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Religious mystery in endings and beginnings

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 6, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

We can hear all creation groaning, Saint Paul tells us, but that plaintive signal of the spiritual longing of the cosmos -- and of us -- may be muffled by our own heavy breathing at having run the race and finished the course of the departing year. Don?t we get a medal or something for keeping the faith?

The answer seems to be ?Not yet? because even though we feel that we have proven ourselves we hear the crack of the starter?s pistol and, without respite or even a swig of Gatorade, we are entered in the race of the new year in which we must prove ourselves all over again.

As we scramble to catch up with the other runners -- did someone tip them off about it and not tell us? -- we find that we have not really escaped the last year yet.

The wispy shadows of its expired time zones fall across our path in the lists of the best movies, the trendiest fashions, and -- following a formula whose secrets will only be revealed at the Last Judgment -- the wild card teams for the football playoffs are laid on the table. And the Academy Awards and SuperBowl Sunday, the latter now bigger than Pentecost for many, loom on the horizon to finish last year?s business.

It?s hard to believe those who preach about the imminence of the ?End Time? and the ?Last? Days when we seem to live between beginnings that never end and endings that turn into new beginnings.

In this always beginning and never quite ending passage, we discover, in fact, as homely a human experience -- and therefore as true a religious experience -- as we are likely to find anywhere.

That fact, of course, is that we are pilgrims.

?The defining character of the human species,? mythology scholar Donald Leeming writes, ?is the pilgrimage aspect? because we are ?the only species concerned with the idea of the journey of life.?

Journey is our dominant human metaphor and, even if we cannot give it a name, we feel its pull as we cross over, without security guards or hand rails, the chasm between one year?s end and another?s beginning.

From the epic poem of Gilgamesh through Homer to John Bunyan down to Robert Frost?s ?road not taken? and Jack Kerouac?s ?On the Road? in our own time, we find our constant journey defined and celebrated.

In the strain of longing that is its by-product we also discover the human impulse to tell a story, to craft a plot or narrative *mythos* -- the story of our spiritual journey inflected in different ways in different cultures but the same human story of pilgrimage everywhere.

In larger or smaller ways, we humans are always on the move. Noah could have built a cruise ship as readily as an ark.

Aren?t you planning to go somewhere right now yourself? Observe the small moves in the background of big

occasions -- from one as randomly assembled as parishioners arrayed beneath their preacher or the crowd at a football game, to one as carefully selected as those gathered for a papal Mass or a presidential inauguration.

Where you would expect fixed and focused attention you find movement instead -- people turning around, getting up, looking through their pockets or purses, or purposefully edging through the aisles for reasons that will also be withheld until the Last Judgment.

We are pilgrims on the same journey over the consuming torrent of passing time, finding our way by the light of the eternal that glints in this very stream of passing time.

Joseph Campbell speaks of how the world of myth and art -- the instruments of authentic religion -- allow us ?to recognize?the passing forms of this world, the mere shadow play of that inevitable, bitter yet bittersweet round that James Joyce in *Finnegan?s Wake* has dubbed ?the Here-we-are-again Gaities.??

We thereby participate in what religious scholar Mircea Eliade has described as the myth of the ?Eternal Return.? By this, modern people -- like their ancient forebears -- break free of linear time to enter what he sees, according to Leeming, as ?cyclical -- that is, ever repeating -- eternal time rather than linear, inevitably ending time.?

?I am the Alpha and the Omega,? is one of God?s best lines in the Bible: ?I am the Beginning and the End.?

That gives the measure of the profound Mystery that makes our workaday lives, in Joseph Campbell?s words, ever transparent to transcendence.

We are every day involved in the pilgrimage of our ever repeated journey between endings and beginnings, in the acts of creation that constitute the wonder of life and that are powered by the micro-chips of the eternal.

Creating -- whether painting a picture or painting a house, teaching a subject or learning one, falling in love or staying in love -- is the existential human activity that fits pilgrims, that thrives only in that interval between beginnings and endings and would not exist without the tension they generate.

In creating we participate in God?s Creative Act so that we find ourselves both exalted and exhausted, emptied and filled -- reaching one ending to find a new beginning just beyond it.

That is what we feel at this time out of time as the ice floe of one year drifts away and another immediately slips into view.

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