

NCR's calling to report the eternal in time

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | May. 1, 2014 | Bulletins from the Human Side

April is, as T.S. Eliot tells us, is "the cruelest month." Winter may be breathing hard, but even an exhausted April can still whiten the land overnight while May, still shedding the last soot-flecked mounds of holdout snow, can ask us to dance and then as suddenly back away.

Even at its end, we feel April's ice breaking up in our depths and find ourselves plunged like Jonah into the mystery-charged waters that symbolize all that lies full fathom five within us, unnamed and just beyond our grasp. We are carried by the current of the ineffable in April's tide of spiritual revelation.

In April, God speaks to us in the seas whose rhythmic murmuring fills our ears from a long way off. It was in April that the Titanic went down into the deep to lie like a slasher's victim, bleeding the "debris field" of its passengers' personal possessions, the everyday things of everyman and everywoman, across the ocean's floor.

Despite all the movies and deep-water searches, our imagination cannot clear its screen of the Titanic. These items ping, as the black box of Malaysian Flight 370 was thought to have done all through this now-ended month, the fading human pulse of that mystery-impounded aircraft. So, too, the final messages of the trapped passengers on the South Korean ferry claimed by the ocean this April speak as the Titanic does of how much, a hundred years apart in time, we are like these men and women caught in the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the overwhelming and gripping Mystery of our existence.

These simple possessions from the Titanic, the pinging from Flight 370, the cellphone calls to loved ones from the South Korean ferry: These are relics that are truer than the splintered bones of so-called saints, more of them manmade than heaven sent, that have been proffered like indulgences on sale across the history of Christendom. How much truer are these messages from the deep than the bits and pieces left over from ecclesiastical autopsies that cram the kitchen drawer of official religion.

We are drawn to the Titanic's human traces because the embrace of the deep has broken the grip of time on these humans, investing these possessions and signals with the eternal. These razors and pens, rings and bracelets, these sounds and messages have been made transparent, as Joseph Campbell expresses it, to transcendence, so that they reveal to us the humanity and the inexhaustible mysteries of time and loss.

These witnesses in the waters are not like the relics that have been exchanged like a strange coinage of uncertain value, these shards of made-up history that are so starkly different from the simple signals that make history because they are so simply and profoundly human. Most ecclesiastical relics are fixed in time at the moment of their manufacture. That is why they are offered for veneration in casings that resemble pocket watches. They have lost their claim to mystery because they are so clearly the products of time.

When leaders do not listen carefully to the imperfect world -- the world as it is rather than the world as we would like it to be -- they dismiss it as secularized or, as Pope Benedict XVI (perhaps expressing his professorial uneasiness at the untidy and incomplete homework the world placed on his desk every morning) bemoaned, as plagued with "spiritual desertification."

But every day, the world pings sacramentally from its murky depths, for it is, as Pope Paul VI wrote, "imbued with the sacred." What moves us about the Malaysian flight is not the airplane any more than it is the capsized ferryboat or the hull of the Titanic broken open in the depths a century and half a world away.

This sacramental richness of ordinary people can be observed in spaces that we would not ordinarily think of as sacramental settings, in the often-crowded places that social critics, who often miss the wonder spread around them, dismiss as "anonymous," "impersonal" and "commercial."

You find this sacramental revelation in unexpected places; for example, in the torrent of coded messages that clogged the air during the desperate battles of World War II. Jerry Roberts, who died recently at 93 and was the last surviving member of the British code-breaking team, said they were able to crack the near-foolproof German Enigma cipher because of the human errors of the German operators in sending the same message twice in a row, giving the Bletchley Park team the first key to understanding the transmissions.

The second error was even more human, as the German operators could not help but express themselves, like the one who merely signaled of the terrible cold that located him in Russia, or the other who described the murderous heat, identifying Italy as his base. It was not uncommon, Roberts told a group in 2006, for them to hear, amid the torrent of signals about battles and troop movements, a simple but profound human cry: "I'm so lonely."

As we conclude these reflections, we may well understand and support the *National Catholic Reporter* as it pursues its calling of searching for the sacramental in the pings of what is sacred in the vast, noisy tangle of human experience. For a long time, for example, almost alone the newspaper picked up what other media did not hear, the first anguished cries that would become a biblical wailing of Rachel's children, the victims of the anti-sacrament of the clergy sex abuse scandal. This attunement to the eternal has been the distinguishing mark of this newspaper.

Out of great tragedies, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center, the disappearance of Flight 370, or the overturning of the Korean ferry boat into the sea, this newspaper helps us to hear the human voices crying from the deep of the great religious Mystery that is hidden in plain sight around us all the time.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Eugene Cullen Kennedy's column, *Bulletins from the Human Side*, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: [Email alert sign-up](#) [1].

Source URL (retrieved on 06/24/2017 - 04:01): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/bulletins-human-side/ncrs-calling-report-eternal-time>

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>