

Foreword

The author describes *A Grace Given* in his introduction as a “book about hope.” It is surely that, but the description is almost too trite, too facile. The story here lets us for a short period see through the thin veil that separates the ordinary world from the divine. In that way, this is a startlingly religious book and is, itself, something of a grace given.

To read it is to experience the truth of St. Exupery’s renowned secret dictum: “*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.*”¹

It is a documentary, or perhaps a diary, written by a self-avowed, “non-religious” person over the course of 13 years that gives testimony to how a kind and loving God intercedes in the daily lives of ordinary people.

What is most striking here is to find oneself caught up in emotion such that makes reading passages from the book in public all but impossible. I have used several passages in preaching retreats to various assemblages of both men and women, and I invariably find myself

¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, “The Little Prince” Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1943) XXI, 70-71.

unable to continue because of the emotional charge that builds within me.

Before Kent wrote the book, I became privy to a short blurb he had written for a family newsletter that caught my eye. He said there:

At times, I have sensed in other people the belief that it would be better for Liz and me if Elie were to die soon. They feel she is a hardship, that it would make our lives easier, or more steady if she were gone, that it would strengthen our marriage by giving us more time together, less stress.

I think these people are fools. I was right when I was a boy. Suffering is a gift.... Elie is the greatest gift we have ever been given. She makes our lives far richer, more contemplative, and full of joy than they ever would have been without her. She is a beloved—even essential—addition to our home and will be as long as she is with us. Elie has given us an awareness of suffering's noble beauty.

Later, I read the eulogy he had prepared in anticipation of Elie's death. The interior emotion of the father invaded me as he recounted the fact that he prepared a eulogy for his child on an ongoing basis over 10 years. Imagine the sorrow of living daily with the impending death of the first child.

He goes on to mention—for me—the profound point that this child was held for her entire lifetime. She was affirmed tactilely by a certain number of persons, and he names them and says, "We touched her physically. She touches us spiritually."

God asks us as Christians to value two things above all else. First, love the Lord God with all your heart and soul. Second, love thy neighbor as thyself. This is a book that intimately describes love and the alchemy of sorrow. It reaches deep into the midst of pain and suffering and pulls from them the beautiful blossom of love and the gift

of self. Where could we expect to find a love more intimate or generous than the love of father for child? But to expose that love so nakedly and unreservedly is a true gift.

It is difficult not to dig deeply into what is going on in the book and in the reader. We are dealing with a knowing that is in the heart and the emotions. In an apparent contradiction to scientific objectivity that reduces and analyzes reality into bundles of empirically measurable facts—a procedure to which even modern physics has given the lie—Kent Gilges has crossed the forbidden threshold of a totally disabled child and done the scientifically impossible: he “understood” her. By that I mean that he “*read her from within.*” The etymology of the Latin *intellegere* is precisely *ab intus legere*.

Kent Gilges is a child himself peering into the persona of his beautiful daughter, and resonating with her, tells us who she is by telling us who he is. One becomes the father only by “becoming”—that is, residing in and knowing—the child. It would be fitting to dedicate this book to the reader who is a “Leon Werth *when he was a little boy*” in the manner that Saint-Exupery dedicated “The Little Prince.”

For me, one of the most stunning parts of the book is the chapter “A Day in the Life” that describes the view of the world by the child as she could never in life have described it. It is the father putting himself into his child for a moment as she lies in the bathtub, held gently by his own hand. The father speaks to us through the child, gives voice to her, and connects her back to God.

But, who is this father who is inside this little girl’s head and heart? Louis Evely suggests that only one who has suffered knows how to see. When you are young you are hard, selfish and protected. You have ups and downs and moods that have mainly to do with the affirmation that you are receiving. Ultimately, in youth it is all about you, and the compassion you might feel for others is gratuitous, generous perhaps, but superfluous.

But when you become a father, you suddenly become vulnerable in the most sensitive part of your being. “To become a father is to experience an infinite dependency on an infinitely small, frail being, dependent on us and therefore omnipotent over our heart.”²

To be needed is to be loved. We all have that desperate need in order to achieve our own identity. Made in the image and likeness of the Son of God who reveals Himself to be sheer dependence on the Father, we most literally cannot be ourselves unless we are engendered by love. As Josef Pieper wrote: “It does not suffice us simply to exist; we can do that ‘anyhow.’ What matters to us, beyond mere existence, is the explicit confirmation: It is good that you exist; how wonderful that you are! In other words, what we need over and above sheer existence is to be loved by another person.”³

As we read this story, it is true for the child. But it is even more true for the father. Again, Louis Evelyn:

To love a person is inevitably to depend on him, to give him power over us. God loved us freely; God gave us power over him. God wanted to have need of us. The passion is the revelation of our terrible power over God. He surrendered himself to us, we had him at our disposal, we did with him what we wanted. On a plaque in Normandy one can read this cruel sentence: ‘It is always the one who loves the least who is the strongest.’

It is always he who is least in love who gets his way with the other, who keeps a cool head and stays in control of the situation. God, in regard to us, will always be the weakest, for he loves. God can be denied, forgotten; he cannot deny us, forget us. We can be without God. God cannot be without men.⁴ We can stop being sons; he

² Louis Evelyn, “Suffering” Herder and Herder (1967) 127.

³ Josef Pieper, “Faith, Hope and Charity,” Ignatius (1997) 174.

⁴ This refers to God’s Erotic Love that is one with His Agape. See Benedict XVI’s “Deus Caritas Est,” #9-11. God’s Love not only gives Self but desires (spousally) to receive free love from created human persons.

*cannot stop being a Father... Thus, God will always be the weakest against us for he loves us.*⁵

Prior to his election as pope, and while taking part in the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla wrote his last dramatic work, *Reflections on Fatherhood*. It provides a good summary for this work:

“And in the end You could put aside our world. You may let it crumble around us and, above all else, in us. And then it will transpire that YOU remain whole only in the SON, and He in You—whole with Him in YOUR LOVE, Father and Bridegroom

“And everything else will then turn out to be unimportant and inessential, except for this: father, child, and love.

*“And then, looking at the simplest things, all of us will say: could we not have learned this long ago? Has this not always been embedded at the bottom of everything that is?”*⁶

Father, child, and love. That is what this book is about. Yes, it is about hope, but it is about much more than that to me. It is about what is most essential, and it is about allowing the eye to see what is most often invisible.

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⁵ Louis Evelyn, “Suffering” op. cit.

⁶ Karol Wojtyla, “Reflections on Fatherhood,” University of California Press (1987) 368.