

## Finding Textpeople through Tragedy

By Anne Moore

Each term I teach a Block Week course on Religion and Film, and this year the course ran from September 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup>. One of the films under the discussion was Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now. The film is used to illustrate Rudolf Otto's ideas about the feelings or attitudes a human believer has towards the Ultimate Reality. They include the fathomless mystery beyond rational analysis which attaches to the sacred being; the equally deep fascination or enchantment experienced by the worshipper in the contemplation of the sacred; and the feelings of awe, dread, and familiarity that take hold of the worshipper. The discussion of Otto's concepts occurs in reference to understanding the inward journey of the mystics seek a deeper connection with the Sacred. Often these mystical experiences are described as sublime. The only other context the term sublime is frequently employed is war. Therefore, we examined Apocalypse Now as an illustration of two men's inward journey and their sublime experience.

The final assignment for this course was due at noon on September 11, 2001. As I entered the university on that day, through the televisions placed in the hallways, I witnessed the destruction of the World Trade Towers. It was a sublime experience. And as my students entered my office in complete silence with vacant stares, I realized each one had also had a sublime experience. And I had set the stage for this experience. Our discussions about the horror of war, the radical morality of war, the transcendent as something beyond human concepts of morality, the paradox of religious portraits of God as both loving and vengeful and the mystic's experience of the dark night of the soul had raced through their minds. The experience of the classroom had become too horribly real.

I knew I had to respond to the students. However, it took me nearly the entire day before I found what I considered an appropriate response. So, between phone calls and e-mails to friend and family in the United States, I composed a long e-mail which I now summarize.

I began by saying that I could offer no answers, no resolutions and no advice; however, as I had done in the classroom I could offer them the ideas, concepts, theories and knowledge I was using as a Religious Studies scholar as I personally tried to comprehend the tragedy. In telling them this I was following the teachings of my adopted mentor, Abraham Joshua Heschel: Everything depends on the person who stands in the front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. He is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself. He must ask himself, "Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say?" He must be able to answer in the affirmative. What we need more than anything else is not *textbooks* but *textpeople*. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read, the text that they will never forget.

The definition of religion I use with my students is this: Religion is the concern with how to live a meaningful human life given the dilemmas, problems and crises of human existence. Therefore, in my message I discussed both how religions in past have responded to tragic events and how my previous teachers had responded to crises within their world. I shared with them the passionate speech that Dr. Rolf Knierim gave on the anniversary of The Night of Shattered Glass. As a fourteen-year-old Berliner, he had been given a gun and told to defend his city against the American and Russian invasion. After his World War II experience, he spent the remainder of his personal life and his scholastic career studying how language had become a weapon of hatred and destruction. And so I carry as part of my legacy the awareness and sensitivity he had for the use of language to destroy. I shared how my friendship with Holocaust survivors had taken me to the edge of an abyss that contained only horror and how they shared with me the pain of entering such a chasm. However, I also can witness to their ability to soar out of the abyss and actually bring hope to the world. I also shared how throughout history various religious groups from Christianity to the Lakota Sioux had faced tremendous loss of life. These groups responded through "rites of crisis," rituals that spoke about the grief and loss. But, more importantly these rituals that focused on death also sung about life, the importance of human life and what was important about human existence in light of such horror.

Was this long e-mail the appropriate way to respond to my students? I wondered for several days as silence seemed to be the answer. Then the students began to send their own e-mails. The messages were extraordinary. They were poems, quotes and stories. They included ideas, concepts, theories and knowledge that students were using to help them make sense of the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. In the face of the sublime and with my attempt to share, my own students had become textpeople.

And so I now share a couple of their messages with you:

"Past the seeker as he prayed  
came the crippled and the beggar  
and the beaten. And seeing them...  
he cried, 'Great God, how is it  
that a loving creator can see such things  
and yet do nothing about them?'...  
God said, 'I did do something.  
I made you.'"

- Sufi Teaching

"We hold the balance of our species and this precious planet in our hands and in our Hearts."