

Protagonist Corner

The Madness of Ministry

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Several years ago, I turned the television to a PBS production of a new play called, *ZALMEN* or *THE MADNESS OF GOD*, by Elie Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1974). I became more involved as the story unfolded with each new scene. Soon afterwards, I purchased a copy of this play. Over the past few years it has haunted me, as *Zalmen* haunts the Rabbi throughout the course of the play. For contained within this play are insights into what prevents us and, at times, enables us to minister in divine madness to the community of faith.

In the preface to this play the editor offers these words, "On Yom Kippur eve in 1965, Elie Wiesel found himself in Russia, in a synagogue crowded with people. The air was stifling. The cantor was chanting . . . Suddenly a mad thought crossed my mind; Something is about to happen; any moment now the Rabbi will wake up, shake himself, pound the pulpit and cry out, shout his pain, his rage, his truth. I felt the tension building up inside me; the wait became unbearable. But nothing happened. It was too late. The Rabbi no longer had the strength to imagine himself free" (Wiesel, p.ii). In *ZALMEN*, the Rabbi does finally cry out his truth. Yet, it is not something that he does not powerfully resist. It is in the conflict between the Rabbi and *Zalmen* that Wiesel examines the struggle of both hearing and obeying the madness of the voice of God.

The oppressive situation in which the Rabbi found himself is alien to pastors in the United States. His sentiment is anything but alien. The pressures of Christian ministry today are complex and enormous. Leaving the seminary often as an idealist and visionary, the pastor discovers after a few months in the local parish the necessity, if not the art, of compromise. There can only be so many sermons on the arms race before we find ourselves preaching to emptier pews. There can only be so many demands for increased social awareness made upon a church board before their commitment becomes a matter of diminishing returns. I am offering no argument against the legitimacy, and even value, of compromise in ministry. Yet, the frequent practice of compromise tends to cloud our vision and impair our judgment. *It becomes so much a way of ministry that we do not set enough limits.* In the name of compromise we sacrifice deeply held convictions. In the name of compromise, we deafen our ears to the maddening voice of God (Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, 1929. p 177). Challenged by *Zalmen* to reveal the angst of his community when a group of Western Jews attend the service of Yom Kippur the Rabbi asks, "What would you like to hear? The things I have to say, how can I say them? And who am I to say them? All I can do is pray—I am the shepherd who follows his flock"

(Wiesel, p.21). As the Rabbi speaks with such brutal honesty a mournful "Amen" echoes inside many of us involved in Christian ministry.

We justify the cloudiness of our vision and the shallowness of our ministry in the most creative of ways. We keep the customers satisfied, to borrow an image from Paul Simon, or we maintain shalom to speak more theologically. Such inauthentic approaches to ministry can easily become our purpose and goal. To take too many risks would certainly alienate some, thus unfairly depriving them of the nurture and fellowship of the church. At times, some of us proclaim an unpopular idea from the pulpit largely to assuage our consciences and boost our flagging self-esteem. Other times, we hold back our vision. We temper the Word of God, because "they" are not ready to hear it. We resist wrestling with the awesome theological, ethical, political and pastoral issues of the day because our people easily tire of listening to these concerns. So, our rationalizations go. "I am the shepherd who follows the flock," says the Rabbi. Over the years we compromise our integrity. Much more, we compromise the integrity of the biblical vision of life, and even the integrity of our call to "madness."

Faced with a rare opportunity to speak boldly of the oppression of the children of God, Zalmen, the Rabbi's "beadle," urges the Rabbi to "let yourself go mad!" (Wiesel, p.78). Like any responsible leader of a believing community the Rabbi wants to weigh the probable impact and estimate the potential damage that could result from such a demonstration. He asks Zalmen, "What happens then?" (Wiesel, p.78). Zalmen cries out, "Let the future take care of the future. Make this one evening count." It does not take great imagination to hear in Zalmen's cry the cry of Jesus, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself" (Matt.6:33-34).

Zalmen is as relentless as the voice of God. Again, he cries out to the Rabbi, "One has to be mad today to believe in God and in man—one has to be mad to believe. One has to be mad to remain human. Be mad, Rabbi, be mad! . . . Become mad tonight and fear will shatter at your feet, harmless and wretched" (Wiesel, p.80). In a rare moment of candor the Rabbi loses his calm and responds to his persistent beadle, "Not so easy, Zalmen, not so easy. Fear and I, we have shared the same roof for a long, long time" (Wiesel, p.80). This is often also our reality. We too are bedfellows with fear. Words go unsaid, deeds go undone, visions slowly blur in the name of pastoral care. What occurs when our pastoral care springs largely from a sense of fear? Does it not become a shabby commodity that really satisfies no one? Zalmen challenges our ministry today as he challenged the Rabbi's, "Tear your fear out by the root! Let it not become your night and your universe, your silence and your lie—or, what is worse, your truth, your God!" (Wiesel, p.80).

Prompted by the tirades of Zalmen and by a vision of God, long since laid to rest, the Rabbi acts in "madness." During the service of Yom Kippur, at which the Western Jews are present the Rabbi boldly describes the plight of his people. "Dammit, what came over you all of a sudden?," asks the inspector of the KGB. Almost in a state of euphoria the Rabbi answers, "A moment of unconsciousness, of falling upwards" (Wiesel, p. 88). Implicit in our tendency

to compromise deeply held principles, and our reverence of fear, is the suspicion that to respond to the madness of God's vision would be a destructive experience for both the minister and the church. Certainly, that is a possibility that should not be casually dismissed. Yet, to act upon the madness of God's vision also holds within it tremendous potential for the minister and the community of faith "of falling upwards."

The Rabbi's outburst frightens and angers most of his community. The chairman of the community council tries to correct the Rabbi's disastrous blunder by assuring the Russian inspector, "We have only one mission: to survive. To survive at any cost!" (Wiesel, p.105). The chairman's words are reflective of the goals, and resulting ministry, of many Christian communities. Whenever this happens, faithfulness becomes confused with survival. To survive encourages us not to say anything too challenging, nor do anything too provocative, lest the delicate balance of the church be endangered. The irony of the church is that to survive is slowly to die. Our ears deafen and our lives rebel against hearing and obeying our God. When survival becomes our goal; even our god, Jesus' words sound with devastating judgment, "He who would save his life will lose it" (Mark 8:35). There is an element of madness within us whenever we lead our communities of faith to challenge the primacy of survival. When we lose our lives in this way, we open up the possibility of "falling upwards."

A dim spotlight focuses upon Zalmen as the play closes. Turning to the audience with a crazed look in his eyes, Zalmen says, "And you believed me! You really believed me! That story I just told you . . . it never really happened . . . it couldn't ever have happened. Never! Not here! Not now!" (Wiesel, p.172). As we participate in the drama of ministry, the Word of God calls us to listen, to speak, and to act in ways that others, and even our inner voices of caution, consider madness. The grace of divine madness is that it does not result simply from our deliberate decision-making. It comes to us more as a gift. The theological, ethical, political, and pastoral issues before the church are overwhelming, and will only increase in the days ahead. Undoubtedly, God will provide us, as he did the Rabbi, with moments for madness. We will hear that disturbing voice crying to us, "Be mad! Be mad!" Will we fall upwards? Or will we sit, like Wiesel, disillusioned by our own silence?