

The new year and the mystery in the mundane

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 11, 2012 | Bulletins from the Human Side

The cackling and cawing of the media birds of prey stripping the Iowa cornfields clean blurred the weekend of our transition into a new year. Yet their departure from Iowa in a noisy fluttering wedge to disturb the peace elsewhere reminds us, as does this steep path of descent from the craggy peak of one year to the lush foothills of another, of the Mystery that swirls around this familiar passage.

There is, of course, the Mystery of Time itself, something that can fly or weigh heavily. In fact, time staggers and stretches out on the bench next to us when, for example, we are grounded by the nameless intermissions life reserves just for humans. These include the lusterless hospital spaces in which the next of kin sit helpless as fear and hope battle like fighter planes beyond the clouds, beyond their call or command, too. And we have all met on the common ground of holiday airport delays that resemble late-night horror movies in which the expressionless dead walk the unending concourses. But these, too, are filled with revelations about the Mystery of being human.

We may wonder how it is that airports that house the Mystery of Travel are designed to hide rather than to reveal any awareness of it. In one of his short stories, John Cheever observes how old railroad stations reflected rather than suppressed that Mystery. They were built on the scale of cathedrals as fit settings for the profoundly human, and therefore religious, transactions that took place beneath their eaves.

Great windows glowed with light that fell, like the graceful shafts from the rose window at Chartres, bathing men and women bogged down in time with the sun that symbolizes eternity, suffusing the space with Mystery and transforming the travelers into pilgrims and making sacred the platforms consecrated by the beginning and ending of so many journeys, all of them, in varying degrees, heroic.

Railroad stations, now all but obliterated and reduced to windswept holding areas for commuters, were once so easily recognized as scenes of the deepest human feelings that dramas such as *Brief Encounter* or *Casablanca* found them natural backgrounds for the bittersweet choices that men and women, torn by the surprise of love but commanded by the familiarity of duty, must make every day.

Railway stations were, in their marbled grandeur, appropriate settings for the moments that underline the great change points in life, such as a person's leaving home on a journey that repeats that of the mythical hero. The young man or woman is headed for a far country even if it is only a college or a military base 100 miles away. Each must face and slay the dragons of ignorance whose tails, as John Cheever also observed, can be heard scuffing the fallen leaves of every autumn.

Only after these travelers have faced down the dragons that would devour them could they return with their gifts developed to alight once more to welcoming family and friends in the sweeping sanctuary of a now largely lost and gone railroad station. They were on the right scale for the celebration of the simple Eucharists of separation and reunion that are the inescapable elements in every truly human life. We repeat them every day when we leave home for work and return home again in the evening. We experience them whenever we begin a new task and must leave what we have already achieved behind as if, in a sense, we had no connection with it.

That explains why travelers sat in pew-shaped places that, impossible to wear out, whisper of the Eternal. Nothing better symbolizes Time than the plastic fittings of a modern airport. The chairs, with their torn imitation leather patched with sticky black tape, match their purpose, which is not for rest and meditation but to keep you on the edge of discomfort, checking your watch as you try to kill time only to feel that time is killing you instead.

Railroad stations accommodated the human mysteries that constitute the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans* (the overwhelming and gripping Mystery) of our lives. They allowed us to view what Willa Cather described when she wrote, "There are only two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before." (*O Pioneers*, p. 11) They unconsciously respected the range of human experience they witnessed while airports consciously try to move you along or to pen you in so that you are numbed to the liturgy celebrated all around you.

There is one way, however, in which airports do remind us of a Mystery all too well known by all of us. Thanks to TSA, we must prove who we are all over again every time we head for a plane. It doesn't make any difference that we have done this a hundred times before. We still must prove that we are who we claim to be and that we have nothing in our shoes or up our sleeves. Many must submit themselves to a machine that sees through their garments. Judgment Day, when we will probably be bar-coded, will be a cinch after this. Nonetheless, this does present us with a snorting dragon we encounter all the time -- that new challenge, after all the times we have proved ourselves, to prove ourselves all over again. That reminder of the most common feature of the hero's journey we all share makes airports less inhuman and, if not quite railroad stations, still settings for one of the mysteries of being human.

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