

FATIGUE AND THE SPIRIT

Thomas G. Long
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

"No good times, no bad times,
There's no times at all,
Just The New York Times . . ."
--Paul Simon

The Cultural Centrifuge: Fatigue and Weariness

To point out that people in our culture experience fatigue is to come perilously close to discovering the obvious. Mortgage bankers gloving up for one more round with the prime rate, the vacant expressions of shoppers at the A&P checkout, middle-class taxpayers shifting their footing under the load, exhausted schoolteachers bracing for another click of the ratchet in the classroom, and more--the evidence for societal fatigue is so clear and widespread that, presumably, even the most callow sociologist could make an open and shut case for it.

To make that case too facilely and superficially, however, would be to risk blurring an important distinction, the one which can be made between fatigue and weariness. To maintain that ours is a fatigued society is to claim something more--and something more important--than the mere assertion that people today are weary: weary of political and economic uncertainties, weary of the pressures of living. Weariness and fatigue cannot be equated, and fatigue is by far the more profound and hazardous malady. Weariness is simply the temporary loss of the strength sufficient to accomplish a task. Fatigue is much closer to despair in that it involves the loss not merely of the strength to do a task, but also of the will to do it. To be weary is to have lost energy; to be fatigued is to have lost purpose.⁽¹⁾ To be weary is to need a few innings' rest; to be fatigued is to be in danger of forfeiting the game. To be battle-weary is to be too tired to fight; to be battle-fatigued is to be indifferent to the war. To be weary is to need a break before resuming the quest; to be fatigued is to need a new quest altogether. To be weary is to desire recreation; to be fatigued is to be desperate for re-creation. The weary rub their eyes to clear their sight; the fatigued have lost their vision. The linguistic ancestor of "weariness" is a Greek work meaning "to faint"; fatigue is the semantic grandchild of a Latin noun signifying "hunger." The weary faint under heavy loads; the fatigued hunger to find meaning in carrying the load at all.

In light of this distinction, there are signs in our society not merely of weariness but also of genuine fatigue, not just a dissipation of social and personal energy, but a loss of that amalgam of shared heritage, common goals, clear sense of what is to be valued and what it means to count for something, and intense yearning for a future which is both attainable and desirable, which forms the critical mass essential for empowering a culture and its people to live with direction and vigor. In some ways our fatigue is made more visible by our attempts to hide it. Merrill Lynch's cheer-leading jingle about being "bullish on America" even as OPEC tightens the noose and Chrysler lies in intensive care on a respirator, the Charlie Daniels'

band redneck-rocking and boasting that "we're walking real proud and we're talking real loud in America again" even as the limits of our global power become more apparent each day, the church growth movement's drive toward vanilla milkshake homogeneity in the face of the Baskin-Robbins pluralism of American ethnic and religious life--at best, these are whistling in the dark; at worst, vengeful attempts to repress the truth that fundamental fatigue is dampening the engines of society's vital institutions.

In our culture, where optimism is close to being the state religion, and diligence is its sacrament, honest-to-God fatigue is, if not the unpardonable sin, at least the unmentionable one. Former President Carter discovered something about the need to mask fatigue in the overwhelmingly negative reaction to his now-famous speech in which he observed that the American people were beset by a "malaise." This disclosure evidently exposed a raw nerve of the body politic, for, though the speech was among Carter's more candid public statements, it was also part of his undoing. Carter's diagnostic term was "malaise," but it could just as well have been "fatigue," and as Roy Blount, Jr. noted in his "southern-fried" book, Crackers:

Of course we got malaise. Anybody who reads knows that. (Or, anybody who reads has it.) But the President is not supposed to say so. . . The President is supposed to be in charge. Having a President tell us we got malaise is like having a doctor who says, "Gosh, you feel terrible."(2)

Carter's mistake was not that he caused our malaise, our fatigue--societal fatigue transcends any one political figure, transcends even politics itself--but that he told us about it and then refused, or seemed unable, to make it go away.

Fatigue is the staph infection of a society concerned with rectitude; it prospers in those places where the most stringent antiseptic precautions have been taken to prevent contamination of society's moral reserves. "America," observed historian John Brooks, "has an old habit of regretting a dream just lost and resolving to capture it next time."(3) In other words, we may have missed the brass ring of freedom, contentment, and prosperity on the last turn of the carrousel, but nothing will keep us from grasping it this time by. Nothing, that is, except being too fatigued to reach. A case could be made, of course, that much of our fatigue is due to the fact that societal forces keep moving the ring farther and farther from our grasp. A wistful illustration of this can be found in the naively hopeful vision of the future evoked for a depression-battered America in the 1939 New York World's Fair. William Manchester remembers that . . .

The hit of the fair was GM's Futurama, which drew 28,000 paying customers a day, each of whom sat on a conveyor belt armchair for fifteen minutes, listening to a recorded explanation while he observed Norman Bel Geddes's notion of what the American landscape would be like in 1960. Bel Geddes's prescience was less than twenty-twenty. He predicted tall, tanned, vigorous people spending most of their time having fun. (There was no mention of black people; blacks, apparently, would have ceased to exist.) Possessions would bore Americans in his 1960, so there weren't many in the Futurama. The countryside was criss-crossed by fat highways. Cars were air-conditioned and cost \$200. Most of the land was forested. The luckiest Americans dwelt in one-factory villages producing a single industrial item and growing their own food.

Inventors and engineers would use a little atomic energy, but their chief source of power would be liquid air. Tremendous telescopes permitted men to see the moon a hundred times more clearly. Cancer would be cured; the average life span was seventy-five years. Houses were light and disposable; when you tired of one you threw it away. (Where you threw it was unmentioned.) Most people had high school educations. Every village had an airport, with elevators taking aircraft to and from underground hangars. Office buildings and apartment condominiums were 1,500 feet high and were bordered by fourteen-lane turnpikes.(4)

Almost every dimension of modern American urban life stands, of course, in striking contradiction to Bel Geddes' ingenuous vision, but perhaps none more ironic than the fact that the expected opening day crowd at the 1964 New York World's Fair (four years after the target date for fulfilling Bel Geddes's fantasy) was diminished by over sixty percent because of a traffic snarl caused by a civil rights protest engineered by James Farmer and CORE.(5)

There is, however, increasing evidence that the basic cause of fatigue in modern life is not simply that cultural forces have emerged which render the securing of social and personal goals more difficult, pushing the ring farther from our grasp, but rather that the process of modernity itself has exposed those goals to be less coherent than we had thought, their ambiguities more plain, their desirability less certain, their viability doubtful. John Murray Cuddihy, in The Ordeal of Civility, points out that "modernization," by definition and by experience, is "differentiation"; that is, "the power to make distinctions between previously fused--confused--ideas, values, variables, concepts."(6) If a community is to have the durable and replenishable energy to live purposefully--that is, to avoid fatigue--then it must be impelled by some shared vision which gives meaning to its efforts, serves to calibrate its values, organizes its common life. If Cuddihy is correct, it is precisely this notion of a "fused" vision, a framework of meaning, which modernization, with its concomitant differentiation, undermines. Modernization has not served as a lens focusing the light of our culture's vision to a white heat, but rather as a prism, refracting it into different and contrasting hues and finally diffusing its energy:

Differentiation is the cutting edge of the modernization process, sundering cruelly what tradition has joined. It splits ownership from control . . . it separates church from state . . . ethnicity from religion. . . . Differentiation slices through ancient primordial ties and identities, leaving crisis and "wholeness-hunger" in its wake. Differentiation divorces ends from means . . . nuclear from extended families. It frees poetry from painting, and painting from representation. Literary modernism differentiates the medium from the message.(7)

Playwright, Arthur Miller, observing the fragmentation of modern life, commented on how this is experienced on the personal level:

People no longer seem to know why they are alive; existence is simply a string of near-experiences marked off by periods of stupefying spiritual and psychological stasis, and the good life is basically an amused one.(8)

In the face of this, people struggle valiantly, but with inevitable fatigue, singlehandedly to forge some workable synthesis of the disparate elements of their lives, one which will at least serve to get them out of bed in the morning--in short, to "get their act together." Sometimes this takes the form of a search for some person, group, or genre of experience--activism, therapy, leisure, drugs, career--which can serve, temporarily at least, as an organizing center around which life can be oriented. Paul Wazursky, the cinematic director of Willie and Phil and Bob, Carol, Ted, and Alice, remarked that "If you tell an American that there's a guy who sells shoes but is in fact the greatest masseur in the world, and not only that, but when he touches the top of your head with his fingers you feel great for two days, I'll find you some people who will go to this guy, and not just in California." (9)

As this article is being completed, the radio news reports that some fans of ex-Beatle John Lennon are still so grief-stricken, now many days after his death, that social agencies in New York are forming grief therapy groups to handle the reaction. My initial response is to refuse to take this seriously, to find it somehow excessive and silly, and to ask, For whom or for what do these people really grieve? Few, if any, of these mourners actually knew Lennon, and their grief is certainly not over the loss of any personal relationship in the usual sense of that phrase. There is evidently more here than meets the eye. Some observers of culture maintain that these people grieve for a lost adolescence, Lennon's death (like the deaths of Elvis, Glenn Miller, and Valentino for other generations), constituting an unwelcome reminder of their own fading youth and the adult responsibilities around and before them. But, on reflection, probably their sense of loss is more complex than that. Lennon, like many other symbolic figures in our own culture, not only represented and evoked an era formative for many people, he also, in a way, organized it. That is to say, Lennon's life (more in the mythical than in the actual sense) provided the frame into which the bewildering and seemingly contradictory elements of our recent past could be inserted. Fame and privacy, peace and war, commitment and disengagement, divorce and marriage, group needs and individuality, wealth and concern for the poor, growing older and holding on to youthful ideals--all of these and more were held, if not in balance, at least in manageable tension, in Lennon. His life was, for some, like the centerpiece of a jigsaw puzzle, the one with a touch of all the puzzle colors, a hint of all the designs, around which the other pieces could be fit. His death, then, for some, is not merely the loss of a cultural idol, or even of adolescence; it is the loss of the sense of a structured and thus meaningful past, another reminder that "things fall apart--the center cannot hold." Those who deeply mourn Lennon's death--like all who grieve--feel that they have lost not only a person but also one of the means by which they arranged the otherwise random and nonsensical experiences of their own lives. To lose a coherent understanding of one's past is also to lose hope for a meaningful future, to become, in a sense, fatigued. "I just don't know how I can go on" is the lament of the grief-stricken.

The point here is not to make too much out of a single moment in recent cultural experience, but rather to see this as but one example of the general truth that people in our time are hungry for the very thing that the process of modernity, by definition, sabotages: some reasonably coherent way to organize their experience and to determine its depths, some unified view of life which can give integrity to their labors and (to borrow Lewis Sherrill's terms) turn their treadmills into pilgrimages. Without this, people become more than weary; they become fatigued. Or, to put it more traditionally, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Dimmed Vision: Fatigue and Faithlessness

All of this is, of course, a deeply theological matter, since fatigue and faithlessness (in the descriptive sense) are intimately related. It is precisely the claim of Christian faith to be, as Gordon Kaufman puts it, "in fact the basic stance or posture of the self (which) orients all thought and action."⁽¹⁰⁾ Christian faith must also navigate, though, in the maelstrom of modernity, and it is interesting to note that at least two recently-published theological works have chosen for the starting point of their discussions, not the usual treatment of the nature of revelation or the problem of God-language, but rather the fatiguing struggle between modernity and faith.

The first of these, Thomas C. Oden's Agenda for Theology⁽¹¹⁾ is, in some ways, an intimately personal journal recounting how Oden, as "movement theologian," became disillusioned with the bandwagon style of doing theology. "Modernity" itself is clearly the villain for Oden, and he uses the term "in the same sense that many Frenchmen speak of modernite with a wave of the hand and upturned eyes, as something between 'gauche' and 'compulsive up-to-dateness.'"⁽¹²⁾ As the forces of modernity shatter the traditional synthesis, the only recourse for modern theologians is to chase after this or that piece of the wreckage--whatever seems in vogue. Oden sees as hopeful the fact that many of his young theological students are not only fatigued by modernity--they are also tired of it. "They have had a belly full of the hyped claims of modern therapies and political messianism to make all things right."⁽¹³⁾ The remedy, according to these students--and Oden too--is nothing less than a resistance movement formed around the tenets of classical Christianity:

They are fascinated--and often passionately moved--by the primitive language of the apostolic tradition and the church fathers, undiluted by our contemporary efforts to soften it or make it easier or package it for smaller challenge but greater acceptability. . . . They want nothing less than the substance of the faith of the apostles and martyrs without too much interference from those who doubt they are tough enough to take it straight.⁽¹⁴⁾

Oden hears this as a call to arms and spends the remainder of his book advocating a theological stance he calls "post modern orthodoxy"--in essence a full-circle return to "the Christian consensus of the first millenium."⁽¹⁵⁾ Oden--the repentant modernist--even reports with pride and reassurance on a dream of his in which he views his own tombstone in the New Haven Cemetery. On it is inscribed, "He made no new contribution to theology (!)."⁽¹⁶⁾

The second book the more finely-tuned, more radical, and, in my view, the more persuasive of the two--is Peter Berger's The Heretical Imperative.⁽¹⁷⁾ Berger takes a phenomenological, and thus less jaundiced, view of modernity than does Oden, though he is just as impressed by modernity's power to differentiate, to pluralize institutions, and "to carry in its wake fragmentation and ipso facto a weakening of every conceivable belief and value dependent upon social support."⁽¹⁸⁾ Put more simply and in categories we have used before, modernity undermines the consensus of a stable society.

Stable societies avoid fatigue by providing firm and ready-made answers to the intuitive philosophical and religious questions of their members. "The answers can be given," claims Berger, "in a tone of great assurance. . . . 'This is what the world is

like; it is this and no other; it could not be any different; so stop asking silly questions."(19)

Those who accept these answers can do so spontaneously, unreflectively, and, thus, tirelessly. Those who choose otherwise become "heretics," a term which Berger reminds us comes from the Greek verb hairen, "to choose." The impact of modernity is that, by fracturing the cultural consensus, it compels all of us to attempt to forge our own sense of a meaningful order, to choose among a bewildering array of meaning constructs. As Berger puts it, "For premodern man, heresy is a possibility--usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity."(20)

According to Berger, this situation is even more complex in the sphere of religious conviction since modernity not only fatigues by demanding choice, its secular bias whittles away at the roots of religious consciousness. People of religious faith are, in effect, in a high stakes poker game with the dominant modern and secular worldview, and the house seems to have the odds. So, an elaborate and lengthy process of bargaining takes place:

. . . There will be compromises. Certain outward manifestations of piety may be surrendered, in the hope that an irreducible core (of faith) can be held on to. . . . Some traditional propositions will be abandoned, others adhered to. For example, Jesus' miracle of the loaves and fishes will be given up . . . but not the miracle of the resurrection. Or it will be conceded that Paul was quite wrong in his views on women or on slavery--but not on the justification of sinners. And so on and so forth. . . . There is a built in problem in this bargaining process--namely, that secularity, like all dominant worldviews, is very hungry, so that it is difficult to call a halt to the give-aways.(21)

Berger suggests three possible responses for the religious community to the dilemma of modernity. The first, called the "deductive possibility," is simply to reassert and to insist upon the authority of a religious tradition regardless of the cultural challenge. (Would Berger place Oden here? Would Oden be pleased to be here?) The problem with such "leaps of faith," according to Berger, is that they finally "appear as acts of premature closure--and perhaps, of a less heroic faith than one first thought."(22)

The second option, no more attractive to Berger, is "the reductive possibility," a reinterpretation of the religious tradition in the categories of modern secularity. "The major disadvantage," he claims, "is that the tradition, with all its religious contents, tends to disappear or dissolve in the process of secularizing translation."(23)

The third option, and Berger's own choice, is the "inductive possibility," which involves turning "to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations"(24) and moving from the religious tradition back to uncover those human experiences which led to the formation of the tradition in the first place. This possibility avoids the self-liquidating tendency of the reductive option and the perilous dogmatism of the deductive option in favor of an attempt to "grasp the core contents" of basic religious experience.(25)

Fusion Energy: Fatigue and the Spirit

At the risk of blurring Berger's crisp argument, I hear him encouraging, in the

Christian tradition, at least, a new and fresh openness to what we have called, in familiar theological language, the work of the Holy Spirit. To combat the fatigue of modernity, we need to re-examine a key insight of the faith, namely that experiences of the Holy are not confined to mystics, "charismatics," and other "religious virtuosi," but, to the contrary, are available to "ordinary" people as well. There is great pressure in the modern world, of course, "because of the delegitimation of the experience by the prevailing worldview (to) hide or deny it,"(26) but to repress such experience altogether is to deny the central fact of the religious life and to prepare the soil for fatigue.

The reality and immediacy of the experience of the Holy is a recurrent theme in the work of Flannery O'Connor. In her story, "The River,"(27) the Reverend Bevel Summers is leading a riverside baptism service, and it is the river itself which serves as a metaphor for the experience of the Holy in the midst of life. Many of the people gathered by the river have come to be healed of illnesses, but Summers, standing in the river, rejects their selfish concern, "If you ain't come for Jesus, you ain't come for me. If you just come to see can you leave your pain in the river, you ain't come for Jesus. You can't leave your pain in the river. . . . I never told nobody that."(28)

Harry Ashfield, the young son of sophisticated but purposeless parents, has been brought to the service by Mrs. Cronnin, his babysitter, and suddenly--half willingly, half unwillingly--he is thrust into Summer's arms to be baptized:

"Have you ever been Baptized?" the preacher asked.

"What's that?" he murmured.

"If I Baptize you," the preacher said, "you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?"

"Yes," the child said.

"You won't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count."(29)

Commenting on this story, John May remarked, "And the reason why the baptized Harry counts is precisely because the atmosphere of belief provided by Mrs. Cronnin and The Reverend Bevel Summers offers a total vision of life. . . . One counts, the story announces, where concern is ultimate."(30)

We do not wish to minimize, of course, the difficulties inherent in identifying, testing and celebrating experiences of the Spirit, or even the dangers of such experiences themselves, but rather to affirm, with Berger, "that the experience of the supernatural opens up the vista of a cohesive and comprehensive world," the lack of which, we have argued, is precisely the cause of fatigue. Perhaps the way to begin is by taking more seriously, in the liturgy and common life of the Church, what Berger would term "experiences of reality-rupture," such as . . .

. . . "Since my mid-thirties I have developed a sense of humor that makes me see life in a very different way"; or "Life has never been the same for me since the death of my mother." Moreover, there are different avenues by which an individual arrives at experiences of reality-rupture. Some individuals try to get there through deliberate efforts--by taking drugs, for example, or by cultivating certain types of aesthetic experience, or even by embarking on a physical adventure (climbing Mount Everest, say) with the express purpose of changing one's sense of

life. Other experiences of reality-rupture are involuntary. Experiences of illness or death are rarely sought after, but the development of a sense of humor in mid-life may take one by surprise, too. What all these experiences have in common is that they open up realities which are, literally, "beyond this world." . . .(31)

Recent studies have shown that a large proportion of the people in our culture have indeed had such "reality-rupture" experiences, and yet many are reluctant to report them because of a fear of ridicule, or of being labeled "insane." Surely, many of these experiences are--and should be seen as--the result of neurosis or an undigested pizza, but to place a priori all such moments of mystery into a psychological waste bin is, in effect, to relativize, or even to deny, the presence of the Holy Spirit. Surely there is some truth in Richard John Neuhaus's statement:

The therapeutic mind set must be challenged in a Christian community that calls people to believe that they are instruments of divine purpose . . . that the air we breathe is shared by angels and archangels. . . . As ministers we might worry when a good church member claims that she saw three angels last night and describes their appearance in detail. But we should be much more worried about the member who denies the very possibility of that having happened.(32)

For the mainstream Christian community to become less suspicious of, more responsive to, the immediate, often naive, religious experiences of people is only a place to begin; but, it is a place to begin. To do so would be to testify to the truth that the only integrating vision of life which can overcome fatigue, the still point in a thrashing world, is not to be found in temporary systems and structures, even those called theology or Church, but rather in the One who brings order and gives peace.

If the Christian community can provide the locus for the respecting and telling of people's "beyond this world" experiences, for the exploration of the ways in which they point beyond themselves to the unity of all things in Christ, and if the Christian community can understand its own theological affirmations to be the expression in symbols and stories of similar encounters with the Spirit, then the Church will be the place where people can receive the vision which re-creates and can hear once again the voice of the Lord saying, "Come unto me all you who labor and are fatigued, and I will give you rest."(33)

(1) See André Sarradon, "The Treatment of Fatigue" in Paul Tournier (ed.), Fatigue in Modern Society (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1965), p. 37.

(2) Roy Blount, Jr., Crackers (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 258.

(3) John Brooks as quoted in William Manchester, The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 1297.

(4) Manchester, p. 199.

(5) *Ibid.*, pp. 1037-8.

(6) John Murray Cuddihy, The Ordeal of Civility (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 11.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 10.

(8) Arthur Miller, "The Bored and the Violent," Harper's Magazine, vol. 225, no. 1350 (Nov., 1962. p. 51.

- (9) Paul Mazursky in Henry Bromwell, "A Couple of Three," Atlantic Monthly, vol. 246, no. 3 (September, 1980), p. 105.
- (10) Gordon D. Kaufman, Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 21.
- (11) Thomas C. Oden, Agenda for Theology (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).
- (12) Ibid., p. 27.
- (13) Ibid., p. 3.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Ibid., p. 34.
- (16) Ibid., p. 11.
- (17) Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1979).
- (18) Ibid., p. 19.
- (19) Ibid., p. 21.
- (20) Ibid., p. 28.
- (21) Ibid., pp. 100-101.
- (22) Ibid., p. 94.
- (23) Ibid., p. 62.
- (24) Ibid.
- (25) Ibid., p. 64.
- (26) Ibid., pp. 54-55.
- (27) Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971), pp. 157-174.
- (28) Ibid., p. 165.
- (29) Ibid., p. 168.
- (30) John R. May, The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), pp. 64-5.
- (31) Berger, pp. 40-41.
- (32) Richard John Neuhaus, Freedom for Ministry (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 73-4.
- (33) The French version renders this "fatigued."