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A sunken cruise ship, a missing couple and a Religious Mystery

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 26, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

We all feel that we know Barbara and Jerry Heil, a Catholic couple presumed dead [1] after the cruise ship Costa Concordia, like a prehistoric creature too clumsy to escape its adversary, heaved its wounded bulk one last time before turning on its side and dying in the shallow waters off the Tuscan coast.

Jerry and Barbara Heil are remembered by their grieving fellow parishioners at St. Pius X Church in White Bear Lake, Minn., as "quiet kindly people deeply involved in the congregation."

Shawn Gutowski told The Associated Press that they were the kind of people every church needs to function. "They didn't draw attention to themselves, but you knew if they were involved, that it would get done," he said.

Their story, and the mystery it evokes, is heartbreaking in its familiarity. Their daughter Sarah told a Chicago radio station, "They raised four kids and sent them all to private school, elementary to college. So they never had any money. So when they retired, they went traveling. And this was to be a big deal -- a 16-day trip. They were really excited about it."

Yes, we know these good people. They are all around us, living lives of sacrifice for their children, giving of themselves to their church and their community, the kind of people who never get their names in the newspapers but who keep the world going. And at this moment, when they could finally catch their breath and embark on a trip that seemed just the kind of reward they had earned, they disappeared from our view, into the "night sea journey of the sun god" that the mythologists find deep in the human consciousness, into that "land below the waves" that they also locate in the vast deep we share together.

We pull back reflexively from what seems this final unfairness that was visited upon a loving couple who deserved better. We are swallowed up in the depths of Religious Mystery, as Jonah was, and we shudder, recalling T.S. Eliot's warning in *The Waste Land*, to "Fear death by water."

Water is a medium for Mystery with a capital M, for it is the symbol of the ineffable, of things too terrible to know or to give words to, the symbol of our own depths. Of depths from which we hear the sounds of the shifting continents within us, of the unconscious that we mine for what we make of our lives and loves and work. Waters flow through the scriptures, for it is through a water source, a well, that Joseph leads his brothers into Egypt. It is through the waters of the Red Sea that the Jews make passage to emerge as a people. We have entered the healing pool at Siloe, we have watched Jesus call his apostles at the very edge of the sea whose tempests he would calm and whose waters would cleanse us and open us to eternal life.

James Joyce explored the vast sea of Human Mystery that is in fact Religious Mystery, writing, as if for just such incomprehensible events as the death of the Heils, and offering, through the voice of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, his definition of pity as the emotion that arrests the mind before whatsoever is grave and constant in human suffering and unites it with the human sufferer. That is what we feel when we learn of the Heils and their unearned fate.

He goes on to define the terror we may feel as the waters rise around them in the distant darkness. For Joyce, terror transcends pain and brings us an experience of the sublime. For him, and for us in this tragedy in which waters have not yet receded, terror is that emotion that arrests the mind before whatsoever is grave and constant in human suffering and unites it with the secret cause.

"What," Joseph Campbell asks, "does that mean?" He turns to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and asks if racial conflict was the cause of his death. That, Campbell says, is "the instrumental cause and not the secret cause."

Shortly before he was killed, King spoke of his work: "I know that in pressing on for this justice and this cause I am challenging death."

"That," Campbell says, "is the secret cause," explaining that "the secret cause of your death is your destiny. Every life has limitations, and in challenging the limit you are bringing the limit closer to you, and the heroes are the ones who initiate their actions no matter what destiny may result. ... Here is revealed the secret cause: your own life course is the secret cause of your death."

Campbell concludes: "The accident that you die this way instead of in a different time and a different place is a fulfillment of your destiny. All these deaths are secondary. What must be manifested through the event is the majesty of the life that has been lived and of which it is a part. ... Death ... is understood as a fulfillment of our life's direction and purpose."

That is what we can see about the deaths of the Heils that seemed so out of joint and untimely to us. Their deaths, called into the deep as the apostles were, summoned, after a lifetime of living the daily Mystery of giving themselves up for their children and their faith, they booked passage on a cruise they long planned for, on a journey they were finally able to make and that they happily anticipated. This voyage corresponded exactly with the one they had signed on to make together many years before. They surrendered to this Mystery when they first surrendered to each other and to the lives that their love for each other allowed them to lead without hesitation or regret.

The secret cause of the deaths of Barbara and Jerry Heil is found in the lives they led, in the destiny they shaped day by day, and on which they embarked like a bridegroom and his bride, happy, fulfilled, full of light that casts away the darkness that cannot hide the true majesty of their lives.

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