

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

October 10, 2017

This week I'm writing about three mostly unrelated things

#1 Three Boys. Many years ago, a Philadelphia congregation watched as three nine-year-old boys were baptized and joined the church. Not long after, unable to continue with its dwindling membership, the church sold the building and disbanded.



One of those boys was Dr. Tony Campolo, author and Christian sociologist at Eastern College, Pennsylvania. Dr. Campolo remembers:

Years later when I was doing research in the archives of our denomination, I decided to look up the church report for the year of my baptism. There was my name, and Dick White's. He's now a missionary. Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there. Then I read the church report for 'my' year: "It has not been a good year for our church. We have lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children."

My friends, as we do our best with the children God sends us, may we remember that we do not see what God sees. *Let us not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up* (Galatians 6:9).

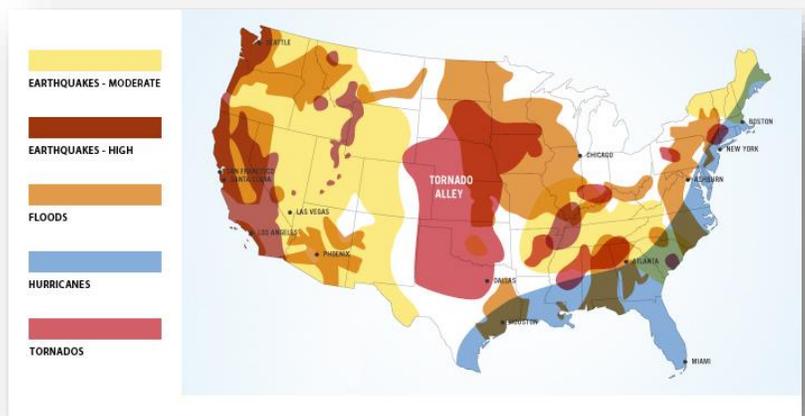
#2 Holy Friendships. Holy friendships are friendships rooted in God and in mutual encouragement toward faith-full living. Such friends (1) are willing to challenge the sins we've come to love; (2) are able to affirm the gifts we're afraid to claim; and (3) help us to dream the dreams we would not have dreamed without them.

Do you *have* such friends? *Are you* such a friend?

#3 Grief is Everywhere. I don't usually read Susanna Schrobsdorff's column in *TIME*, "The Pursuit of Happy-ish," but I was drawn to it this week. Her opening paragraphs were powerful:

"If you could see grief on a map, there would be rings of anguish radiating from whole regions of the U.S. right now. From Texas to Florida to Puerto Rico and Las Vegas, the hurt would expand with each person affected to the people they're connected with in all parts of the country. No state would remain untouched by the events of 2017.

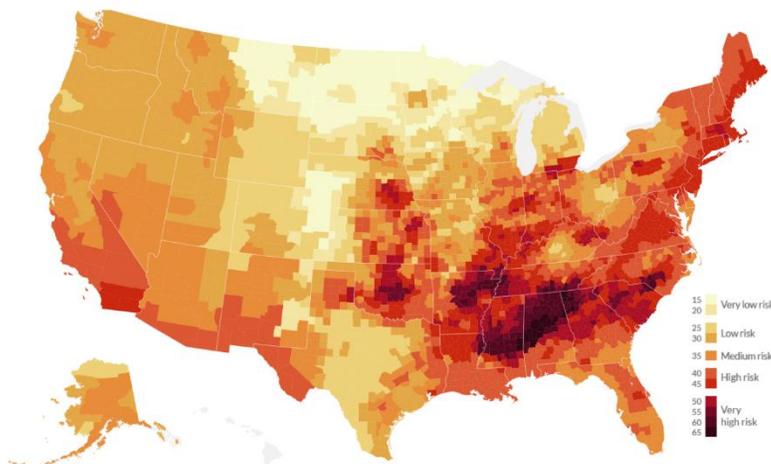
"The magnitude of the suffering over the past few months is unfathomable to those who haven't spent time in a war zone or in countries where nature's most brutal assaults are even more



frequent. Houston and Florida are still reeling from sequential hurricanes. Puerto Rico hasn't gotten to its feet in the wake of Maria. The people of Charlottesville, Va., watched hate march into town and take one of their own--an event from which they're still recovering. Now a man has hauled a cache of weapons into a hotel room in Las Vegas and unleashed a hailstorm of death on concertgoers below, killing dozens and wounding hundreds.

“We have run out of adjectives for these kinds of events. Last year's deadliest mass shooting in American history has been overtaken by this year's deadliest mass shooting in American history. The last set of catastrophic hurricanes has been eclipsed by this year's set of catastrophic hurricanes.

“These tragedies are accumulating so fast, we forget that many of the ramifications are just starting to unfurl. The hospital staff members, first responders and brave Samaritans in Las Vegas will have to learn to live with the horror of what they've seen. Puerto Rico's children may lose a whole school year; if we're having trouble getting them food and water, it will be even longer before they're back in class. And it's clear that the most vulnerable of those hit by the storms in Texas and Florida will struggle economically for years.



“One wonders if it's possible for us to expand our hearts and minds to embrace this level of hurt and destruction--a trail of stricken families and communities that stretches from the Gulf to the Atlantic and parts in between. It must be said that the trail of kindness and courage reaches just as far. But I worry that our capacity for empathy has been worn thin and that our attention spans are now so tweet-size that we won't be able to focus

long enough on any one of these tragedies to provide long-term help.”¹

Susanna's counsel for avoiding compassion fatigue and ensuing despair is to “**Choose Something & Do Something.**” I think that's pretty good advice. We can choose a particular situation and pray diligently for those affected by it. We can choose a particular need and focus what resources we can on meeting that need.

And we don't necessarily have to wait for a “disaster.” We can choose to give generously to a particular Christian mission need, such as Ghanaian wells, Fire & Light Church, or the Huehuetenango Youth Ranch. We can choose to involve ourselves in the life of one of our CBF young people. We can choose to involve ourselves in tutoring at a local school. We can DO SOMETHING.

At the same time, we can become more sensitive to the grief that pervades our lives in so many ways, disaster or no disaster. We can grieve with those who have lost homes. We can grieve with those who have lost loved ones. We can grieve with those who have lost jobs. We can grieve with those who have lost health. We can grieve with those who have lost

¹ Susanna Schrobsdorff, “The tragedies of 2017 will test the bonds that connect us, now and for years to come,” *TIME*, 10.5.17. <http://time.com/4970294/tragedies-2017-will-test-bonds-that-connect-us/?iid=sr-link1>

pets. We can be gentle with one another, because if we're paying attention, we're all grieving something.

Wayne Oates, a famous professor of pastoral care, and one of my own teachers, offered two images of the process of grieving that I have found very helpful. The first of these is the image of an altar; the second, of a spiral staircase.



If you imagine your heart of hearts as an altar, a holy place, then when a loss comes, whether a huge sorrow such as death, divorce, or the diagnosis of serious illness (as well as lesser griefs) every part of your life, every dimension of your sense of self is suddenly piled up in a heap on one side of that altar. This heap contains every memory, conscious or unconscious, every smell, every sound, every color, every place, every melody—every *everything* that has ever been connected to that which you have now lost.

And, one by one, everything in that heap enters the holy place of your heart and collides with the reality that your life is no longer as it was before. Every one of these collisions is painful, some excruciatingly so, and we often do not see them coming. A song on the radio, perfume in a restaurant, a sunset . . . the triggers for the collisions are beyond numbering.

The good news is that each one of these parts of our memory crashes into the holy place only once, and then passes to the other side of the altar, beginning to build a new sense of self that incorporates our new reality. Little by little, usually over a period of two to three years, we begin to regain our balance, our sense of who we are now, grateful for what has been, and beginning to be hopeful about what lies ahead. This healing is the work of God's grace.

Another way to imagine this process is to think of a long spiral staircase. In this case, the reality of our loss is splattered all over the floor at the beginning of the stair.

Every day takes us one step higher, one step farther away from the grief, one step nearer healing. We experience times that feel like "three steps forward and two steps back," but even then, we've still made progress.

From time to time, we lose our balance—as when the collisions occur in the altar of our souls—and we grab the banister to keep from falling. Without intending to, we look over the banister as we regain our balance . . . and the nature of a spiral staircase is that if at any point we look over the banister, we can see all the way to the bottom, where our loss is splattered all over the floor.



Every time this happens, we are caught up short in soul pain, and are tempted to tell ourselves, "I thought I was doing well, but here I go again." And yes, it still hurts, but we are farther away now, higher up, and cannot see the pain so clearly any longer.

Sometimes, as healing progresses and we begin to feel a new sense of hope and life, we stop to look over the banister on purpose, to see how far we've come. The same thing still happens—we can see all the way to the bottom—and the surprising pain causes us to feel discouraged. But again, though it still hurts, we are farther away now, higher up, and cannot see or sense the pain so clearly any longer.

Sometimes keeping an occasional journal of these experiences provides a helpful measuring stick by which to evaluate how far we've come over time. And of course, if our loss was a loved one, and if they were and we are in Christ, then every step forward takes us farther away from our loss and closer to our beloved who is with the Lord. We are "climbing Jacob's Ladder," after all (Genesis 28:16-17).

Soli Deo Gloria!

