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On Gems and Ashes

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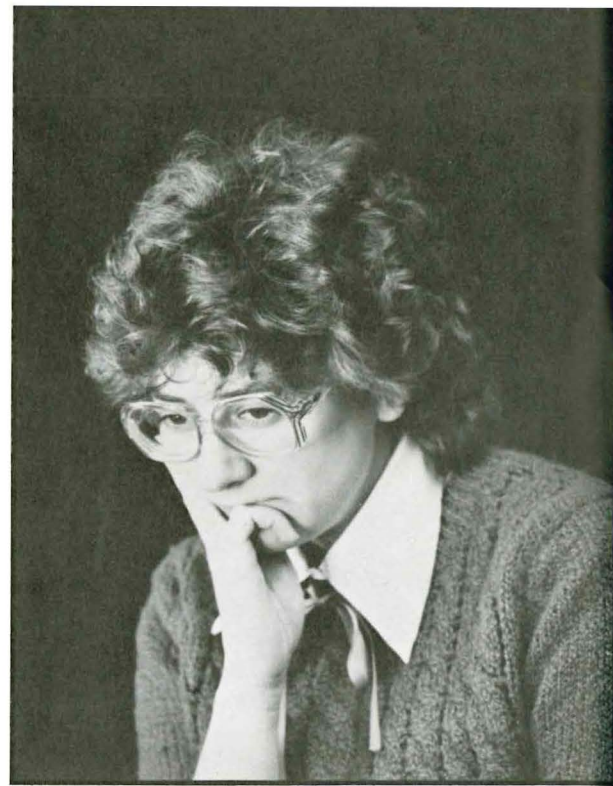


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ON GEMS AND ASHES

BY PAUL ANDERSON

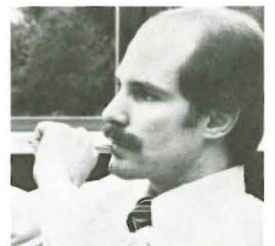
THE QUALITY of a person's life is determined less by the circumstances at hand than by the way one responds to those circumstances. Following Christ does not mean that one's lot in life will be more pleasant or opportune. It does mean that within the course of following Christ events take on a different perspective. We are able to respond to them in light of God's presence and purpose behind and beyond those events.

H. Richard Niebuhr has written a book* that is worthwhile if for no other reason than the following statement about this "response ability." "Responsibility affirms": says Niebuhr, "God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as you respond to His action."

As evangelical Friends we might feel a bit paranoid about the recent losses we have sustained. The untimely deaths among our most spiritually able and sensitive leadership leave us wondering "What could God possibly be doing among Friends at this time?" The recent deaths of Sheldon Louthan, David Leach, and Delmar Day have caused us all to pray about this a great deal, I'm sure. We know that the only way to purify precious metals and gems involves a forging process combining heat and pressure. However, knowing about the value of gems does not make the heat any cooler or the pressure any less. It may give us a new perspective, though, as to how we might respond to those events in life that are beyond our "whys." And it might give us the courage to press on even in light of what we cannot see at this time.

*H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York, Harper & Row, 1978) p. 126.

With shadows of tragedies over the entire Evangelical Friends Alliance and Friends everywhere after the deaths of well-known Friends leaders the past year, Paul Anderson, of the pastoral team at Reedwood, reflects on a Christian perspective of these events. His insights are helpful to us all.





This has been a watershed year for the community of faith at Reedwood Friends Church in Portland, Oregon. Not in the sense that we have a lot of new, innovative programs to talk about, but in the sense that we as a "family" have been through an unprecedented amount of suffering and hardship. Yet, only now, upon looking back over the year, does there emerge a handful of gems from the ashes.

One year ago last October, Don Green, the chairman of our pastoral team, received a severe wood-cutting injury from which he died some three weeks later. During the following weeks and months we learned some things about how God works in ways we'd never seen before. Here are some of those learnings.

1. Even amid tragedy *God works* all things together for good for those who love God and are given to God's purposes.

A myth has emerged among Christians who misunderstand Romans 8:28 to mean "all *things* work together for good to those who love God . . ." In the Greek the subject of the sentence is God. To say that *God* works all things together for good to those who love God is very different from saying, "There, there, now; things aren't as bad as they seem. They will work themselves out." This statement denies tragedy. However, the correct rendition refers to God's redemptive activity even in the midst of tragedy. We had held meetings for prayer several times a week for the three weeks following the accident. Then we received the news. Don, who had been in a coma for three weeks, had died.

As prepared as I was for the event, I was still shocked. I knew Don's love for God and also was aware of God's blessing in his life. Immediately I thought of Don's ministries: his ability to help a couple regain trust in each other during a counseling session, his outstanding ability to communicate an insightful message to an audience, his opportunity to introduce London Yearly Meeting to what a pastoral Friend was *really* like, and his role as a loving father and a faithful husband. All of these "good" ministries were now lost. How in the world could God bring something good out of this loss? Impossible! Don's death was a true

tragedy. No attempt to explain a "greater good" coming out of it made any sense at all. Only upon recognizing the event as a tragedy did the possibility of God's healing grace come into effect. Here's where the focus changed from things or circumstances to God, who works for the good even in the worst of circumstances.

As we began to focus on what God was doing we began to see several things happening. We became so much more aware of our dependence on God. Where many of us had looked to Don for spiritual leadership, now we were forced to look to Christ as our present leader and teacher. Another "working" of God was the way that we drew together to gain support from one another. This is not to say that Don's loss was not tragic. It is to say that no matter how tragic the loss, God is still present, working things together for good if we allow it.

2. Another learning was *the priority of worship* within the community of faith.

As the pastoral team gathered to plan the sort of worship services we would have, one theme began to emerge as paramount: worship. Each of us did some preparatory work on the theme of worship, and then we brought our findings together to discuss and pray about within the context of a team retreat.

The first change that came about was to strip the programmed meeting for worship of everything that did not add directly to worship. Therefore, we cut down on non-essential announcements and added to the singing time and open worship. We also believed that Christ did indeed want to be our leader in worship, and we determined for those assuming the facing bench to meet several days before the service to pray together and seek to discern the mind of Christ for that service. As a burden would emerge, we then planned around it so that every song, spoken word, and event led up to the conveyance of that theme.

This focusing was a very helpful exercise, but it didn't stop there. We soon began to develop a passion to see every meeting be a meeting primarily for worship. The business to be carried out in committees and the learning to be done in the classes would all rise out of the context of worship. All we do is either for the sake of worshiping God, or it arises out of that worship. Ministry that is most powerful arises out of ministering first to God in worship.

3. Another learning is the fact that *all who serve God* are in "the" ministry.

While Friends have always believed in the priesthood of all believers, we have too often denied that reality by our dependence on "released" ministers or even "weighty" Friends. During the months that followed Don's accident we had an entire host of volunteers who donated their time and their energies to help carry out the ministries of the meeting. All at once the ministry team had jumped from 4 to 40. The responsibility for ministry was now in the hands of the membership, where it had always belonged.

The team reinforced this philosophy by scheduling lay people to speak and to share the facing bench. This year

alone we have had at least 22 people share the pulpit on Sunday mornings. Not only has the community benefited from the rich diversity of perspectives, but several men and women have also gained valuable experience in vocal ministry. Some of them are even considering seeking recording. Thus, through this experience, while Don's ministry is no longer with us in the active sense, God's ministry continues. Yes, it even multiplies.

4. Another learning combines *the need for prayer with the need for precaution.*

We simply cannot pray too much for our leadership and for one another! We are in the midst of spiritual warfare, which must be fought with spiritual, not human, weapons. While God's ultimate victory is certain, the outcome of today's battles depends greatly on our involvement in "the Lamb's war." (See James Naylor.) Spiritual unpreparedness and inactivity are terrible reasons for the kingdom of God to suffer. We cannot predict or predetermine what the future will hold, but we must prepare ourselves and others for it. And the place to begin is *prayer*.

Our response ability to God is in dynamic tension with our responsibility to exercise wisdom and good judgment in the way we live our lives. We should be safety-conscious not only regarding our children, but regarding ourselves for the sake of our children. This adds cooperation to the ministry of those guardian angels who are already working overtime.

5. The last learning that I will offer at this time is the stark realization of how much we *need one another in order to grow spiritually.*

The church is like a caravan of pilgrims traveling toward the heavenly city. Each of us perceives the heavenly city in a distinct way, but our commonality is that of involvement in a common venture. For some reason God has not seen fit to give any one of us the entirety of truth, and in the discerning of God's truth, we are incomplete without one another. Even though we have received historical revelation through the law, the prophets, the Scriptures, and even Christ Himself, we still *need one another* in order to discern what the will of God is for us today.

We also need one another for mutual encouragement. We have seen at least a half dozen small groups develop over this last year, and I am convinced that it is in those groups that the power of God works most freely. Where else can there be the sincere confession of sin and the open sharing of needs? The small group is the place in which the grace of the Gospel has the potential of flowing most freely. Maybe Jesus wasn't understating Himself when He said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst."

The small group may be the closest thing Friends have to a sacrament. Why? Because Christ is most present in those whom He indwells, and it is through the personal support available within small groups that the greatest potential for growth lies.

The Sunday following the accident would have completed a sermon series on the "one another" passages of the New Testament. Little did Don know how much that theme would be developed in the year ahead. By the way, for that particular morning we left the sermon time open and listed as the bringer of the message "the congregation." Perhaps this was prophetic about the ministry that would follow.

Looking back, I am deeply grateful for God's continued healing and the support we have sensed from so many. Perhaps in the sharing of these few observations, the healing is continued one step further. Or, maybe the importance of sharing these learnings lies in a fresh glimpse at those ashes that wasn't available until now. Maybe there are a few more gems there than we'd expected. ☐

The World Is Waiting

O God of heaven
and of earth below,
the world is waiting—
it is waiting, now,
like willows in the snow—
for some clear sign,
some indication how
the winds will blow.
What do these dark clouds
signify? Tell us now.

O God of heaven
and of earth below,
the world is hoping—
it is hoping, now,
like willow buds in snow—
for Your sun to shine,
for changes that allow
Christ's love to grow.
Can there be peace,
not war. O tell us how!

—Arthur O. Roberts
November, 1983