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Summer mysteries born of earth, air, water and fire

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jul. 15, 2013 Bulletins from the Human Side

The elements thought by the early philosophers to have exploded out of the very eye of the hurricane of creation that scattered the galaxies across the cosmos -- earth, air, water and fire -- turned, as uncontrollable storms do, to wail and burn and wash over us all, leaving us, as religious mystery does, blinded by its light and unable to hurl even a word into the maw of its enveloping force.

The week began in fire kindled by a stroke of lightning and spread by a wind that, according to *The New York Times*, listed as it would, beyond the calculation of any man or machine, to close off escape for the brave young men -- so like your sons, or nephews, or any and all of the good, clear-eyed boys you have ever known -- ready to lay down their lives that seemed to us at their beginning but that were already fully lived in the Mystery into which they had long been called: to save the lives of others.

The week ended in the tragic crash of a Korean airliner grasped at the last moment by a devil's hand of earth jutting out of the waters of San Francisco Bay, taking it down and devouring it in flame struck from the blazing tinder of its twin Mystery in Arizona.

These terrible events confront us with questions that are taunts from unbelievers who see every disaster as an indictment of a supposed loving God. They are summonses to believers not to fear what they cannot explain about the Mystery that mixes love and loss into every moment of human existence.

Most of the gallant firefighters, according to their families, had felt a "calling," as John and Jesus did in the desert, to fulfill their callings at whatever cost. So these "hotshots," as they playfully called themselves, revealed the real measure of manhood in a tattoo- and testosterone-obsessed culture as they bravely entered the very belly of the beast of fire to break and tame it before it ravaged the land and their loved ones, left like the women beneath the cross wrapped in the silence of the sorrow that is always a sign of true Mystery.

In San Francisco, we are plunged into the waters that, as in so many aspects of religious Mystery, prompt us to run and re-run the last frames of the revelation to see if some intervention might still be made to close the gap of open water that separated the plane from the safety of a routine landing. But water, that symbol of the ineffable and of the depths of our beings, is a familiar setting for Mystery.

That is another hallmark of genuine religious Mystery: Had we acted, had *someone* acted, say, in those last few seconds to alert the Titanic crew to the already unsheathed ice dagger about to slash its hull or to push Lee Harvey Oswald's arm so that his shots went as wild as he was, that everything would have worked out differently and no blackened trees or scorched runway would be left as the traces of the Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans (the great and enfolding mystery) that, rather than a catechism of teachings and practices, is the basic religious experience for all humans.

One of the characteristics of religious Mystery is that it remains unexplained, that, as we learn in a study of its language roots, there is, as in the Greek "musterion," something "secret" about it, something unrevealed, some core that we will never penetrate.

Following its building block, "muein," we learn that the Mystery "initiates" us into something we have not known before. So "muein" also means "to close the eyes and the mouth," for that is how something is kept secret. It also describes how religious Mystery leaves us: unable to get the event into focus and unable to say anything that describes it or our reactions fully. "Mu," we learn further, fittingly appears in the word "mumble," for that is what our speech is reduced to by genuine religious Mystery. The word "mum," to keep silent, arises from the same root and explains why servicemen who have experienced war in all its stunning Mystery often never talk about it afterward.

"Mu" appears again in "mute", one who cannot speak of what he or she has experienced. That is where most of us find ourselves after the week in which we experienced religious Mysteries born only a few days apart. Now we understand why some of the prophets could only mumble and why great saints cannot tell us what they have learned in their close encounters with Mystery. We find ourselves unable to speak or even to tell ourselves what has happened. There will be investigations and findings for both the desert fire and the bayfront plane crash, and these will tell us more about what happened. But they cannot tell us anymore about the secret, the ineffable, the unexplained that leave us speechless and blind and that tell us we have entered into the very depths of the Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans of life itself.

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