

Glorious Disorder

Reed Stirling

By the time I've walked along the estuary road to the village, fall colours have assured me that everything does have its season. Not so, the usual topic of discussion at The Compass Café. Voices lower as I come up the steps, then come greetings from all the usual suspects for old Terry Burke, who has finally put in an appearance, and queries as to how it's going with Grace and little Brenda Verité. They know of the situation in general, but I have kept information regarding the family crisis to a minimum.

I prepare my coffee and sit down opposite a red-faced Bill Houston. Next to him is Christopher Tenets. Though his hands rest neatly folded on the table before him in a gesture that would ordinarily signify relaxation, I see that Tenets is perturbed. His lower lip has all but disappeared.

"To further that proposition," Tom Shelley says, having allowed time for me to settle in, "as far as we humans are concerned, Bill, a perfectly 'designed' universe would be one without suffering. If we are all god's beloved creatures, including our Cro-Magnon ancestors, why *design* so many diseases to make lives miserable?"

"And while we're pursuing that particular point," Doc Rhyle adds, "why would your omnipotent creator take so long to bring it all about? Aeons, endless aeons! Were the Neanderthals, and their ancestors, also made in God's image? If so, why did he wipe them out? If not in his image, why did he wipe them out? Because they

were not perfect reflections of his alleged perfection the way, supposedly, we humans are?"

"Okay, Bill," Tom Shelley begins again, more emphatic at this point, "the Bible states that God made man in his image."

"It does indeed."

"That would imply a great deal about what humans should be like, but aren't. And inversely, much that is vile, ugly, and evil therefore can be attributed to God. What an ungodly reflection that is! Human, all too human! There's no mirror large enough to reflect the self-absorption of Yahweh. No revenge brutal enough to satisfy the god of Islam."

"It matters not what you sceptics say, it still remains a question of faith in the intrinsic goodness of God."

Shelley taps himself on the head impatiently with the base of his palm. He turns and pulls a copy of *Seniors Serenade* off a nearby shelf, flips through a few pages, stops, then begins to read:

Dear Natasha Konstanz:

The older I get, the more doubtful I become about there being a benign intelligence directing life on this planet, what with wars, bloodshed, robberies, and home invasions, earthquakes and tsunamis, mass murders, home-grown terrorism, the bombings in New York and elsewhere, disease, famine, and cervical cancer, to say nothing of Alzheimer's. Get the picture? Surely this is not all to test our faith? I'm beginning to lose my ability to believe

as much as my ability to touch my toes. What's a guy to do? What's a guy to do before oblivion sets in? Please advise.

Confused.

"That's funny, but it's sad," observes Gaye Godbout who sits with Joe Lebeau. "*Confused* is not that confused, it seems. At least he foresees a time when he won't remember a thing, and won't be confused about not remembering."

"And *that's* funny, but sad," Rhyle says.

"Bill, tell me," Tom Shelley says, waving the magazine. "What do you think Natasha's response to poor old Confused should be? (a) Trust. Trust that this is really serving some greater good. (b) Change your perceptions and change the world accordingly. (c) God works in mysterious ways. (d) Oh, the banality of evil, is it? Keep reaching for your toes, *Confused*, it beats worrying about something beyond your ability to understand or change."

"Choose," Joe Lebeau says, and guffaws. Gaye shakes her head while Tenets lowers his. And I can't help smiling, in spite of how I am feeling, at the silly look on Tom Shelley's face.

"Better to have asked a man of God than some cheap magazine floosy," Bill says.

"Because?"

"Because there is a divine plan. You just have to have faith in the divine creator."

"Have faith in this, Bill! Alzheimer's is a total denigration of human dignity, a backhanded gift from your benign creator. Why would your perfect god not create a perfect universe, one without totally destructive natural phenomena, plagues, and diseases that compromise or terminate human life? All life!"

"It is a perfect universe," Houston says, "simply because God, a perfect creator, brought it into being. 'He causes his sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the righteous *and* the unrighteous.'"

"To *rise* on," Tenets quickly puts in, "Matthew 5:45: 'causes his sun to *rise* on the evil and the good.' Can't you see, Tom, that in this, God's mercy and generosity are made manifest?"

"Right! Such generosity! So equitable! And *that* explains evil in the world, does it? All part of the grand plan, is it? Afflictions that strike the innocent and the guiltless, all God's will? Evil is perfectly acceptable because it's acceptable to your perfect god? Is that how it all shakes down?"

"I don't know why I come to The Compass," Houston says, heaving a great sigh. "All I get here besides tepid coffee is contradiction, argument, and abuse."

"Only when you argue against common sense in favour of the preposterous. Better you should stick to criticizing hockey commentators and NHL officiating than dabbling in theodicy."

"And what's that, Tom?" Joe Lebeau asks.

"Vindication of God's goodness despite evidence to the contrary. Or, to borrow from the poet Milton, justifying God's ways to man."

"Some philosophers argue that this is the best of all possible worlds," Gaye pipes in. "So Bill and Christopher are not alone in this regard."

"It may be that, and the only world possible, but not for the reasons *they* postulate. The world is as it is, and the universe is as it is with its incalculable distances, both totally indifferent to our concerns. By the way, Doc's coffee warrants no criticism, and coffee's not the real reason you two come here. You come here, both of you, on a regular basis to test your faith! On the other hand, old Terry here, he comes to drink the dark roast while hoping to substantiate his doubt."

Bill Houston looks to Christopher Tenets who looks as though he is about to say something, but turns away. As though suddenly inspired, Houston taps the tabletop with the knuckles of his right hand, and reaches for another rationalization.

"That's the essence of faith," he declares. "Pure faith. You hang on to your beliefs despite what the world, claiming irrefutable proof, holds as highly improbable, if not absolutely impossible. You hang on regardless of being termed stupid, superstitious, ignorant, obstinate, or perverse."

Then Houston looks to me with supplicating eyes and asks me what I think. I look out a window. I watch a small, curly-headed child down below the Compass deck running awkwardly

towards the extended hand of a teenage girl and conjure up the image of our little Brenda Verité at about the same age running ahead of me, and my letting her just barely win the race that she challenged me to, and Grace clapping and cheering her granddaughter on.

Truth is, I had not intended to get into the discussion, but by this point I can't hold back. Dread, anxiety, concern, fear, or maybe, finally, a sense of release from despair that arrives with the familiar taste of Rhyle's coffee. What exactly it is that motivates me I can't decide. Perhaps the sight of that small, curly-headed child running, perhaps the intuition that glorious disorder is operating beyond all our chatter in the guise of medical science. Maybe it's hearing once too often little Susan Felicité's squeaky voice ordering Killy-Jilly to get out from under her sister's vacant bed: Killy-Jilly, an imaginative but nasty character born of adult tears and uncertainty that has come to dominate the child's fretful play. I begin, drawing on reports from various attending physicians, Grace's log that chronicled daily events right from the get-go, but mostly personal observations of the miserable little being that our beloved Brenda Verité has been for the last three months of her life.

"Let me tell you what I know," I start, shaking my head, aware that my eyes have begun to water slightly, "let me tell you what these last few months have taught me. Let me tell you a thing or two about Guillain-Barré syndrome."

"Do, Terry. Do." This from Christopher Tenets, who, I believe, wants out of the limelight. He gives the nod to Bill Houston.

"Let me tell you about the physical and psychological suffering of an eight-year-old and the endless grief all her family has endured."

"Terry, I know about the Guillain-Barré syndrome," says Gaye Godbout our resident retired RN, "it's not very pleasant. A nephew back east was paralyzed with it."

"Good. Rein me in, Gaye, if I get carried away. Brenda Verité first complained of weakness and a weird aching feeling in her legs."

"Tingling sensations," Gaye adds.

"Exactly. Creepy skin, she called it. Said she felt little pinpricks everywhere and then in-

creased pain. Spread quickly, her arms and upper body. She lost all movement of her muscles. Guillain-Barré is like an autoimmune disease, you see."

"Under attack, nerves cannot signal efficiently," Gaye explains, "so muscles lose their ability to respond to the brain's commands."

"Is it contagious?" Joe Lebeau asks. "What causes it?"

"It's not contagious," I respond, having earlier asked the same question of those in the know. "Its causes are not actually ascertained."

"Any viral or bacterial infection?" Gaye asks. "Infection can be a contributing factor. Or vaccinations?"

"None. The doctors covered all that. In Vancouver."

"Why there?" Joe Lebeau wants to know.

"What's needed are sophisticated machines to keep the body functioning, once stricken. State-of-the-art stuff. Brenda Verité was put on a ventilator to assist with her breathing. That's why she was moved over to Vancouver, into a well-equipped intensive care unit."

"They watch for additional problems," Gaye says.

"Such as?" Tenets asks.

"Abnormal heartbeat, changes in blood pressure, pneumonia."

"As if loss of movement isn't enough," Houston says.

"When I saw her a week after the onset, Brenda Verité had no knee jerk reflexes at all. Not normal for a kid like her, not at all, and when -"

Admittedly, the desire to explain is largely emotional, an impulsive reaction not without resentment or the need to obliterate aggravating and decidedly contrarian points of view. On the other hand, my more rational side attempts to convey relevant information without being too jargonistic. Then that rush of emotion hits me again. Where I falter in my explanation to get into specific detail about the syndrome, Gaye Godbout does not. She takes over when she sees that I have hesitated, in fact, spilled coffee over myself in attempting to quell the lump in my throat when the image of Brenda Verité

lying helpless in her hospital bed arises in my imagination. Gaye proves very knowledgeable, and holds the attention of all, mine especially, because I have to hear rational explanations for all of it again in order to make sense of the least of it. She explains how in the GBS victim, the immune system starts to destroy the myelin sheath that surrounds the axons of many peripheral nerves, or even the axons themselves, the long thin extensions of nerve cells that carry signals. These symptoms can increase in intensity until certain muscles cannot be used at all.

"That's been the case with Brenda Verité!" I break in, and I can hear the anger in my voice, "Severe! Virtually paralyzed!"

"That's tragic, Terry!" Houston says.

At this juncture, in an attempt to recompose myself after the outburst, I try to name various treatments for the syndrome the doctors mentioned and are noted in Grace's log, the particulars of which I actually remember very little. And again Gaye Godbout intervenes. What I do remember about these treatments are the outcries of resistance and fear they registered among members of the Templeton family, those of Brenda Verité's paternal grandfather in particular.

"It's absolutely soul-destroying to witness an active, independent, responsible kid, through no fault of her own, be thrown into situation of complete dependence just to perform daily functions. Add in the impersonal machines throbbing all about her. I can still see her pleading little eyes."

"No doubt, psychological adjustment will be required," Doc Rhyle says. "And counseling if—"

"At this stage, the one in greatest need of counselling is Gabriel Templeton, her father. He's in denial. Confused about God's role in all of this. That his daughter could be reduced to being as helpless as a newborn."

"Will she recover?" Tenets asks.

"Please understand, everyone, there's no known cure for GBS. There's always a chance, however, that Brenda Verité will recover and be as active as she was before being stricken. It's day to day."

"The onset is sudden," Gaye says. "Recovery is long term. Unfortunately, relapses do occur."

"Must remain optimistic!" Houston says. "Have faith in a positive outcome."

"Hard to be optimistic when in that first week you're asked by a terrified little girl: 'Will I walk any more? Will I ever dance again?'"

"Be optimistic," Gaye insists. "My nephew recovered completely. Was back at it, months later, as though nothing had happened."

"There you go, Terry," Houston says, "a miraculous recovery!"

"Amen to that!" Tenets says. "God's will be done!"

"Not at all!" Tom Shelley breaks in, his head shaking from side to side. "No divine intervention, gentlemen, please, unless you honestly entertain the counter-argument, assuming a god is involved in the situation, which is absolutely not the case. The other half of the equation states that your divine intervention caused the problem. God's design, this Guillain-Barré syndrome? God's will that a little girl suffer so? To what end?"

Throughout the ordeal I heard talk of God's will from Gabriel and from other Templetons, and the whole sorry episode serving some higher purpose. The only purpose it seems to have served is to bring me finally to my senses. I pick up where Tom Shelley leaves off.

"Picture this, Bill, and you too, Christopher: One innocent little girl stricken with a life-threatening condition, certainly life-altering – a healthy, vibrant, active engaged kid, athletic, graceful, happy to be cart-wheeling through life, knocked back by a some insidious, unidentified virus, lying absolutely helpless with tubes now down her throat, and intravenous lines puncturing her small arms, and a respirator squeezing the breath of life into damaged lungs, lungs on the verge of collapse. A little kid, beloved of all her family, afflicted, violated, unable to speak a word, her eyes the only means of communicating, and not very well at that. Does all of this serve some greater purpose? I think not! The only purpose it serves, as far as I'm concerned, is to allow me to finally understand what was

intimated all along, all my adult life, and asserted emphatically by the likes of Doc Rhyle here and our lovable Doubting Thomas Shelley, and as you two know well, there are none so deaf as those who will not hear.”

“That’s from the Bible.”

“Is it really, Bill? But this is not. Your omnipotent, omniscient, all-embracing, good and loving god is not served by Brenda Verité’s suffering. If yes, I’d like to know how! Nor shall she be released from it by anything like divine intervention. What she endures is simply a disorder arising out of the seeming randomness of the evolutionary process that the cosmos contrived, one that brought us into being, and one that can take us out.”

“Amen to that!” says Tom Shelley.

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Back at my desk, awaiting Grace’s evening call, I flip distractedly through the pages of Steven Hawking’s *The Universe In A Nutshell* that Doc Rhyle handed me before I left The Compass. A nutshell indeed! A nutshell the size of my head! I set the book aside and I pick up the framed photograph of Brenda Verité as a toddler, taken by Grace when she and I were babysitting one New Year’s Eve. Little Brenda Verité is captured in her attempts to take first steps. She had athletic little legs, shaped perfectly, even then, but they were of little help to her at the time, like now. The scene then was hilarious. Not like now. I keep the photo close by these days for obvious reasons, the most significant one being to remind myself that it’s not all about me, old Terry Burke, angry yet, more so because of all the sentimentality.

After a long sip of whiskey, and photo put aside, I pick up my pen and begin writing, prompted by a vague recollection of some Zen-flavoured poem. Life is really so simple in spite of the complexities we tend to wrap it in: sunsets and storms, a cup of coffee, births, some of them ugly, deaths, some of them beautiful; all doubt, all angst, all concern, all encompassed by the wish that it were not so, all of it dissolving in view of a nine-month-old child – her blue-eyed curiosity about your wiggling fin-

gers, your ruse of a smile; she carries the past, your past with hers, into the present play of cereal hoops spread out on her highchair tray, like so many little wheels of fortune spinning off in random directions, so many hexagrams of possibility, glorious disorder in its infancy. At the point of my period, the phone rings. Grace at long last. She says she is returning home, and will need a pick-up in the morning. •

Reed Stirling lives in Cowichan Bay, British Columbia. His work has appeared in Maple Tree Literary Supplement, Nashwaak Review, Valley Voice, Out Of The Warm Land II and III, StepAway Magazine, PaperPlates, Senior Living, Green Silk Journal, Fickle Muses, Fieldstone Review, Ascent Aspirations, Filling Station, Hackwriters Magazine, The Danforth Review, Dis(s)ent In Words, and The Eloquent Atheist. Glorious Disorder is excerpted from Lighting The Lamp, a novel in progress.

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