

Silence, God and the Gulf Oil Spill

By Rev. Fletcher Harper, Executive Director of GreenFaith (NJ)

A seminary professor once taught me about the most important passage in the book of Job. From her perspective, the most significant passage was neither Satan's convincing God to try Job's faith by torturing him, nor the graphic descriptions of Job's boils, nor God's verbal counterattack from the whirlwind after Job finally lets God have it.

For Dr. Tribble, the most powerful passage in Job described the initial reactions of Job's comforters to the hideous spectacle their friend had become. Before these friends spend 34 chapters pressing their useless explanations and misplaced faithfulness on a blameless man with a shattered life, their initial actions -- before they open their mouths -- offer more help than their subsequent 600 verses of speech. When they first realize what has happened, they "wept aloud and tore their robes ... They sat with Job on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, because they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:12-13).

In the first seven days after the Gulf Coast oil spill, I've heard a lot of responses that fall into two primary categories. One reaction is from various industry experts, who've observed that oil spills are unavoidable. Like Job's comforters, these experts appear to believe that their response is adequate, and that we need to accept that the price of a steady energy supply is an ongoing litany of environmental and humanitarian disasters. Several of these experts have noted without irony that the US has it good because our environmental laws are so tough -- citing the example of less-regulated countries like Nigeria, which apparently has suffered an Exxon Valdez-equivalent spill every year since 1969. This kind of response is the pastoral equivalent of telling a family that's just lost a loved one in a horrible accident that "stuff happens." It doesn't cut it.

A second, more heartening reaction has been that of the thousands of volunteers who've wanted to act. NPR carried a story about the effectiveness of human and animal hair as an attractor for oil, and described hundreds of barber shops and salons nationwide shipping their trimmings to a central location where volunteers are stuffing the hair into cloth tubes, creating sausage-shaped, hair-filled booms to skim the Gulf's surface and to collect the oil.

In the wake of these two initial reactions -- one avoiding the heart of the matter while the other sought to make it right -- I heard two other stories, one directly related, the other indirectly. The first described Michael Brune, the Sierra Club's Executive Director, taking a helicopter ride to view part of the spill from the air. The report noted that Mr. Brune was silent during the ride, and that he said very little after it. The report went on to relate several of Mr. Brune's words -- and I don't remember even one of them. But I do remember being grateful for his relative silence, and for his allowing himself to be moved. Like the initial reaction of Job's comforters, his sobriety felt more evocative to me than most of the ink that's been spilled on this catastrophe. It created space to recognize the pain of the victims -- human and beyond. People deprived of their livelihoods and culture. A vulnerable coastline battered by a second cataclysm in less than a decade. Sea turtles, fish, birds -- oil-suffocated and washing up dead. These images and this suffering command silence, at least in part. And if we can't manage that silence, I doubt we'll find the humanity to respond in a genuinely decent and effective way.

The second story was on the release of the President's Cancer Panel report, a 200-page report that, according to those who'd seen advance copies, expressed grave concerns about the impacts of thousands of unregulated chemicals on human health. The report described the growing prevalence of certain cancers in children, the fact that "many known or suspected carcinogens are completely unregulated," the warning that "to a disturbing extent, babies are born 'pre-polluted'" because of chemical exposure in the womb. "We wanted to let people know that we're concerned, and that they should be concerned," Professor LaSalle Leffall, Jr., a leader of the Panel and an oncologist and professor of surgery at Howard University, told *The New York Times*.

Silence, followed by the larger view that this report provides, can create the space for the disaster in the Gulf to strike a chord. The world's religious traditions teach that we owe respect and care to the earth, to our own bodies, and to the world's most vulnerable communities. In the wake of the Deepwater disaster it's time to listen to these traditions, to strengthen our resolve, and to act.

For example, numerous classical Jewish sources mandate the proper disposal of waste, and state that noxious products from industrial production be kept far from human habitation (Deuteronomy 23:13-15, *Mishnah* Baba Batra 2:9). The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ died to redeem people and all of creation (Colossians 1:15-20), and joins with its Jewish forbearers in affirming repeatedly the goodness of the earth (Genesis 1). Islam teaches that human beings are the "vice-regents" of Allah, responsible for the earth's care, and warns against human self-destructiveness: "Neither kill or destroy yourselves: for verily God hath been to you Most Merciful." (Quran 4:29). Hinduism's Atharva Veda offers a beautiful prayer: "Supreme Lord let there be peace in the sky and in the atmosphere. Let there be peace in the plant world and in the forests. Let the cosmic powers be peaceful. Let the Brahman, the true essence and source of life, be peaceful. Let there be undiluted and fulfilling peace everywhere." Basho, the acclaimed 17th-century Buddhist poet, describes the entire earth as a sanctuary with his succinct offering: "The Temple bell stops. But the sound keeps coming - out of the flowers." And there's more, much more. We just need to be quiet and listen -- and then act.

Nothing can undo the suffering that this oil spill is creating. There will be no immediate balm in Gilead. But we can redeem ourselves by understanding this disaster for what it is -- yet another indication, along with the President's Cancer Panel report, that we need to change course. Developing strong federal policies to create renewable energy and fight climate change, and to regulate and replace the toxins we're spewing into the earth, would be a good start. Do we have the ears to hear, the eyes to see, and the resolve to act?