

A Response to Douglas John Hall

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The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.
Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*

In the 1940s, the idea of an “existential crisis” was the construct of Continental philosophers, the literary bauble of Sartre, Camus, and other French intellectuals. But by the late 1950s, almost everyone in America, it seems, was having one. Concepts like “loss of being” and “nothingness” had seeped into the vernacular, and even gas station attendants would lean wearily against the pumps, assume their best James Dean pose, and complain of *Angst*. In the seventies, Jimmy Carter placed a stethoscope to the heart murmurs of our society and pronounced that *Angst* had passed right through sixties’ rage and had soured into “malaise.” Now, in his compelling essay on the spiritual condition of the twenty-first century, Douglas John Hall has uttered an even more grave diagnosis: malaise has metastasized into full-blown despair, the utter loss of hope.

Kierkegaard warned us about this, told us that mild fevers like *Angst* and malaise were but early signs of deeper distress, way stations on a path to intensive care. We human beings, observed Kierkegaard, have a disease no HMO lists and no medicine can cure, namely despair, the “sickness unto death.” Hall (who shows himself in his essay once again to be what we have always known him to be: one of the ablest theological analysts of North American society) agrees that at least this cultural moment fulfills Kierkegaard’s dire assessment. Meaningless and despair are, he says, “the dominant anxiety of our present age.”

Beach Blanket Bingo and Covert Despair

But is this true? Are we living in a culture riddled with despair? Ironically, I made my way through Hall’s essay while lounging on a crowded beach in the waning days of summer, tracking his description of despair, hopelessness, and meaninglessness while all around me children were tossing beach balls and riding boogie boards as their parents sipped Bud Lights and slathered on sunscreen. This, by the way, was not the French Riviera, but instead a public beach in the American South, a place where fifty years ago the presence of a racial minority walking down the strand would have been a police matter but now where Sikhs and Southern Baptists, surgeons and secretaries, people of all colors and classes and conditions share the beach peacefully, even amiably. In the parking area, battered Ford pickups and aging Honda Civics are interleaved with BMW convertibles and mammoth Ford Expeditions, and down in the surf, older guys with brush cuts and “Semper Fi” tattooed on their biceps cheerfully chunk the football to their grandsons, who wear earrings, nose studs, and tattoos of their own. In short, here on the beach the American experiment appears to be working reasonably well and, despite the moody Dow, the future seems as bright as the summer sky. Somehow I cannot imagine rising like John the Baptist from my chaise lounge to thunder, “I know where you’re hurting. I feel your pain. You people are in despair!”

Despair seems all the wrong category.

But that, of course, is the point. As Hall argues, our society, at least the more affluent portion of it, suffers from “covert despair,” from “repressed hopelessness,” an insidious disease that does its damage while we blissfully ride on cruise control unaware of just how sick we are. Despair, says Hall, “is well able to masquerade under a guise of well-being so persuasive as to deceive the wearers of the mask themselves.” Kierkegaard intensified this claim, arguing that at root *all* true human despair is finally covert. Even when we know we are despairing, and even when we think we know what causes the despair, this surface awareness of despair is but another misdirection, another attempt to ward off the truth of a deeper despair that infects us in ways we cannot fully know. “The specific character of despair,” said Kierkegaard, “is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.”

This hidden and repressed character of our culture’s despair is one of the reasons Hall believes that, of all spiritual maladies, “it is the most excruciating to contemplate, and the most difficult to engage from the side of the ‘gospel.’” In other words, it is hard to preach about despair to a society tossing frisbees on the beach and contemplating how to spend the tax refund check. Moreover, as Hall notes, covert despair is a disease without immediate symptoms, or rather a disease whose only real symptom is violence inflicted on other people. According to Hall, one of the ways a culture in despair lies to itself, pretends that all is well, shores up its crumbling foundations, is to strike out at the powerless. As was once said of a particularly tyrannical French monarch: “He has a disease fatal only to others.”

It’s the Economy, Stupid

From whence did all of this despair arise? As Hall understands it, some time ago our culture set sail on the good ship Modernity with a cargo hold full of high-minded Enlightenment and Romantic ideals. Unfortunately, somewhere back there in the angry sea, Modernity struck an iceberg and beneath the waterline the ship is rapidly taking on water. Occasionally we can hear the screams from steerage, but here on the upper deck the band plays on and the caviar is still being served. But the vessel Modernity is doomed, and its cargo of Big Ideas has been washed into the sea. Deprived of high-minded understandings of Reason, Nature, the Individual, and the like, Modernity still plows ahead, but it now moves toward its dreadful end sheerly on the momentum of little strategies and impoverished motives such as technology, greed, vulgar consumerism, and exploitation of the environment. The precious cargo is overboard, but the ship struggles on, or, as Hall puts it, “Meaning has departed; the system remains.”

So far, so good. Hall is arguing, elegantly I might add, that grief over the loss of Meaning caused by Modernity’s demise is the genesis of covert despair. This description rings true in part, but I would like to see how all this fits when we loosen the bolts a bit between the American experience and the heavy application of European philosophical categories. The situation is layered and complex, to be sure, but it is not clear that the Big Ideas of Europe ever fully fueled the North American vision in the way that many theologians, most of us schooled in European modes of thought, often claim. Pragmatism and Progress—cousins, but distant *American* cousins, of Reason and Nature—were more the New World’s cup of tea. The Guns of August 1914 may have signaled the end of Modernity and served as a suicide note for European culture,

but they set the Ford plants humming in Detroit. We have heard, of course, the rumors that Modernity died in a nursing home in Europe, but here in North America hardly a tear was shed, and only the philosophy department at the University showed up for the funeral.

It is almost impossible to underestimate how much the notion of progress means to the American soul and, indeed, serves as a substitute for a deeper and more nuanced worldview. For most Americans, life is good if we can see ourselves moving on up, materially and spiritually. Progress is our creed, upward mobility is our eschatology, and leisure is our sacrament. It would be hard to imagine Denmark or France, for example, producing a high priest of positive thinking like Robert Schuller or to conceive of a bookstore in Warsaw with a large self-help section. At the 1939 New York World's Fair, visitors to the General Motors pavilion were treated to "Futurama," an optimistic prediction of American life in the decades to come featuring such notions as a private helicopter in every home garage. At the 1964 New York World's Fair, General Motors once again named its exhibit "Futurama," and though the particulars had changed (this time the promise of cheap nuclear energy had replaced the personal helicopters), the tune remained the same as GM beckoned visitors to travel the "Avenue of Progress." Today the GM corporate web site still focuses on progress, promising a "heart-pounding future," but now the better tomorrow will be inaugurated not by personal choppers or nuclear power "too cheap to meter," but by GM's corporate support for restoring Brazilian rainforests. Progress sleeps around with whatever is fashionable, and all of this illustrates the American tendency to see ideas not as eternal verities but as working drafts. If ideas die, they die, or if they become inconvenient, we throw them away. We are quite willing to swap, abandon, modify, and adjust ideas in service to the larger theme of progress.

In *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand's breathtaking *tour de force* on the American pragmatic philosophical tradition of Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Peirce, and John Dewey, he gives us a fascinating glimpse into this wrinkle in the American mind. According to Menand, all of these influential American thinkers "believed that ideas are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves."¹ These men, popular in their own lifetimes and still exerting considerable influence on American modes of thought, "didn't just want to keep the conversation going; they wanted to get to a better place."² They "taught a kind of skepticism that helped people cope with life in a heterogeneous, industrialized, mass-market society..." a skepticism that "permits the continual state of upheaval that capitalism thrives on."³ In other words, Americans are riding the carrier wave of progress, expecting life to get better through hard work and ingenuity, and they are willing to slap together whatever ideas are necessary to get there. All of this is validated by a constant rise in the standard of living. As Bill Clinton reminded himself, and us, "It's the economy, stupid."

The public narrative of faith in progress and the rightness of pragmatic tolerance is a powerful source of meaning in America. In the popular mind, it led to victory in the Cold War, an enormous growth in the American economy, and the creation of an enviable standard of living such that even China and Russia are struggling to reinvent their economies along free market lines. It was reported last summer that officials of the Democratic Party are now concerned about losing the loyalty of African Ameri-

cans because evidently so many African Americans experienced a substantial increase in personal wealth during the heady nineties that many are becoming Republicans. Hall may well reply that North American progress, pragmatism, and optimism are merely examples of what he calls “the...reduction of the Modern vision to truncated versions of its own principle themes,” but they seem to me to form a genuinely rival vision, an alternative and very potent source of cultural meaning.

“And I tell you: Not one dot-com will be left here upon another....”

I approach Hall’s analysis appreciatively, and with a homiletical interest, wondering, in the light of his essay, what a preacher should do and say. Cautiously I offer the following observations:

First, I take seriously Hall’s warning that preachers (among other Christians in the West) are addressing the wrong historical age and speaking a dated language when we assume “that the human predicament is one of ‘guilt and condemnation.’” Hall is right. If what we proclaim is to stand a chance of being “good news” to the hearers, then it must hit the bull’s-eye regarding the nature of the “bad news.” It must speak to the human condition in terms recognizable to those who hear. In the classical period, Hall reminds us, the larger culture understood the “bad news” in terms of fate and death, and in the Medieval period it was guilt and condemnation, but in our day the “bad news” is predominantly meaninglessness and hopelessness.

In the main I agree, but I am reluctant to cast off entirely the earlier language. In a nation where millions of otherwise sane people rub their hands together with glee anticipating the next novel in a series about being left behind after the Rapture, the language of fate and death evidently still has a bit of currency. And anyone who has listened to a country radio station for more than ten minutes, or tuned into to late night talk radio, or watched Connie Chung on *Primetime Thursday* attempt to arm wrestle a remorseful confession out of Gary Condit has to be impressed by the lasting power of the language of guilt and condemnation. Writing in *The New York Times* of the Connie Chung interview, Jedediah Purdy observes:

“Primetime Thursday” and its sister television programs form a public confessional, with the interviewer in the role of the minister and the audience cast as the congregation. Americans love to forgive, but we exact a price in exchange. The sinner has to offer up a heartfelt and detailed account of his transgressions. He has to be remorseful. Then, and only then, do we decide whether he has been forthright and sincere enough to earn our indulgence. ...Ms. Chung’s story has its origins in sweaty, crowded Baptist services.⁴

In other words, I think preachers in North America need to recognize that “sweaty, crowded Baptist churches” still thrive here in the air-conditioned comfort of GM’s Futurama and that we preach amid a confusing swirl of optimism and self-doubt, secularity and hot religious passion, microchips and blood sacrifice, people with guilty consciences and Emersonian self-made types, old creeds and disposable ideas, piety and perversity—all jostling together like fans pressing into Yankee Stadium. A colleague of mine once said, describing his alcoholic father, “He was an atheist when sober and a fundamentalist when drunk.” This is an apt description of our culture, and

preachers have to be nimble, culturally multilingual, and, like good missionaries, willing to listen long enough to know what is really at stake in the lives of people in a strange land.

Second, Hall helps us to see that much of today's hopelessness is caused by the fact that we hit an iceberg back there somewhere and lost the great vision necessary to keep a society responsible and productive. I think we took a hit, all right, but it seems to me that the really big iceberg lies ahead of us. We are a culture expecting endless expansion and economic growth, and so far we can make a reasonable case to ourselves that it is working out pretty well.

But we are living off of the world's credit card, and the party cannot go on forever. I say this not as an economist, but as a theologian. I believe that God loves us so much that God will judge us...indeed, is even now judging us. As Karl Barth said:

Humanity cannot stand up to God's wrath because it is the wrath of God's love. The reason why God's curse falls so hard upon us is that it is surrounded by the rainbow of God's covenant. ...Those whom God loves, God chastens. Those whom God will have for himself, God pursues to the remotest corner where their backs are to the wall and they can no longer escape from God. For those to whom God wills to be all in all, God strips everything else.⁵

America is in an SUV with the pedal to the metal. Sometime in the future—perhaps in our lifetime, perhaps in the lifetime of our grandchildren, but certainly in God's good time—the cheerful, thoughtless, upwardly mobile and finally greedy American experiment will hit the wall. There will be injuries, and we want to be pastoral, but one of the tasks of the preacher is to avoid taking on what Kierkegaard called “the poet-existence,” which is really just despair that uses God language. The poet preacher, Kierkegaard warned, seeks to “poetize God, making him a little bit other than He is, a little bit more like a loving father who all too much indulges the child's ‘only wish.’”⁶ Instead of preaching sermons that describe God as a cosmic “Make a Wish Foundation,” our task way well be to turn once again to a theological category many of us have, with some relief, avoided as a relic of our religious past. Maybe the preaching task will be to reintroduce the category of God's loving judgment.

Even now there are signs that God's judgment is at work, stripping away everything else. I point, by way of illustration, to one small, almost trivial, example. As I walk across the campus of the university where I teach, I go past scores of students on their way to and from class. Many a student, as soon as he or she hits the campus green, reaches into a backpack for a cell phone and punches in the numbers for a call. We see the same thing in shopping malls and airports: dozens of people strolling along yapping into phones and talking to people somewhere else. It finally dawned on me that most of these calls are not being made out of necessity or utility, but rather out of boredom and loneliness. For the most part, the students are not calling for cabs or dates or pizzas or to let their roommates know they'll meet them at the library. Instead, these are “Whassup?” calls, random searches for action. It is as if we sense that nothing of consequence is happening in us or around us, and we are convinced that action and meaning must surely be occurring somewhere else, if we could just find it. Kierkegaard said that “when one is about to despair, the cry is, ‘Procure me possibility! Procure

possibility!” So, we phone it up, hoping to be connected to a possibility, a life, that is somewhere else, a possibility and a life we do not have. Why are we so lonely? Why doesn’t a loving God stop all our pain? Because maybe God started it. As Barth said, “For those to whom God wills to be all in all, God strips everything else.”

Notes

¹ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2001), xi.

² *Ibid.*, 440.

³ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁴ Jedediah Purdy, “Gary Condit’s Strong, Silent Act” in *The New York Times*, August 26, 2001, Section 4, 13.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 607.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1941, 1954), 209.