sites in colored and poor communities. His sense of environmental justice is not a Sierra calendar one—no humans in sight and pristine vistas. Rather, he is concerned about the ways we should be crafting life and the ways in which we are destroying it.

It is more than wetlands. Larry's sense of environmental justice and sustainable community is that we look at who lives nearby, their quality of life, the civic arrangements bind them to the land and to each other, and where are faith communities active in establishing justice for all. He is clear that if we do not take care of this earth—all the living things on this planet—we reduce God in ways wholly unacceptable and ultimately unfaithful.

Any God-talk that does not take in all 13-15 billion years of the pilgrimage of the universe to date, and the immense wheeling of 100 million galaxies, each swimming with millions of stars and, we now know, numerous

1. Larry R. Rasmussen, "Singing 'The Hymn of All Creation'" (Commencement address for Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, 5 June 2003).

2. Marty Haugen, "As the Grains of Wheat," in *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), #705.

planets; any God-talk that does not gather in all species come and gone, as well as those leaving as we speak; and any God-talk that does not embrace the whole drama of life in all its misery and grandeur, is simply quaint. Shorn of the universe, ours is "apartheid" worship of a human species idol.³

I include these two extended quotations from Larry's address for three reasons. First, they make my point. Second, they show deep insight and analytical skill and wit. Third, they are beautifully written (and spoken). The latter two are the most germane, however, because they point to what I find to be the "best of Larry." He is a deeply thoughtful and analytical thinker who synthesizes an enormous body of knowledge into plain English for public consumption. He is also a gifted writer and speaker who gives us profound images of life and death through a sharply etched sense of a moral universe that is inclusive of the socio-communal, the biophysical, the geoplanetary.

Larry writes for creation and out of a fierce love for the earth. Rather than confining this love to beautiful panoramas, he places humanity squarely into this hymn of creation, as we love not only the tangible environments that surround us, but also, how we respond to living *in* creation itself. This means that those of us who are members of faith communities are also part of the civic community and therefore, we must be engaged in addressing the inequities of our social arrangements. This is the full weight of what environmental justice is all about for him. To care for the earth means, quite literally, care for *all* the earth. His work weaves together the Cross, penguins, the South Bronx, Zimbabwe, and Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church.

To hold all this together and to do so with integrity and intellect means that Larry is also a very smart man. However, more importantly, he is also a wise man. When Larry told my class that no one could be whole in a broken world, students scribbled this down fast and furious. I suspect that some were thinking about where they would place this in a sermon they were preparing for Sunday. Others probably wanted to capture it for a paper in another class. Still others knew someone they wanted to share this with as they wrestled with life. And I found myself writing it down because it captured, in one phrase, all that I think that Larry is trying to say to us. What a wonderful blend of intellect and wisdom.

The two come together nicely in who he is as colleague and scholar. They are quite remarkable in who he is as a person. I will miss this

3. Rasmussen, "Singing 'The Hymn of All Creation.'"

Lutheran man of the Cross. His faithfulness as an active layperson and brilliant and respected ethicist is, I believe, founded on the Cross which he sees as one of brute reality—telling the truth about life and the God of life. But what causes me to both rejoice and mourn his departure from Union is that he's just a damn fine human being. Yes, there *are* good things (and people who come from Minnesota are nice).

Emilie M. Townes
Union Theological Seminary, New York, New York



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