A Name is Not Just a Name

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AETH

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It is customary to begin a speech such as this by declaring how pleased one is to be here. In a way, I am glad to be here, and to share in this convocation with you. But that is not my only feeling. I also feel bewildered and a bit frustrated with the task of saying something that is somehow relevant to people concerned over child abuse, over drug abuse, over environmental abuse, and over media abuse. Actually, the way I have felt having to prepare for this occasion, I would suggest that you add one more item to your list: speaker abuse!

As I pondered and wondered about what to say that would be relevant to all these various concerns (and to the many others that I have not even mentioned), it seemed to me that the best way to do this was to go back to the very root of the issues, to what it means to be human, and to our place in the cosmos.

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Let us then begin at the beginning, with the early chapters of Genesis. We all know that in those early chapters there are two parallel stories. In a moment we shall come to the story in Genesis 1. But let us look first at the second creation story.

In the creation narrative of Genesis 2, God begins by making heaven and earth, then Eden, and then the first man. All of this takes place before the creation of most of what today we would call "nature.” But then God said: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a

helper fit for him" (Gen. 2: 18). We are so used to reading this text with reference to the creation of woman, that we do not realize that between it and the passage about the rib "God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would name them" (Gen. 2: 19). Thus, for the "man not to be alone" did not mean only that he should have a wife. It meant also that there should be an entire creation around him. The words "it is not good" referring to this man standing by himself contrast with the words that appear repeatedly in the other creation narrative: "And God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 2:25, 31). In the first narrative, this phrase appears after the completion of each stage of creation. Now, in this second narrative, we are told that God said that it was not good "for man to be alone," in other words, that this human being is not complete by himself. From the very act of creation, the human creature is intended for companionship. And in the Genesis story the companionship intended for this man is not only that of the woman but also of all of creation. In and by himself, the man is not "good." He is not the good creation of God.

Yet all the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky, good as they are, are not enough. What this lone man needs in order to be fully human is "a helper fit for him." As the Genesis story puts it, when God created each beast and each bird, God brought them to the man to see what he would call them, "but for the man, there was not found a helper fit for him."

Let us first of all clarify what these words mean, for they have been the object of very bad exegesis. The King James Version correctly translated this text as "a help meet" for him, two separate words: "help" and "meet," meaning a fitting help. Unfortunately, our sexist society then joined the two words, created the word "helpmeet" and into it poured all its preconceived notions of what a wife ought to be. But such an interpretation errs on two counts. First of all, the word translated as "help" has none of the connotations of a meek, docile, self-effacing "ideal" wife in the traditional sense. On the contrary, it is a word most often applied to God as the "help" of Israel.

Secondly, and even more importantly for our purpose here, what is translated as "meet" in the KJV, and as "fit" in the RSV, literally means "as in front of him." What is thus implied is something like a mirror image, a counterpart, and not a subordinate being. Actually, the difference between the woman and all the animals is precisely that they are not "fit for him." They are not bad. They are simply not equal to the man. They are by nature subject to him, as is shown by the fact that he has the power of naming them. Remember the enormous importance of naming as a means and a sign of control. When you name something, you define it, you declare what it shall be, how it shall behave. Then comes the "rib" episode, which has usually been interpreted in the sense that, since the woman comes from the man, she is to be subordinate to him. But that is not the way the man in this narrative interprets the events. On the contrary, what he recognizes is that she is his counterpart, his mirror image, the one "fit for him"—or "as in front of him." And therefore, he declares: "This at last is bone of my bones and

flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 2:23). What the first half of these words indicate is not lordship, but recognition. Finally, the man has seen his counterpart, the one "fit for him" as a mirror image. The rest of his words are not really an act of naming. He does not give her a separate name but calls her by his own name in its feminine form. He is *ish*, and she will be *ishshah*. The man does not name the woman. The man recognizes the woman as a participant in his own name.

The man is now "good," because he has a helper "fit for him." To be fully human is to be for others, and therefore God's human creature is not complete until there is another to be for. The God who, according to the first creation story, made each thing and saw that it was good, according to this second creation story made the man alone, and saw that it was not good. It was not finished; it was not complete; it needed a companion "fit for him."

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But there is more. This helper is "fit" like a mirror image. What this means is that the entire story can be reversed. It is not only the man, who appears at the beginning of the story, who is good because he has a companion. It is also the woman who is good because she too has a helper fit for her.

Let me hasten to add, however, that the married couple exemplified in the story of this first man and first woman is just one of many ways in which humans fulfill each other. This story does not mean that humans are complete only in marriage. If that were so, we would have to

conclude that Jesus was not fully human. Being fully human is being-for-others. This is intended to occur in our many human relationships, and not only in marriage.

It is also significant to note that, contrary to most traditional interpretation, in the Genesis text there is no hint of subordination. In the first creation narrative, all of creation is to be subordinate to the human creation, both male and female (Gen. 1:26-27). In this second narrative, the birds and the beasts are under the authority of the man, who names them—naming is a way of having control over the named. Presumably, when the woman appears on the scene and is declared to be flesh of the man's flesh and bone of his bones, and "fit for him," she is also to share in his dominion over the creatures that he has named. In any case, it is only in Genesis 3, as a result of sin, that the subjection of the woman to her husband enters the scene. It is significant to note that the man is quick to assert this authority resulting from sin, for in Genesis 3: 20, immediately after the curses, we are told that "the man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living." Before, he had shared his name with her. Now he stands apart from her and names her, just as earlier he had named the birds and the beasts. From the very beginning of life after sin, the man uses his authority to subject and dehumanize the woman. But in so doing, he dehumanizes himself, for he no longer has a "helper fit for him," and therefore the words again apply: "it is not good for man to be alone."

The subjection of a human being to another—in this case the wife to the husband—is the result of sin and an expression thereof. The creature, male and female, that in the story of Genesis 1 was to have dominion over the rest of creation, was not to have dominion over its fellow

human beings. In Genesis 1: 26-27, it is both the male and the female who are to have dominion. But in Genesis 3, after the fall, the man claims dominion over the woman by giving her a name not his own. In this naming, they are alienated from each other. They are no longer *ish* and *ishshah*. Now she is "Eve," named by Adam. Their intended “for-otherness,” based on their being "fit" for each other, "as in front of" each other, is now disrupted. Thus is the society of dominance born, a society of abuse in which we are alienated from each other precisely because we seek to lord it over each other. In such a society, it is not only the "other" that is lost. We are all lost because we have lost our “for-otherness,” and God rightly said that “it is not good" for us to be for ourselves.

But the stories in Genesis have much more to teach us. Let us look again at the oft-quoted text of Genesis 2: 7: "then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” Nowhere does this text indicate that there is something wrong with being made out of earth. That we are more than earth is clear from the text. But it is also clear that, no matter what else we might be, we are earth. That is why God later declares: "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3: 19). In the second part of this saying, death is obviously the result of sin. But the first part, “you are dust,” is no more than a statement of the fact that was already declared in verse 7. Being made out of dirt is not part of the curse. It is part of the original creation, of being human as God intended it. It is good.

Thus, from its very first chapters, the Bible declares our kinship with the earth. We are not spiritual beings temporarily sojourning here. We are made of earth, and the breath of God does not destroy but rather affirms that.

There is a somewhat different creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, and there we are told that God said, when creating humankind, “let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Gen. 1: 26). These words have often been interpreted as giving human beings *carte blanche* in their dealings with the earth. Vine Deloria, Jr., criticizing Christianity from a Native-American perspective, quite correctly points out that

> it is this attitude that has been adopted wholeheartedly by Western peoples in their economic exploitation of the earth. The creation becomes a mere object when this view is carried to its logical conclusion. Whether or not Christians wanted to carry their doctrine of man's dominance as far as it has been carried, the fact remains that the modern world is just now beginning to identify the Christian religion's failure to show adequate concern for the planet as a major factor in our present ecological crisis.[1]

Historically speaking, Deloria is correct. No other civilization has wreaked such havoc in nature as has so-called Christian civilization. This has been done on the basis of the notion that we are to rule over nature, and until recent times Christian apologists would boast of the technological achievements of Western civilization as the outcome of a biblical view of our relationship to nature.

[1] *God is Red*, p. 96.

On the other hand, a closer examination of the Genesis account would correct the notion that we are to have *carte blanche* in our dealings with nature. First of all, the very verse that speaks of human dominion over creation puts that dominion in a certain context: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion." The dominion is after the likeness of God's dominion. And God's dominion is dominion in love. God does not rule the earth and humankind as a tyrant. God's very nature is being-for-others, love. If such is the case, it follows that our dominion over the earth is not that of an autocrat but rather that of self-giving governance. There is no question that humankind has enormous powers over the earth. What is surprising is that this was known as early as the time when these words were written, long before modern technology. But, given the fact of that power, the biblical author sets a limit to it: it is power given to be used after the likeness of God's power. It is creative power. It is a power that is to be used in the same manner, and in the image of, the power that has created us and still sustains us.

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To this we can then add what the second narrative of creation tells us about our place in the universe. We are made of earth. That means that we do not stand over against nature but are rather part of it. We are not higher beings that can look down upon nature with utter detachment. When we look at nature, we look at ourselves, for we are part of it. Part of the goodness of God's creation is that we are made out of dirt. Of the same dirt that we undervalue and pollute. We are tied to the earth by an umbilical cord, and what good or evil we do to it we do to ourselves.

But then, the story goes on, the human creature oversteps the limits of rightful dominion, or even better, of proper stewardship. "What do you mean I can't eat of that tree? Am I not the ruler of this garden?" The result: "cursed is the ground because of you"; “the woman will be subject to the man; and there will be enmity between all the descendants of the woman and all the descendants of the serpent.”

The result of sin is alienation, not only from each other but also alienation from the rest of creation.

But there is still more. According to the story in Genesis 3, the serpent tempts the human creature by telling them, "you shall be like gods.” The usual interpretation of these words, at least for the last sixteen centuries, is that the temptation consisted in thinking too highly of themselves. They were not content with being human. They wanted to be like God. From this perspective, the primal sin is akin to what the Greeks called "hubris,” overstepping the bounds of one's place and destiny, reaching for the stars, trying to steal fire from the gods.

But that is not what the text says. If we read the story as it stands now, after some inspired genius put the various narratives together, we read in Genesis 1:26 that God made the human creature, male and female, after the divine image. They did not need to eat some silly old fruit to become like God. They were already like God! Their temptation consists not of thinking too

highly of themselves but rather of doubting the grace by which God had made them like Godself.

Thus, we see the roots of alienation and of abuse: self-doubt that leads to wrongful attempts at self-assertion; trying to become what we already are as if it depended on us and our control; naming and seeking control over others: “She shall be called Eve.”

Ultimately, the question of abuse is a question of naming. What do we name ourselves? What do we name others? What do we name the earth around us? Recently I read the words of a Native American, commenting on the so-called discovery of America, who said that the first abuse by Europeans against the original inhabitants of these lands was committed by Columbus when he named them. He was looking for India. The success of his mission depended on his having reached the shores of India. Therefore, this must be India, and these are "Indians.” Even before taking away their lands, and their traditions, and their freedom, the Europeans took away their identity by naming them Indians. This particular speaker went on to comment that it is a good thing Columbus was not looking for Turkey! But the point is that in claiming the power to name, Columbus was making a political statement of far greater consequence than in planting the flag of Spain on these shores.

Fortunately, that is not the whole story. Naming does not end here, with no future but a futile quest for control. There is a different sort of naming, and it is to that different sort of naming that we Christians are called to witness.

In his famous hymn in Philippians, Paul declares about Jesus that "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the *name* which is above every *name*. How did this happen? Paul says that it was because Jesus, even though he was in the form of God, "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." According to Genesis, one of the ancestors of Jesus, being also in the form and likeness of God, did count equality with God a thing to be grasped, and thus brought sin and death and destruction and abuse upon himself and upon the whole of creation. Now, according to Paul, Jesus, who has not counted equality with God a thing to be grasped, who has not sought to be in control, has brought forgiveness, and life, and hope to this fallen creation.

And that is what Christians are all about. In the early days of the Christian church, the very day of Pentecost, when Peter has convicted his hearers of all the sin and abusive behavior of which they were partakers, and they asked him what they should do, his answer was simple yet far—reaching: "repent and be washed each of you in the *name* of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin." And later: "I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have; in the *name* of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!" And even later: "They left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer *dishonor* for the *name*." Do you see what is

being said here? They are ready to suffer dishonor, to let go of their own prestige, to let go of their own control, to have their name besmirched, for the name. What name? The name of one who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

We could go on with similar references throughout the New Testament, until finally, in the last book of the Bible, we read the promise: "Those who conquer. . . I will write on them the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name." What name? The name before which every knee shall bow, in heaven, and in earth, and even beneath the earth.

The Christian promise, the promise on which we dare fight oppression and abuse, the names by which the world names us are not our final name. They are not our real names. We may seek to name ourselves, thus trying to claim over our lives a control that we need not claim and that ultimately leaves us out of control. Our parents may have named us, thus expressing hopes and expectations that we may or may not fulfil. The world may name us, thus classifying us according to its own whims and power structures. But ultimately, we know that we are named by God. And not only we but all of God's creation is so named, for as Ephesians clearly states, we bow our knees before the all-loving Parent "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

You see, at the root of every abuse and every oppression there is one of two views of the future. First of all, there is the view that there is no future. More often than not, abuse grows out of despair, out of hopelessness, out of futurelessness. Then, there is the view that the future is something we must grasp, that if we let go, we will lose it, that we must build bigger and better barns, greater and greater security, more and more power. And also of such a view, abuse is the result.

Over against such views, our message is that it is not so. There is indeed a future. But it is not a future that we must grasp. It is a future promised to us, given to us, assured to us. On the basis of such a view of the future, we can let go when it is time to let go. But also, on the same basis we can stand firm when it is time to stand firm.

What can we do about abuse? We can and we must develop programs against each and every kind of abuse. But even more, we must foster a vision of hope—hope so deep, so radical, so unshakable, that there is no longer room nor reason for abuse of any sort.

There is a story in the final chapters of the book of Acts. Paul was being taken as a prisoner to Rome. The ship on which he and 275 others sailed was driven by a storm. Every hope was abandoned to the point that for fourteen days they practically ate nothing. Paul had told them that they should not lose hope, that they would all be saved. But they did not believe him, and they continued in despair and abusing themselves without food or rest. Finally, on the

fourteenth day, Paul turned his words of hope into action. He urged them to eat, and then he himself took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to eat. When they saw this, the text says, they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. Paul not only spoke of hope; he lived out that hope, and because he lived it out, those who were with him in the same boat, but who did not share his faith, were able to share in his hope and stop abusing themselves.

At the very heart of much of the abuse that takes place today, at the heart of child abuse, spouse abuse, and substance abuse, is the empty feeling that we are about to be shipwrecked, that there is no future, or that if there is any future it is for those who can get ahead of the rest and grab the few lifeboats available.

There are many responses we can give to various sorts of abuse. There are a number of practical and immediate responses we must give, and the quest for those will be the substance of this Convocation. But the most radical answer that we as Christians can give to all sorts of abuse is to redefine the future, to announce and provide a new hope. This we must do, not only be announcing a new future but also by living out of that future.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Suppose I told you that I love Japan, that I believe there is no other place in the world like Japan, that as soon as I am able to retire, I shall move to Japan, that I cannot wait for the day when I shall live in Japan. And then you ask me, "What are you doing meanwhile?" And I answer, "I am studying Italian." You will laugh in my face. If my actions do not correspond with the future that I announce, I shall appear ridiculous.

We as the church announce the coming Reign of God. We speak of a day when they shall turn their spears into pruning hooks; and yet, we do very little to stop that mad arms build-up in which nations, large and small, spend billions in arms while millions starve. We speak of a day when they shall sit, each under our own fig tree, and each under our own vine; and yet, we have built a church organization that hardly reflects such a hope. We are convinced that much abuse in today's world is the result of a lack of hope, and therefore we invite the world to join us in our expectation of the Reign of God, but the world does not see us practicing “Reignese.”

In the midst of a storm, Paul took bread, gave thanks, and ate. In so doing he brought new hope to a crew and passengers who were abusing themselves. Can we—in our taking bread, in our thanksgiving, in our eating, in our entire living—bring new hope to our own world?

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