

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Theologian *A Tribute to Harry Emerson Fosdick*

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A FAVORITE author of mine is Alan Sillatoe, the British spokesman for the alienated man. Perhaps you have read his works or seen them as movies: *The General, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and the great selection of short stories, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. This latter work has held a fascination for me since I first read it some years ago. I like the work for itself, but it also spoke to other dimensions of my own being and life struggle.

Smith, the main character in the *Long-Distance Runner*, has struggled all of his life to make meaning of and to find some basis of truth for his existence. Without this basis he has found himself continuing to get into trouble. When the story begins he is in Borstal detention home. There he is given great freedom because he is an outstanding long-distance runner. The home and headmaster hope that Smith can win the coveted cup for Borstal. They care nothing for Smith, but they want to use him. Smith has the freedom to run free and he could easily take off and leave the home but he knows that would solve nothing because he is not running from Borstal. He cannot run from himself and he knows he can struggle to be his own person and find his own core of truth at Borstal as well as anywhere else. It is only on the day of the big race that he comes to a position of self confrontation and resolve. It all takes place in the loneliness which he expe-

riences as he runs with no one at his side, no one to share with, no one to understand. Smith had no core of personal truth to give his life and that which he experiences with other meaning, thus he had no basis for commitment to anything and this is what kept getting him into trouble. He found momentary meanings and involvements but they were somehow alien to him when in reflection. What makes Smith so real and identifiable is that he was a searcher and he recognized this was a lonely business.

Daniel Day Williams made some comments a couple of years ago that reflected what I was encountering in my own work with theological students and ministers active in the parish.

"Here is the student who does not really know even what his commitments are. But he is a searcher for faith, and for his own vocation. He knows some things he is against. He participates in a civil-rights protest. He demonstrates against a government policy. He understands various ideologies under which these things are done, some of them liberal, some of them revolutionary. But if you press him, he does not really accept any ideology. He distrusts them all and he would like to find a truth he can trust. He neither rejects the conventional forms of church life nor does he find them convincing. He is, so to speak, searching for the reality of commitment itself, and yet we would not call him an uncommitted person. He may have a stubborn honesty and hopefulness that we cannot discount and which in some way we regard as a precious ingredient in the life of the theological community."

It seems to me that there is a great similarity between "The Long-Distance Runner," Smith, and a majority of theologians today, seminary students, clergymen, and lay theologians alike. The

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search for some kind of meaningful and experiential faith or truth keeps us all running but we don't run away. Like Smith it would do no good to run from Borstal because he couldn't run away from himself. Those of us concerned for theology are aware that even when we can see no clear answers we cannot run away for we cannot run from ultimate concerns once the struggle has been undertaken. Like Thomas Wolfe said in his great novel, "you can't go home again" — you can't return to a state of non-involvement in ultimate concerns once the struggle has been started.

There is tremendous loneliness in this search. I am increasingly struck by this fact. I used to feel that the "fellowship" of the church indicated that there were a group of like searchers following the same course. To a degree that is true, but at one step removed. The church can be a fellowship and provide a great source of strength and direction. But the more I work with individuals and their ability to be open and honest with where they are at the given moment, I don't think that this is often what is shared in the sustaining fellowship of the church. Rather this is the "agony and the ecstasy" of loneliness. The attempt to make some ultimate meaning of our experience, both rationally and emotionally is always a solitary experience in at least its first encounter.

Let me share with you some examples of what I mean regarding this. During the past year I have served as resource leader to a variety of groups of ministers; Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and Unitarian. During our day or weekends or whatever time we were together the groups reached a place where they could share their weaknesses, their limitations, their marital problems, their sexual problems and fantasies, but when I pushed them on the fact that they had been so private regarding any attempt to share their real inner religious experiences and struggles, they became very threatened and "up-tight." They could intellectualize and could pull out the

dogmas of the church but when it came to expressing where they were as a person in faith this was the threat.

It was finally possible for me to enable them at least to talk about the threat. Lying behind the expression of their doubts were these kinds of concerns: "What does this conflict or doubt say about my whole vocational commitment?" "I would be rejected by my group." "I would reveal myself as a farce." "I could not stand to hear myself say in words the thoughts I have been having about my theology or faith." "I couldn't tolerate being that different openly." "I am afraid." "I would be letting so many people down."

These are but a few of the comments, you would have thought that it was a group talking about the unforgiveable sin — and I think that perhaps theological struggling for many may be just that if they were forced to make an open confession about it.

You may wonder what difference this all makes. If that is the way a person feels, so what. But it is of vital concern to me for I happen to feel that theology, faith, ultimate concern of a human life, is the integrating factor of that life. What a tragedy when this integrating factor or core poses such a threat to interpersonal acceptance and belonging that it must be blocked and denied expression. Has it become safer to act than to reason? With all the emphasis upon encounter and feeling is it becoming safer to feel than to reason? What happens to the unity of body, mind and spirit when this happens? The Whole Person, of which we often talk but have very little understanding, may be just as far from a reality in this day of action and feeling as in the past if there is no core around which integration takes place.

This week saw the passing of a great man and a great theologian, Harry Emerson Fosdick. Certainly today we could poke some holes in his theological structure but that is beside the point. He was a man of action, a man of intense feel-

ing both inward and with others (empathy), but also he was solidly a man of faith. In his time his faith was as different as the Death of God or Robinson or any of the *avant garde* theologians of today. He was thus cast into a lonely position. Yet it was not the loneliness of one who struggles with his own doubts and conflicts and fears the implications to himself or others were these revealed. It was the loneliness that comes from taking a risk and having the courage to stand on his faith. It is the kind of loneliness that was experienced by Jesus, by Paul, Augustine, Luther, Fox and many of the great religious leaders of which we are all in some form followers. The struggle for meaning and integration is always an inward and alone process and thus being a theologian is loneliness business. Perhaps this is why many who have grown up in the day of the group, the crowd, the mass, as a means of getting where the action is, do not want to struggle with an ideology or theology.

Dr. Rollo May and Dr. Abraham Mas-

low have both said in their own way that whenever a person is on the growing edge of life there is a dimension of himself that is cut off and alienated from communication. Thus to grow is to experience loneliness. Both *these* men seem to feel that we are losing much creativity today because of an attempt to escape from being lonely — we would rather let the leader tell us what to do and thus be part of the group, we accept ready-made ideologies or rebel against them for the same dynamic reasons. The loneliness of the inward struggle to find the ultimate concern around which we achieve personal integrity is more than many individuals are willing to take up today.

Harry Emerson Fosdick faced and tolerated loneliness and as a man of faith was a great man of our time. To be a man of faith who knows why he is committed to action is a man who lives on the growing edge and who can face the loneliness of being the long-distance theologian.

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