

Gregory Baum. In Memoriam.

by *Christine Jamieson*

There is a poem by an anonymous prisoner at Auschwitz, found on a wall there – only part of it was recoverable – it read:

There is grace, though,
and wonder, on the way.
Only they are hard to see,
hard to embrace, for
those compelled to
wander in darkness.

(from *Last Traces: The Lost Art of Auschwitz*, Joseph Czarnecki [New York: Artheneum, 1989], p. 11)

The reason this short text from the poem comes to me as I reflect on Gregory's life – on my experience of Gregory as a person I had the tremendous privilege of knowing – is because of something that struck me about him almost from the beginning of our friendship. I would say that it was Gregory's profound optimism and hope, despite his courageous wandering in the darkness of human existence. In his generosity, he would often come to speak to students in my courses at Concordia University. I remember him expressing once, as he spoke to a room full of mostly young undergraduate students, that one must have the courage to look at the shadow side of our world and of ourselves. If we sought to overcome decline, we must be willing to understand it even though it is, at times, hard to bear. Gregory lived that courage, he did not flinch at facing evil in its starkness and horror, naming it for what it was, and yet . . . his profound optimism, his profound hope!

I came to know Gregory at a time when his wife, Shirley, was in decline cognitively and he was concerned about leaving her to 'fend' for herself in preparing an evening meal and, I think, concerned about whether she would even eat without his presence. A few friends would help – coming to prepare and eat dinner with Shirley when Gregory was away. As Shirley's condition worsened, Gregory became more and more solicitous to her needs – even to the point of, despite the recommendations of healthcare officials, to continue to care for her in their apartment. He was keenly aware of the terrible distress Shirley would experience if she had to move to a nursing home, particularly the enormous difficulty of living in a place where she would not be allowed to smoke.

Gregory spoke of and wrote a great deal about social justice. What I always experienced in knowing him is that he lived social justice in his very person, in how he encountered others. In various contexts – speaking at different events – he would often quote a passage from the Preface of *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World) from the Documents of the Second Vatican Council.

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

This was not simply a theological ‘stance’, it expresses the person Gregory was.

I remember once asking him: “Gregory, who are you?” The question came from my observation of the different ‘identities’ and cultures that shaped his long life. His response was this: “I am not a citizen of the world indifferent to what takes place . . . I participate in several cultures.” He went on to explain it as “the eternal conversation that keeps going on all the time.” Gregory’s intense curiosity, his remarkable mind, and the questions that continually shaped his writings and his life enabled him to live in and encounter multiple intersections of cultures, languages, and religions. In my experience, Gregory met the ‘other’ through genuine encounter, genuinely asking the other, “Who are you? What are you going through?” The story he heard always impacted him at a very deep level.

Recently he reflected on the challenges facing his good friend, Charles Kannengiesser, who he first met at the Second Vatican Council, who is suffering from Parkinson’s disease and who has lived in a nursing home for over five years now. Every Saturday Gregory would visit Charles. He and Charles would often sit together reading their books in quiet solidarity. Then Gregory had to give up his car so he would take public transit to visit Charles. Then that became too difficult. So, his good friend Andrée Lévesque would take Gregory to visit Charles. Then that also became impossible as getting around became more and more difficult. Finally, Gregory sent Charles colourful postcards with simple messages of solidarity to brighten up his sometimes-bleak life. The last postcard Charles received was not long ago. They sit on his desk, brightening his room. When I last saw Gregory, when he was still conscious but in much pain and discomfort, he spoke about Charles and the difficult life Charles lived!

One of Gregory’s books he titled “*Amazing Church*”. I cannot help thinking “Gregory Baum: amazing human being!” I think of Gregory’s tremendous optimism. The message he leaves me with: let’s never give up!