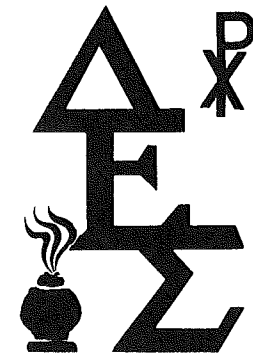

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THE KNIGHT OF INFINITE RESIGNATION AND THE KNIGHT OF FAITH IN FEAR AND TREMBLING BY SOREN KIERKEGAARD

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A FIRST READING OF Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*¹ leaves the impression that a comparison of the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith is rather simple. Deceptively simple. "Of course," one says, "that makes sense." But try it again . . . And again. Each time, the complexity of the text becomes more apparent, to the point where one is on the edge of abandoning the task. Then perhaps one takes a "leap of faith," believing that, if Kierkegaard maintains there is a difference, there must be some distinction worth pursuing. One makes diagrams . . . columns . . . intuitive leaps. Gradually a pattern emerges. The reader feels as though s/he had climbed into Kierkegaard's skin for a time and shared his struggle for some understanding of the role of faith in human life.

Kierkegaard places both Knights in the context of a developmental process: beginning with the aesthetic stage, passing through an ethical stage, and achieving a religious stage. He describes this by means of an analogy: learning to dance (125).² Both knights know the dance steps. Each one develops them differently. The image is a fitting one in the discussion of the two Knights. Although both have made a journey and are now in the religious stage, each has a unique and distinct faith response.

The following working model of Kierkegaard's "stages upon life's way" is proposed. After traversing the aesthetic stage one inevitably hits a wall of despair, at which point s/he either circles back upon her/himself or, by an act of will, enters the ethical stage. One encounters a wall at the conclusion of this stage as well. This time, again provided one does not circle back upon oneself, two dissimilar responses are possible, and the choice made at this juncture determines the remainder of life.

For the Knight of Infinite Resignation, an opening is made in the wall itself. The act of surrender connects the ethical and the religious stage. The Knight moves into the religious stage while, as it were, keeping one foot in the ethical. Living ethically becomes his expression of love for God. Religion, for him, is "duty-well-done" for love of God. There is not textual evidence that the Knight is aware of *God's love for him*—nor any indication of such reciprocity. Relatedness is primarily one-sided—the Knight to God, rather than a mutual "and God to the Knight."

Moving into the religious stage requires courage, "strength, energy, and freedom of spirit" (127), but Kierkegaard claims the power to introduce oneself into this knighthood lies within oneself (124). The act of resignation "opens eternal consciousness" (127) enabling the knight to be aware of his love of God. This relationship, which is the essence of faith, places him in the religious stage. Although faith is not required for the act of resignation, Kierkegaard asserts the first *movement* of faith is this resignation (127). The Knight of Resignation risks moving into a new realm, and by virtue of this risk, makes faith a possibility.³ Kierkegaard asserts: ". . . only in the infinite resignation do I become clear to myself with respect to my eternal validity, and only then can there be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith" (125).

It seems that by virtue of the decision to pursue the religious stage, the Knight of Infinite Resignation receives the gift of faith, which is lived out in his commitment to an ethical way of life for the love of God.

It is quite otherwise with the Knight of Faith. For him, the heart of faith is the reciprocal love and not ethics. It is not that he is unethical. Rather, his response is not an altogether different plane. He has discovered the limitations of ethical response, and it is *love* that propels him over the wall in an act of surrender rooted in a mutually loving relationship between God and himself. This thought will be further developed in the discussion of Job and Abraham.

The Knight of Faith has moved into a new realm after the manner of a rocket having dropped its launcher. He "resigns everything infinitely" into the hands of one who is dearly loved, "then he grasps everything again by virtue of the absurd" (121). If the Knight of Infinite Resignation is a strong walker, the Knight of Faith is a dancer who leaps into eternity but loses nothing of the finite. Kierkegaard claims both make the same movements, with one exception. Imagine an exquisite dancer crossing the stage. S/he brings something more to walking than simply placing one foot in front of the other. The dancer, translating it into Kierkegaard's words, makes another move: ". . . he believes in virtue of the absurd . . . in virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible" (126). This is a leap that the Knight of Infinite Resignation cannot make; he is content to walk.

The Knight of Infinite Resignation is generous. Having given everything to God in an act of "infinite resignation," he lives content in the belief that God has accepted the gift. At the same time, he remains in secure possession of himself. His "gait is gliding and assured" (119). This Knight knows he is doing the right thing for the right reason. He is the "Knight-of-Duty-Well-Done"—a marvelously sensible creature who accepts life as it is and lives it well. In the act of infinite resignation, he triumphs over pain and finds "peace and rest and comfort in sorrow." He courageously renounces "the whole of the temporal to gain the eternal" (127). Having made a rational surrender like the man in the Gospel who desires to build a tower or go to war and sits down to calculate the cost (Luke 14:28-33), he is the "Bright Knight." His is the bright night of knowing the way is clear so long as he keeps the law.

The Knight of Faith has no such assurance: "the only thing that can save him is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith" (126). This "Dark Knight" lives by faith—dark light—and walks the night of paradox, impossibility, and absurdity with such grace that, though he has let go of everything, everything is his in virtue of the surrender. He doesn't deny the rational. He transcends it—and does so "by the courage of faith" (128). The Knight of Faith allows God to be infinitely generous *to him*. He lives in an apparent paradox: the Knight having irrevocably surrendered his very self and all that he loves to God, God gives everything back without Himself losing possession of it. This Knight's life is one of joint ownership. God gives the Knight more profoundly to himself than he could ever "ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). The Knight of Faith knows pain and joy together, experiencing, at one and the same time, the pain of human loss and the joy of being faithful to a faithful God with whom one has exchanged promises.

Let us turn now to an examination of the biblical stories of Abraham and Isaac, and Job, for they illustrate the characteristics of our two Knights. Although Kierkegaard regards both texts as dealing with ultimate paradox, I maintain that neither story is concerned with ultimate paradox, but only with an apparent one. The narratives portray the faith response of two men of God in the face of trial. In each case, we are informed by an omniscient narrator that the event is a test, or a "temptation" to use Kierkegaard's terminology. The stories have a resolution, not on the level of reason but on the level of faith.

Job exemplifies the life of the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the life of the ethical-religious person. In the opening chapter we meet a man about whom we know nothing except that he loves God and has lived uprightly all his life. Eliphaz says to him: "Does not your piety give you confidence and your integrity of life give you hope?" (4:6). He is conscientious: "I have walked his way without swerving" (23:1); he has fulfilled the law: "I have never rebelled against the Holy One's decrees" (6:11); he asserts his innocence: "Show me where I have been at fault" (6:24); and he dares to tell God: "You know very well that I am innocent" (10:6). The narrative reads like a long court hearing: "Tell me what my misdeed has been, what my sin" (13:23). Job, God's good servant, lashes out: "I tell you that God has wronged me" (19:6). Job has lived well: "My hands are free of violence, and my prayer is pure" (16:17). This is a matter of legal justice: "I should set out my *case* to him . . . then I could learn his *defense* . . . would he put all his strength into this *debate* with me" (23:4-5). Job says in effect: "God is not fair. I have done everything I was supposed to do and have nothing with which to reproach myself"

When God reveals Himself, Job responds: ". . . having seen you with my own eyes, I retract what I have said and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5). Although Job still doesn't understand, he bows to God, surrenders, and resigns his arguments. He loses his case, but will keep God's law nevertheless. In effect, he asserts: "Somehow, I know something more of you—but don't ask me to explain it!" "I know that I have a living *Defender* and that *he will rise up at last* and set me close to him" (19:25).

The Abraham and Isaac story in chapter 22 of Genesis catapults us into a plot already developed for many chapters. Abraham is the tenth generation from Noah and thus directly connected with God's promises: "I am now establishing my covenant . . . I shall maintain my covenant" (Gen. 9:9). Yahweh calls Abraham and makes a promise which Abraham believes. Abraham doesn't *know* it is God who speaks—but he believes and acts on that belief. What he *knows* is that, when he obeys the voice, his relationship with this Person grows deeper. Abraham is a man concerned not with fulfilling a law, but intent upon responding to a love. In return, God treats Abraham as a favored child—even when he lies and dissimulates! God talks things over with Abraham, informing him of His plans and decision. Abraham is privy to God's heart (12:1, 12:7, 12:14) and does not hesitate to argue with God (18:16 ff).

In the prologue to the Abraham and Isaac story, God again speaks of fulfilling the promise and the man of faith has no reason to doubt Him. In the story of father and son we encounter one incident among many—albeit the most traumatic—involving this man's absolute faith in a mutual, trusting love relationship, one that has endured for years. Abraham's obedience is not a matter of keeping the law. It is love responding to what the Loved One asks. He has heard this voice before; it has always led to good things. Abraham believes it will be no different this time. "Memory has become the pledge and hope of the future."⁴ Love and trust have always demanded a leap of faith—a leap Abraham is now experienced in making.

Abraham never gets into ethical conflict with God. There is no "right-wrong" confrontation. Does a man have the right to murder his son? Of course not. Does God have the right to tell him to murder his son? We think not. However, here we are posing the wrong questions. We should perhaps be asking: What does it mean for a man to have a relationship with the Living God? How does one respond to being "tested" by God? Abraham responds by stepping over the chasm in a great stride of faith, willing to leap with Isaac into the arms of this God who has always protected him. Abraham believed God would be faithful to His promise, even though he could not have known how this would transpire. The last two citations in the

Abraham cycle occur in Chapters 24 and 25. They complete our picture of the relationship between this man and God: "Yahweh had blessed Abraham in every way" (24:1), and "after Abraham's death, God blessed his son Isaac" (25:11).

Any attempt to sort out the philosophical ramifications of Kierkegaard's discussion of Abraham is fraught with waving red flags. Kierkegaard says that Abraham obeyed God "For God's sake, and (*in complete identity with this*) for his own sake" (133). The italicized words are crucial in understanding the passage, for they indicate the *oneness* between God and Abraham. Abraham achieved union with God: the two are one in mind and heart—no abstract notion, but a lived reality. Nothing will come between Abraham and God. Here, Kierkegaard asserts, one must create a new category: for Abraham, the ethical is not found in keeping the law. "The ethical is the divine" (133). John of the Cross says of the person who is in the state of union with God: "Here there is no way, in the same manner that, for the just man, there is no law."⁵ Saint Augustine enjoins us to "love and do what you will." For this response to be valid, one must have reached Abraham's level of faith. Any attempt to live thus without having achieved this level of union with God is either insanity or presumption.⁶

One understands why Kierkegaard is terrified of Abraham: it is infinitely risky to enter into so profound a union with the Almighty that *anything* might be asked of one. But to be the recipient of a miracle (faith) is to receive the seed of a life unified in single-hearted passion for the Absolute, Who is God.

NOTES

- 1 All page numbers in parentheses are from the text of *Fear and Trembling in A Kierkegaard Anthology*, Robert Brettall, Ed. Princeton: University Press, 1946.
- 2 "For centuries now one generation after another has been learning positions, it is high time I drew some advantage out of this and began straightway with the French dances" (125). He continues: "—people would laugh at him—but in the world of the spirit, they find this exceedingly plausible"
- 3 Brettall Anthology—*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* pp. 219-220.
- 4 Stuhmueller, Carroll, C.P. *Biblical Meditations for Lent*. (New York: Paulist, 1978), p. 35.
- 5 Saint John of the Cross. Drawing of "The Mount of Perfection." Frontispiece of most older editions of his works.
- 6 This situation is exemplified in the crazed killer who claims that God told him to kill. There is no evidence that he has "followed the narrow way of faith" (134) nor does his life give any indication of a relationship lived out in loving service to God and others. Jesus' own words: "by their fruits you shall know them" (Matt. 12:33) have been verified in his life.

REUNION

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What could I do to command
the quick years fall from us
and reveal once more the girl, the grace,
that only time remembers in your face.