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SACRED COMPASS—A REVIEW FROM THE DEEPER HUES OF THE LANDSCAPE

ELIZABETH CAZDEN

When Paul Anderson asked me to focus on the second half of Brent's book—the part that should start, “it was a dark and stormy night”—I thought, “Oh, good, *that* I know something about!” Clear discernment often eludes me; mostly I muddle through, making choices that look at the time like awfully close calls. I'm surely not the only one with a personal list of leadings-gone-awry. I'm a particular fan of what Brent refers to as proceeding as doors slam shut behind you and at all sides. So I tend to be skeptical about books that sound like it's a simple task—just look for God's path and follow it.

Brent Bill writes clearly: an under-appreciated craft! He also has a gift for taking disciplines and modes of discourse from our Quaker tradition and offering them to a much wider community, while staying rooted in the particularities of “how we do things around here.” I know I will loan out this book, and I want to see it on my meeting bookshelf next to Parker Palmer, Richard Foster, and Thomas Kelly.

On the other hand, I have some concerns. Consistent with his metaphor of a sacred compass, Brent uses “lost” as his metaphor of the dark times. Lost really means lacking information—crucial information about our current location and/or how to get to where we are supposed to be going. That ignorance is a very liberal (in theological terms) definition of evil—and the solution is always more information or education. Or, here, discernment.

Brent's advice in times of lost-ness carries the same tone as the first half of the book: reassuring, simple calm—too calm, perhaps, to be credible to those of us who are in the midst of unspeakable terrors or despair. Brent speaks of the confidence, even in the dark times, that you'll arrive safely at your destination, like a UPS package, even if the address is for the moment illegible.

Since Brent uses queries throughout the book, let me phrase my concerns in the form of queries.

1. HOW DOES THE COMPASS HELP YOU IN THE FACE OF ACTIVE FORMS OF EVIL?

What if you aren't exactly lost, you have your compass and map—but the path the compass tells you to take leads through thorny thickets, swamps, fiery lakes, or the places on the map that read, "There be dragons here"? Brent uses a story about a woman trapped by a series of doors that lock behind her in a church. But there was no danger in the church; worst case, she could have slept there safely overnight until someone came to open up in the morning. He also refers to Daniel in the lion's den, but only in a quick brush-by. We don't really feel the terror, the panic, the utter despair, of situations that seem not just lost, but threatening. Contrast this, for example, with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, where there is an active battle between the forces of good and evil, both in the outer world and in the heart of each character, and a deep uncertainty about which will prevail.

Brent also draws from Tom Fox's writings about his leading to go to Iraq and to stay there. We know, as Tom did not when he wrote those words, the gruesome death that ended that adventure. I was at Earlham School of Religion the year that Tom and his fellow CPaters were held hostage, and a number of the undergraduates from Baltimore Yearly Meeting knew and loved him well. I have always wondered whether during his captivity, and especially at the very end, when he must have known he would die, whether he kept his sense of having been led and called to that moment—or did he, like Jesus, cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Brent's treatment of Tom Fox seems too bland for the terror of what followed.

On September 11, 2001, I was in a meeting all morning. We had heard something before we began about a plane crashing into a building in New York, but we assumed it was like the one a couple of years ago where a small helicopter failed to make a turn and crashed into someone's living room. An accident, tragic and inconvenient to those directly affected, but not faith-threatening. By the time the meeting ended, the enormity of the events had become clear. This was not an accident; it was intentional and meticulously targeted. It was active evil, not negligence. I've wondered about the passengers (now considered heroes) on the fourth airplane, who came to understand all too well what they were up against—the drama in which they were "collateral damage" in someone else's gruesome agenda. They weren't lost; they knew pretty much what was happening and its likely

destination, and how few options they had. Where was God for them in those remaining minutes? So I need to ask Brent: where is God's direction in the face of active evil?

2. HOW DO YOU REMIND YOURSELF OF WHAT YOU NO LONGER BELIEVE, OR PERHAPS NEVER HAVE BELIEVED?

“[W]e are safe with God. As we find ourselves moving into unforeseen difficult times or situations,” Brent writes, “we need to remind ourselves that God is right—and trustworthy.” But in those dark times, sometimes no matter how much you repeat words like that, as a mantra, the reality of darkness is that you don't know that. Nothing in your experience makes the words real, and hollow words just increase the bitter taste in your mouth.

Those among us who have struggled with depression have particular difficulty bootstrapping hope. One can know intellectually, or read on a piece of paper, that it would be helpful to get dressed, wash the dishes, go outside, go for a walk, call a friend, do *something*. But when you are in that pea-soup fog of mind and spirit, it is almost impossible to take that first step. “Remind yourself that God is right and trustworthy” doesn't seem much more feasible. Sometimes the problem isn't lack of direction; it's lack of energy, faith, hope, or even the doubt that acting might improve the situation.

“Remind ourselves that God is right—and trustworthy.” How, I wonder, could one give that advice to families trapped in the transport trains en route to Auschwitz? To a parent whose child has just been killed, whether by bullets or grenades or an earthquake or a drunk driver? To refugees in Darfur, to people trapped in Gaza or in the Superdome in New Orleans after Katrina? To detainees in Guantanamo? To all the people all over the world who for one reason or another are wailing, at this moment, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and getting no answer?

Some years ago a woman in my meeting was dying, slowly, from an incurable brain tumor. She was far too young, with children still at home. One day she called me in deep distress. As we talked, it turned out she was tormented by the questions, “Why this? Why me? Why now?” What was really eating at her was that many years before, in college, she had had an abortion. Her Catholic family was never told. Now she wondered if the brain tumor was some sort of divine

punishment. I listened. Then I said, with a clarity that I rarely feel, “I don’t know much about God, but the God I know would never do that to a person.” We talked about her regrets, about how abortion looks and feels different when you’re eighteen than when you’re forty and have gestated and given birth to a new person from deep within your own body, about forgiving yourself for making the best decision at the time even if now you might go a different path. We never spoke of it again. I hope she found some comfort in my words. I hope that before she died she accepted the cancer as a tragic fact. I also hope that she gave up trying to make it fit into a scheme of “God’s plan” or as something right and just.

Brent has a paragraph about a time many years ago when, he says, “I stood in the doorway of my family’s spare bedroom, staring at the wasted body of my best friend who had blown his brains out with a revolver.” Pretty powerful stuff! But he seems to dismiss the resulting anguish as “pure emotion,” which one should work to overcome by hope and faith. He does not engage with the intellectual task—the theological task—of grappling with evil, sin, or whatever word you want to use to describe actions that seem entirely contrary to God’s will.

3. HOW DOES THE COMPASS HELP WHEN YOUR PROBLEM ISN’T LACK OF GUIDANCE, IT’S TOO MUCH GUIDANCE, PULLING YOU IN MULTIPLE CONFLICTING DIRECTIONS?

In Chapter 3, one of Brent’s signs for a true leading is that “Leadings never go against God’s teachings.” That begs the question: How do we discern what is truly “God’s teaching” rather than cultural baggage of our particular sub-tribe? Without (I hope) taking us into treacherous territory, I am thinking particularly of the current discernment and conflict among us over same-gender marriage. What if your leading, and perhaps that of your monthly meeting, puts you 180° at odds with your Yearly Meeting’s Book of Discipline and its interpretation of Scripture and with the commandment to honor your parents? Or what if your leading, your understanding of God’s truth, supported by your understanding of Scripture, appears to require you to condemn and disown your own flesh-and-blood child as evil, misguided, and dangerous? In our history as a Quaker community of faith, the most difficult discernment tasks have often come precisely where two of our most deeply held values come into conflict. Which takes precedence:

preserving love, a peaceable spirit, and unity among the brethren—or speaking with a prophetic voice (and a lamb’s bladder full of pokeberry juice, as Benjamin Lay did) against the outrage of holding human beings as slaves? Which takes precedence: the long-standing commitment to pacifism—or the call to defend one’s home and farm against marauding invaders? Which takes precedence: prudent stewardship of resources, especially those belonging to the meeting—or generous giving of our last shirt, our last cup of rice, to one of God’s needy children? Which takes precedence: Friends’ commitment to utter integrity in word and deed—or the opportunity to forge documents, dress someone in misleading costume, hide someone behind a false wall or false wagon bottom that will allow one more family to escape the horrors of war or enslavement?

More often than Friends like to think, it seems to me, truly courageous acts require being willing to go outside of the accepted moral code, and even to risk offending God as we understand him (or her, or them, or whatever). A friend tells of an experiment with crawling babies, where (if I have the details right) they are put on one side of a chasm that is covered with a pane of clear glass. Up to a certain age, they only see the chasm, and refuse to go. At some point they grasp the concept of invisible-but-solid, and will inch tentatively forward onto the glass surface. Perhaps, in Brent’s formulation, trusting the invisible glass surface is like trusting the invisible God. But sometimes you have to take a step first, not having any idea if there really is anything there to hold you up. Sometimes the safety net isn’t there, at least not in any sense that we can understand. If it is, it’s only in hindsight—when (if) you end up home, warm and safe, without permanent damage—that you can cautiously affirm that perhaps something outside yourself was there holding you up all along.

Perhaps I’m saying more here about my own lack of faith than about Brent’s book. Still, I’d like to see him—for the next book, maybe—write more about faith in the darker dark places, in which evil is more active and more intractable and the compass is broken and every fiber of one’s body is screaming in terror. Or maybe that’s not his calling, and someone else will have to write that one. Whatever the case, our understanding of discernment, and the compass leading to it, is deepened by considering the deeper hues of life’s perplexing landscapes.