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Beowulf, Tupac, and the Talented Tenth

Let us speak of Beowulf, the Scandinavian hero who understood from an early age that he was privileged and chosen to champion the good. Highborn and noble, he developed his skills as a warrior. And as the story goes the time did come when God sent him across the sea to face a powerful demon, monster, threat, fiend out of hell.

The ancient poem says: "Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, nursed a hard grievance" (86-87).¹ The monster's name was Grendel, and he was a banished monster from a tribe of monsters all descendent from Cain's clan, Cain who was the first murderer. Cain, who according to the poem, was cursed. It says:

and out of the curse of his exile there sprang ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants too who strove with God time and again until he gave them their
reward. (111-114)

The ancient poet says that when Grendel caused destruction: "Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse" (137).

¹ The parenthetical numbers indicate the lines in the poem.

Grendel was not invited to the party, neither he nor his mother nor his kin nor his kind. The exclusion caused him pain. He wanted to do harm; he did harm. He, as do we, caused harm out of his own pain. However, in the ancient poetic imagination his evil, his will-to-do-harm was ontological evil, unmotivated wickedness, a tragic malice inherited at birth, stamped into his soul, into his essence, into his very being.

But could that ancient poetic imagination be mistaken? The poet says that Grendel and his kind were God-cursed. The questions become: why would a just God curse Grendel for the sin of a distant ancestor? Were the sins of his forebearers any greater than those of any other family, clan, tribe or nation? If we all look far enough into history, we will find our own slavery and our own sin; we will find the historical moment when we were stranger in the land and the moment when we were its rulers; we will find the times when we were invited to the party and the times when we were not. So, was Grendel God-cursed or cursed by humanity? Did Grendel curse himself by nursing a hard grievance and returning evil for evil? By whose reckoning was Grendel cursed?

And so Beowulf comes, brought by "bravery and stoutness of heart" (338-339). A hero who has fought beasts and brutes and trolls, Beowulf decides to give up his weapons and to fight Grendel bare-handed because Grendel has no weapons. Beowulf prays: "And may the Divine Lord in His wisdom grant the glory of victory to whichever side He sees fit" (685-687). The hero believes that "Fate goes ever as fate must" (455). Still it is his heroic duty to struggle with undaunted courage, seeing a clear truth: "Almighty God rules over humankind and always has" (700-702) Fate is with Beowulf: he kills Grendel. When Grendel's mother comes for

revenge, he also kills her. From a cave accessible only through water, she has emerged. According to the poem, she emerges for revenge and finds her own death at the hands of the hero.

After this adventure, Beowulf becomes King, lives a long life until injustice causes a series of events that wakes a new monster, a dragon. The poet tells us:

The intruder who broached the dragon's treasure and moved him to wrath had never meant to. It was desperation on the part of a slave fleeing the heavy hand of some master, guilt-ridden and on the run, going to ground. But he soon began to shake with terror . . . in shock . . . the wretch . . . panicked and ran away with precious metalworks. (2221)

War had killed off the country's honorable men. The keeper of the dragon's hoard says:

My own people have been ruined in war: one by one they went down to death, Looked their last on sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody to bear a sword or to burnish plated goblets, put a sheen on the cups. The companies have departed. (2247-2254)

So Beowulf goes to fight his final battle. He kills the dragon and at the same time the dragon inflicts a moral wound on Beowulf. Now the hero named for the bear, named for the god of fertility, named for barley and wheat, faces his own death because it is the ultimate end of all mortals. The question becomes for Beowulf and for us is: for what purpose did we live? How is the world better because we have lived?

Let us speak of Tupac Shakur, a young Black man in America, son of the Black Panther Party who lived a short, hard, diamond bright life yet as ethereal and mystical as midnight mist. At the same time, he is as immortal as human fear, anger, love and hope. He was/is complicated.

A thug and a sensitive soul. Vulgar and violent. Poetic and wounded and strong. He said of himself: "I am a product of the pimp, pusher and the reverend."

His mother was a member of the Black Panther Party when it was accused by J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of being dangerous to the security of the United States. Tupac and his family were not unlike Grendel and his mother. Outsiders. Feared. Thought to be evil. His father left the family, and he, his mother and his sister lived in near poverty in New York City, Baltimore and Marin City, California. Tupac's mother taught him to think for himself and to believe in himself. Those lessons stood him in good stead, along with an incredible work ethic.

He left the world a controversial and complicated body of work. Shot to death almost 12 years ago, he had battled both the black and white status quo. However, among his catalogue of raps is one called "Ghetto Gospel." It says in part:

Those who wish to follow me, I welcome with my hands

And the red sun sinks at last into the hills of gold and peace to this young warrior
without the sound of guns.

The song also says:

There is no need, to fear me. If you take the time to hear me, maybe you could learn to cheer me. It ain't about black or white because we human. I hope we see the light before its ruined.

This rap raps of a world that is cursed “and it hurts”, that through our tears it looks dreary. The truth looks strange. Tupac sees the people in pain around him and challenges his own courage. He further declares: “Before we find world peace, we got to find peace in the war in the streets.” Tupac is willing to give his brain and his talent over to God. He says: “I feel His hand on my brain. When I write rhymes I go blind and let the Lord do His thing.” Both Tupac and the poetic hero Beowulf put themselves – brain, body, talent—to the service of the Lord.

Now let us speak of W.E.B. Du Bois and of his idea of the talented tenth. An African-American scholar when African-Americans were only a few short decades out of slavery, Du Bois proposed that a tenth of African-Americans ought to be especially trained so that they could go back into the community to help lift their brothers and sisters out of the degradation of a post slavery, post war existence. He wanted to lift African- Americans out of a mentality shaped in slavery when it was against the law to educate a slave. He came under great criticism for this idea, being called an elitist. So, in a later speech, he clarified his idea. He wanted a group of men and women who would be honest. He said: “We must have unselfish, far-seeing leadership or we fail.” He wanted leaders who possessed the qualities of plain living and high thinking. He wanted a religion that taught character, right conduct, and sacrifice. I would add

that the necessary sacrifice is not a blood-shed sacrifice that asks us to kill and to die, but a blood-lived sacrifice that asks us to live for a higher purpose, for a more noble goal.

The noble goal of which I speak is a goal beyond the profit motive to a prophetic motive, and that is to create peace through justice. Du Bois taught that humankind must continually readjust its knowledge. We ought to readjust our knowledge to solve the problems of this world -- the problems of poverty, environmental destruction and war. Humanity needs heroes and sheroes willing to fight the monsters of fear and greed that cause us to turn on other human beings out of a deception that says we must destroy them for our own self defense. Humanity needs heroes and sheroes who will reject the deception that there is some evil Other who is monstrous at birth, whose very essence is malignant and with whom we cannot reason. Ontological evil is a deception.

The privilege of education, whether that happens because your parents sent you to good schools, or like Tupac, a high school drop-out, one decides to educate oneself through reading widely, or both, that privilege is to learn a humility that will allow us to work with other human beings both far and near to make this world a better place in which to live. This means making peace through justice. We know about the justice that seeks to punish. But there is a justice that requires equitable distribution of the earth's resources – distributive justice. There is a justice that requires that we each contribute to the good of all – contributive justice.

The human effort and the world's resources that go into war planning and war fighting and war recovery could better be spent to provide the basic needs of people around the world, food, clean water, clothing, health-care, education, employment. The s/heroic task today, the contributive justice that we owe, is to search for the truth, no matter how strange it seems; the s/heroic task today is to have the courage to face the truth even if that means we have to slay the idols and false gods given to us by an elder generation, and move in another, more righteous direction.

The s/heroic task today is to be brave enough to conquer evil, not through destruction of the other, but to conquer evil through the transformation of the Other through radical love, generosity, sharing, and caring. The s/heroic task today is to turn a dreary world cursed by fear into a world where everyone lives in joy and in peace. This is a mighty goal which will require a mighty faith in an Almighty God. The good news is through Almighty God all things are possible if we believe. The ancient poet of Beowulf reminds us that: "Whoever remains for long here in this earthly life will enjoy and endure more than enough" (1059-1061).

So I say to you my young heroes and sheroes, prepare yourselves. Sharpen your minds, strengthen your bodies, settle your soul for the struggle ahead, for the enjoyment and for the endurance, and know that through the Almighty God of justice and love the victory is yours.

