



“MATTERS OF THE HEART” SERIES – COMMENTARY II

HEARTBREAK HOTEL:

ON THE ROAD FROM HEARTACHE TO WHO KNOWS WHERE?

by John Bennison

A PREFATORY REFLECTION ON HEARTBREAK

*Well, since my baby left me
I found a new place to dwell
It's down at the end of Lonely Street
At Heartbreak Hotel.*

Heartbreak Hotel,
written by Durden and Axton, sung by “The King”

When Elvis Presley found himself at the end of Lonely Street in 1956, he checked himself into the Heartbreak Hotel, where it seems the vacancy sign is always lit. To hear him tell it, his baby had dumped him. Wise men may say only fools rush in, but apparently he couldn't help himself. And he wasn't alone.

The gyrating rhythm and blues song that hit the top of the charts as the best selling single that year and brought Elvis his first million-seller had obviously struck a common chord for anyone who'd ever loved and lost. And with such a winning loss, it sounded as if a part of him had died, as he put it:

*Although it's always crowded
You still can find some room
For broken-hearted lovers
To cry there in the gloom
And be so, where they'll be so lonely, baby
Well, they're so lonely
They'll be so lonely, they could die.*

That's what heartache is like. It's that feeling deep down inside that something has died. It's all about loss. A life partner or the best friend you ever had dies, and it feels like something has been wrenched from your very core. You think the pit in your stomach would almost be tolerable, if it weren't for the heartache.

Or, a job, a profession, a career is eliminated in a flash. But you can lose more than simply your livelihood, reputation or even self-esteem. When you take into account what you've done with so many years of your life, and what you have to show for it, you realize there can be a whopping sense of loss; about the meaning and purpose of your days that leaves a void in its place that goes straight to the heart of the matter.

Or, a neighbor can't pay the mortgage, so they default on their loan, and become another statistic and casualty to the American dream of homeownership. But they lose more than a house. If a “home is where the heart is,” as the saying goes, then they lose a little bit of their heart, as well.

The first commentary in this four-part series on Matters of the Heart explored that universal affliction, namely hard-heartedness. But an equally human condition none of us seem to escape if we live long enough is the heartache and heartbreak of loss.

“It's better to have loved and lost,” another old adage goes, “than never to have loved at all.” That may be true, but I've found it's little consolation for folks when the loss is so fresh, and raw and real. It's like saying, well, things could always be worse. As true as that may be, it hardly matters. What matters is a broken heart, and a place we inevitably seek to dwell, at least for awhile. I call it Heartbreak Hotel.

Outside Nashville, across the street from Graceland, where Elvis once dwelled, there is an actual establishment known as The Heartbreak Hotel. A fashionable boutique inn consisting of 128 rooms, it bills itself as “taking its cues from the legendary hospitality and personal style for which the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll was known.” It sounds like a charming place, but I don't know what their occupancy rate might happen to be.

On the other hand, back in 1955, Tommy Durden and Mae Boren Axton had indeed written that hit song that was recorded the following year by Presley. The lyrics to the song were based on a true story that had appeared in The Miami Herald; about a man who had destroyed all his identity papers, before leaping to his death from a hotel window. Behind, he'd left a suicide note with the single line, “I walk a lonely street.”

Apparently, for all his wandering, the man with no name never found a place to come with his heart in his hands, and find refuge.

Not to put too fine a point on it, if we would undertake to reflect on all the matters of the heart, then it somehow seems fitting to pause and check in along the way at that place called heartbreak; and with those inevitable experiences of heartache and loss.

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When a recent tornado roared across a wide swath of a Midwest state, it ripped one man's 3,000 square foot home from its foundation and blew it to kingdom come. His comment on the evening news was one we've heard many times before. "I've lost everything," he explained, choking back the tears. "But we're alive."

So, while we're at it, we might as well acknowledge that despite our losses we're also still alive to tell about.

All of which suggests to me there's not only something worthwhile in the journey upon which we've embarked; but that there's also an end to all our exploring that's more than merely overnight accommodations.

COMMENTARY: HEARTBREAK HOTEL

When singing artist, Emmy Lou Harris was just starting out, she wrote to legendary folksinger Pete Seeger, telling him she wasn't sure she could be a folk singer herself because she had not experienced enough suffering in her life.

"Don't jump a freight train," Seeger advised her, "suffering will come to you." Pete was right. If you live long enough, suffering will come.

I thought of this a few months back, when legendary Penn State coach Joe Paterno died. Lung cancer eventually did him in, and was listed as the official cause of death.

But in the aftermath of his involuntary termination at the end of an illustrious career -- following the alleged cover-up of sex abuse by an assistant coach -- a different post-mortem conclusion was drawn by many of his fans.

As one faithful follower was reported saying, "Joe died of a broken heart. My wife said it was cancer, but I believe his demise was exacerbated by this terrible scandal." Suffering eventually comes to all of us, it would seem; and often in the form of a broken heart.

One quoted expert in an article I read on the subject agreed. "Certainly, suffering, grief and loss has been linked to an increased risk of heart attacks and depression," it said, "and Paterno may have been feeling both emotional distress and a sense of loss due to his recent diagnosis and his ignominious departure from Penn State."

A 2005 research study found there was an increase in heart attacks among adults who had suffered the recent loss of a loved one. Indeed, higher levels of stress hormones resulting from all forms of loss take their toll on the heart. Despair and grief that result from such loss continue to weigh on a heavy heart.

One of my best friends has had a lot of worry and heartache this last year. His spouse survived heart surgery, then an intricate pacemaker procedure; only to fall and break a hip, followed by an infection during her ongoing recuperation. At least one his grown children is able to help out, since losing his own job and the break-up of a marriage.

If that wasn't enough, this last week my friend informed me the dog needs another operation; then happened to mention his doctor wanted him to the find time to come in so he could check his heart. I'm not surprised. When it comes to caring and compassionate people, my friend Fred has one of the biggest hearts I know.

"It's like you're a modern day Job!" I told him. Except neither of us are inclined to believe his suffering, trials and tribulations are the result of some divine displeasure or meddling of any kind. We've both seen enough in our lifetime to know worry, heartache and loss are just part of the package. That's not the issue.

So instead, here's the question:

If and when you find yourself on the road from heartache and loss to who knows where, what do you do, and where do you go?

Where is that place to experience, acknowledge and accept things for what they are?

Where's that place one might come to truly know, with the assurance that we're not alone in our heartache? A place with a sense of some abiding presence and caring fellowship, that can even carve out of heartache and heartbreak a hallowed space to dwell, if only for awhile?

SUITABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

For many, a faith community of one sort or another provides such accommodations. In the biblical story, it was part of the reason the people of Israel kept building and rebuilding the Jerusalem temple; only to have it demolished time after time.

Think about it. After years and years of building this sacred place, destroyed centuries before by the Babylonians, how heartbreaking it must have been centuries later to have had it reduced to ruins once again by the Romans in 70 CE.

In the aftermath of such a devastating loss – indeed, at the time the gospels were being written, and those Jewish-Christians were feeling doubly separated from their religious roots -- the fledging church communities must have wondered, where could they go, with their hearts in their hands? They must have surely found themselves on the road from heartache to who knows where?

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So it's not surprising at all that they turned to those remembered stories, shaped and handed down to them about Jesus, the itinerant peasant rabbi and spirit/sage from Galilee. In just such a context as this, we can take another look at one of those temple encounter stories ...



Christ Expelling the Money Changers in the Temple – Greco, 1600

It was almost time for the Jewish Passover celebration, so Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple precincts he came upon people selling oxen and sheep and doves, and bankers were doing business there too. He made a whip out of rope and drove them all out of the temple area, sheep, oxen, and all; then he knocked over the banker's tables, and set their coins flying. And to the dove merchants he said, "Get these birds out of here! How dare you use my Father's house as a public market." (His disciples were reminded of the words of scripture: 'Zeal for your house is eating me alive.')

To this the Judeans responded, "What miracle can you show us (to justify) doing all this?"

Jesus replied, "Destroy this temple and I'll resurrect it in three days"

"It has taken forty-six years to build this temple," the Judeans said, "and you can reconstruct it in three days?" (However, he was referring to his body as a temple. When he had been raised from the dead his disciples remembered that he had made this remark, and so they came to believe both the written word and the word Jesus had spoken.)

John 2:13-22 Translation by Funk, Hoover & the Jesus Seminar]

All four canonical gospels relate their own version about their own character portrayal of Jesus angrily driving out merchants and moneychangers from the temple; but John alone adds interpretive exchange and explanation about the prediction of the temple's destruction and Jesus' ability to "resurrect" it in three days.

While biblical scholars generally agree this juxtaposition and confrontation with the religious authorities was a clear and consistent pattern with the historical Jesus, the retrospective attribution and obvious interpretive elements to the story make it clear it was itself a construction of the early faith communities of which each gospel narrator was a part.

So while re-reading this familiar story once again, it's important to remember the historical context in which this account would have been preserved; that is, in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple by the Roman Empire in 70 CE.

Now, like any faithful 1st-century Jew, it was likely Jesus made many road trips to Jerusalem; which would have included pilgrimages to the great temple there. And the established custom of vendors and moneychangers in the outer precincts would have quite naturally been seen as simply business as usual.

Selling animals for use in ritual, substitutionary sacrifice for unintended sins was just one of the conveniences offered by what would have merely been considered "onsite service providers."

The same was true of the currency exchangers, since it would have been forbidden to use a Roman coin with Ceasar's image for money offerings.

In other words, no cash, checks or credit cards. Only temple coins could be used to make temple offerings; and there was a convenience fee charged for the service.

The whole operation was organized to run smoothly, so the faithful could come with their hearts in their hands; and -- following prescribed protocols of contrition and repentance -- could have them all processed in adherence to prescribed rules and procedures. How could anyone object?

The three synoptic gospels only relate this account as Jesus' tantrum over the apparent corruption that inevitably seeps into systematized, bureaucratic human institutions; where hierarchical authority leads to self-interest in maintaining the status quo, and anyone who challenges it is a threat that must be quashed. As such, the synoptic gospels place this account near the end of their narratives, and Jesus' final confrontation and ultimate demise.

But John includes this story near the beginning of his gospel, along with the addition of the puzzled bystander's question when Jesus creates a ruckus, basically asking, "What in the hell are you doing?" To which the Jesus character in John gives only one of what will be many metaphorical replies (e.g. "I am light," "a vine," "a good shepherd," "bread of life," "living water," etc).

In this case, he not only predicts the destruction of the temple that took nearly half a century to rebuild a second time, but wagers he can rebuild it once more in three days.

With the metaphorical translation John's community of early believers provides -- so even a dullard wouldn't miss the point, he adds -- the narrator explains this soon-to-be-risen Jesus is no longer referring to a place of brick and mortar that has been built and rebuilt; but rather his own resurrected (spiritual) body, that is no longer bound by time and space.

So much for the idea of clinging to the notion of a physical resurrection; any more than a broken heart can be eternally and repeatedly repaired in your local coronary care unit.

This soon-to-be-risen Jesus is no longer referring to a place of brick and mortar that has been built and rebuilt; but rather his own resurrected body, that is no longer bound by time and space.

So much for the idea of clinging to the notion of a physical resurrection; any more than a broken heart can always and forever be repaired in your local coronary care unit.

It's important to remember the historical Jesus had no messianic self-consciousness. The predictions of his passion are retrospective attributions accorded him by the early church, in light of what they came to believe about him; that is, how they experienced his continued, mystical presence.

In other words, that encounter of faith came to be described as being part of the "body of Christ," as they experienced it in various places; in their homes, perhaps; or in overnight lodging on their way to Emmaus, on the road from heartache to heartbreak, or somewhere in between.

It seems the "cleansing of the temple" story is often viewed as crediting Jesus' humanity with sharing the same kinds of emotions we all feel.

How human he surely was, we like to think, to have occasionally given in to minor irritations over the sacrilegious denigrations we seem to make out of our religious practices.

And elsewhere, how repeatedly peeved he's portrayed when his closest friends and comrades fail to understand the subtleties of his parables.

In Luke's crucifixion account, a dying Jesus is shown to grieve over the "daughters of Jerusalem," and their own impending doom.

And so too, in all four canonical gospels, Jesus is imagined in this particular story to lose his temper and fly off the handle when he evicts the legitimate business practitioners.

But we miss the point and power of this particular temple story if we think it's just about some human-like emotion, a fleeting angry moment, before Jesus finally surrenders and acquiesces to some ultimate compensatory sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

That is all such an equally-strange and prevalent notion that pervades so much of certain Christian belief systems to this day; without really adequately explaining how Jesus' execution for the sacrificial expiation and atonement for my personal failures is supposed to work exactly.

Instead, imagine it -- just as the early Christian faith communities may have imagined it -- with Jesus standing and gazing upon the scene before him in the temple precincts.

In the mind's eye of those early believers, the "father's house" that no longer existed was remembered and likened to a market place (other translations, a "den of thieves"). And, in the aftermath of the temple's destruction -- the perspective from which the early believers would have imagined this story -- it must not have been as heartbreaking, as it was maddening.

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Perhaps those early believers came to realize that before the Romans had torn down the temple walls from the outside, there'd already been a deteriorating spiritual rot from within.

Religion as a marketable commodity was being merchandized, bought and sold. The sad reality was the system would have collapsed under

its own weight, if the Romans hadn't given it a push. And for anyone who questions the contemporary relevance of these arcane stories, it's not a far cry to consider the state of the institutional church today, the decay from within, and its irrelevance to the cultural forces from without.

But if that is so, then what's left, where the temple walls once stood? Surely, human suffering remains.

And with it, remains the need to yet find a place to bring our lingering heartaches.

Contemporary British poet, David Whyte, imagines such a place – along with our certain reluctance to go there -- in his poem, *The Well of Grief*.

*Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief
turning down to its black water
to the place that we can not breathe
will never know
the source from which we drink
the secret water cold and clear
nor find in the darkness
the small gold coins
thrown by those who
wished for something else.*

from David Whyte's *Where Many Rivers Meet:
The River of Loss*

The poet himself once reflected:

"I remember dropping down into this poem, like dropping into a well, with this very strange image at the bottom. When I got to the bottom of the well, there were all the coins I'd thrown down previously to make a wish.

Now, you know, in all the great religious traditions, water has always played a part. You're immersed in it at one time or another. Originally, you went under completely in the River Jordan. You went back to the place you could not breathe, into this watery womb. And you were reborn again and cleansed. Now you just get a touch on the forehead in some religious traditions.

And then, in the secular tradition, when you come to the well, you throw down a coin, and you make a wish. And the wish is you don't have to go down yourself. Because we intuit in that dark, watery hole both the source of our nourishment and the place we're so frightened to walk back into. And so we'll throw anything down there; as long as we don't have to go down there ourselves."

The gospel story is more than just an account of the Galilean sage at odds with the corrupted practices of the religious establishment in his own tradition; though that is clearly an underlying counterpart to what's new (or retrieved, renewed, or redeemed -- take your pick) about the good news of the gospel message.

It's also about that place we find -- both in the journey and the journey's end -- that exists beyond brick and mortar, beyond time and place.

It is a place where those unwelcome companions known as suffering and heartache can run as deep as a well.

It is a place we wish we would not have to go. Yet where only in our darkest loss we might "intuit" by faith, and find life again.

Like the poet's well of grief, it is a place that hints of another kind of resurrection.

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