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A Meditation on Power

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Members of Sahakarini, friends.

When Gail Stolee wrote to me some 6 weeks ago and asked who I might suggest to speak on power I responded with a number of names including those in our midst and nearby who have exercised political power, who have exercised bureaucratic power, leadership of various sorts.

I thought of those who have never known power. The young men (largely) in the Near East and parts of Asia who join ISIS because, as Thomas Friedman has pointed out, “they have never held power, never held a job and never held a girls hand.” ISIS gives them a wife, a pay cheque and the opportunity, or so they say, to change history.

I thought of the many in our midst who are daily deprived of the straightforward creative path where power is at rest with love and justice.

I remembered my old friend of blessed memory, Heiko Schlieper, the marvelous historian and iconographer who loved to repeat Lord Acton’s little formulation but repeat it with a difference. “Power corrupts and impotence corrupts absolutely.”

Gail talked with me a day or so later and asked me to reflect on power this evening with you. My first thought, given that my childhood was in this place with its many evangelical songs and hymns, that I could simply sing one of these, “There is power in the blood, wonderworking power in the blood.”

Such requests galvanize the mind. I have rarely thought about power. It has always been below the surface. And now, an NGO I admire sets power as its annual theme. Is there something I have misunderstood, perhaps about myself and how I am in the world; something about power I have never really got my mind around?

My childhood world viewed power with suspicion. Any talk I heard of it was critical. Pastor’s occupied positions of power and we knew just how much of a threat that was to their soul. It’s an old pietist insight and I got it in spades.

Institutions have power and, since the church so often squandered its proper vocation, certainly other institutions did as well. How easily institutions turn inward, become the captive of an inner circle, forget their public work and reorient their effort to the careers of those who hold power often masked as institutional development. And political power seemed so often a nasty business. Even Premier Manning became the director of banks after retiring having built his political career on critiquing them. So I absorbed with my dear mother's milk a visceral knowledge of the exploitative power *over* others and manipulative power using cunning psychological means to gain power over another. But I also learned and largely took for granted the call to a nutrient power that involves a "temporary or permanent inequality of status in relationship but is power used *for* the benefit of another", the power (although we called it grace) of parenting, the works of healing through mercy and the ministry of blessing for the sake of the world. Only much later in life when I found myself in positions of very modest authority did I begin to experience what some have called "integrative power", the power which relies on mutual influence and cooperative freedom of all parties involved; the power *with* others. It is the gift central to Sahakarini as you know better than I.

And then I was off to Turkey and Bosnia on our Ronning Centre work associated with the secular and public religion, a theme, I suppose, that has a lot to do with power, with love, and with justice.

Everyday of the last month I have thought a little about power. It is a word that slips around in our culture so easily and with such imprecision.

Power play, reminiscing of my hockey playing days.

Power ball, the fates line up.

Empowerment, a word on the lips of those who have colonized and their revolutionary opponents.

Power and politics, such an odd formulation since they seem the same to me.

Power elite, powerful, and powerless.

Power to the people.

The power of forgiveness.

Graham Green's marvelous novel, *The Power and the Glory* flitted across my memory.

In Turkey I saw the two-prop plane arrive and slowly taxi toward a contingent of women and men dressed in military uniforms. The plane taxied past the paratroopers standing at the ready, fingering the trigger of their assault rifles,

surveying, alert even to the slightest movement from inside the terminal. It was an oddly shaped plane a little larger at the back. I assumed it carried some military dignitaries or perhaps President Erdogan was arriving unannounced. As the back hatch of the plane opened and became a ramp six soldiers marched forward. A dozen civilians, unable to hold rank, rushed past them and into the plane. After three minutes the soldiers emerge carrying a coffin. It was draped in the blood red flag of Turkey with its image of the new moon on top. The civilians followed convulsing in grief. Another “martyr” had arrived home. His life had ended twenty hours ago with gunfire in the city of Tunceli in the Eastern province of Turkey.

Earlier that morning in the city of Nevshir in Capadoccia I had listened attentively to the call from the minaret that swept over the city. “Come to prayer, come to salvation. Prayer is better than sleep.” Five minutes or so after the call had faded, the muezzin returned to the loud speaker and repeated the Bismahal: “Allah, the most compassionate, the most merciful.” The Quranic text used as a salutation when someone has died was spoken, “we are from God and will return to God.” A slight somber settles over the street where I was walking. Ears perked. People stop for a moment to listen and hear the name of the deceased, his or her village and parent’s names and the deceased’s occupation. Then the hour of the burial and the location were announced. On this morning he closes with the words, “May the mercy of God be upon our martyrs”, a prayer heard across Turkey some 900 times in the last year with the systematic assassination of police and military by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, the PKK. And now at the airport, waiting for the gate to open so I could cross the tarmac to my plane to carry me home I see the coffin bearing Sargent Caner Erdan, to his childhood village, on his way to his final resting place.

The power of war, the power of hate, the power of enmity. Power struggle.

On the plane I remembered the Black Panthers who, in the 1960s, were fed up with Dr. King’s non-violent movement. They patrolled the West Side of Chicago with automatic weapons, distributed milk to children in schoolyards and lived like monks with a single purpose. When Robert Maynard Hutchinson introduced the Cistercian Monk Thomas Merton to a group of them at the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara California they said, “we are monks to”. I remembered the early morning when a number of them were killed in an apartment not far from where I lived on the Westside of Chicago, murdered by the police, some still in their beds. The founder of the Kurdish militants, the PKK, shares the Marxist-Leninist ideology with the

Black Panthers, an ideology that sees the power of violence as central to how history is meant and must unfold.

The power to purify the world.

Is it power or impotence or some deformed way they mingle that sees death as the only way to exercise power, to excise impotence?

Earlier in the month I was invited to Sarajevo to speak at a international conference of religious studies scholars. All the scholars were Muslim. We were asked to consider how religious studies ought to be taught given the rivers of blood flowing in our world. For those of us who are Christian, Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, one of his names that Muslims also treasure. And, the Prophet Muhammad taught that the pathway called "Islam", the pathway of peace, of *Salam*, comes to us when we surrender our self-interest, idealizations, and the enmity we have come to treasure, an enmity that sees the world and other human beings through a crimson prism. Only such surrender opens a place in the heart where enmity may turn to empathy.

In Sarajevo and Mostar peace has broken out. The memory of war is ever-present. Pocked marked building from the incessant shelling for the better part of three years. Walk the graveyards and the birth dates vary. But most death dates fall between 1993-1995.

The power of war. The power of enmity. The power of difference corrupted and wedded to fear. Faceless power.

The great jihad Islam teaches is the struggle for power in the human heart: the power of fear and desire or the power of "the spirit that makes all things new."

Muhammad Ali left this world on June 3rd, three days ago. Now there was power, both in his right jab and left hook and certainly in his dance, his butterfly dance. I saw that power expressed in the basement of Swedish Covenant hospital on the north side of Chicago where I worked at night doing mechanical maintenance. John Crook came in at 11PM to tend the hospital boilers through the night. He could sleep because if anything went wrong the alarms were so loud they would, as he said, "wake the dead." He had outlived three wives, had worked the railway for god knows how many years. As we got to know each other I realized I was talking with a man who was conceived three or four years after his parents were freed from slavery. Muhammad Ali was on his lips.

Rudy Smith taught me all I needed to know to not burn the hospital down. He was a golden glove champ in the South before coming to Chicago. Rudy was a lean beautiful human being, gracious to the end. We were strapping on our tool belts the day after Ali had won the heavy weight championship. Rudy was chanting “dance like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” The competitive hockey player in me surface and I raised by dukes. “Show me Rudy, show me.” Rudy rose on his toes and hit me twenty times before I could move. It was masterful. He embodied the champ. Black was beautiful and we tussled until I called for mercy, a mercy he joyously granted.

The Power of grace and movement. The power to express freedom.

One commentator said that as Muhammad Ali’s physical power waned with the Parkinson’s’ disease his power increased. Even when he shook like a leaf and lost the power of speech he still danced and played.

Here is a lesson in power. He joined the Nation of Islam in 1964 much to the astonishment of many lovers of boxing. The Nation of Islam with its strange racist theology and reading of history saved many young men and women and gave them a model of sobriety, good work and healthy pride. It did so for Muhammad Ali as well. He went on the haji, the pilgrimage to Mecca, where he saw the whole of the Muslim world gather, and, like Malcom X, realized that Islam is a call to recover the dignity of all human beings. He became an orthodox Sunni Muslim and later embraced a Sufi teaching. His rhetoric turned to the power of love.

His strength was made perfect in weakness. May his memory be Eternal.

Let me finish we a few words of insight from the great philosophical theologian Paul Tillich who wrote a book titled, *Love, Power and Justice*. He explores the ambiguity and confusion around these three words central to theology and philosophy, without which ethics would be mute and our disciplines of psychology and sociology and political theory barren.

Tillich argues that love, power and justice are part of our being as human persons. We cannot escape their exercise and will exercise them in a disordered way if we do not hold them tenderly together.

Tillich discusses the compulsory element of power, the way power moves in us simply because we live in the world and encounter each other. It lives in us just

as love does, just as justice does. His question: “If love is united with the compulsory element of power, where are the limits of this union? Where does compulsion conflict with love? It conflicts with love when it prevents the aims of love, namely the reunion of the separated. Love, through compulsory power, must destroy what is against love. But love cannot destroy him (or her) who acts against love.” When power is integrated with love and justice it works to save and fulfill the person crippled by deformed power by transforming in him or her what is against love.

Sahakarini, or so it seems to me, is a labour of love engaged by all of you. The power to heal that you exercise in your work in partnership with others, transforms the lives of many, and, if I have heard a number of you over the years, that partnership has transformed you and Camrose as well.

Love, justice, and power lay down together in a verdant field.