

The Phylactery Factor,¹ Priests Politic,² Declaration,³ and Benemortasia^{4,5}

telescopic incidents--microscopic achievements

Burton Blatt
Centennial Professor and Dean
Syracuse University
School of Education

All of the following is true. These incidents occurred; and, if not in a single day, or year, or years, does it matter? What difference does that make? It only matters that I write what I believe to be true; and I do, even if the "truth" is general rather than precise--eventual rather than temporal. So what if this paper was started ten years ago, and just completed? It took that long to figure things out. Thank goodness for diaries and personal journals.

The day started poorly. No, strangely. But, it ended better; maybe that too is the wrong word. Since childhood, I have been an early riser. However, during that year of mourning, the practice was less one of choice. Before my Dad passed away, my sleeping habits were a matter of my decision and pride; it was virtuous to get up early in the morning, do some vigorous exercise, study, write, set my head and body straight for the day--all this before the first jogger raised his daily storm with the neighborhood dogs.

¹Phylactery (fi-lak'ter-i) N. A small, leather case holding slips inscribed with scripture passages...(worn) by men of orthodox Jewish faith during morning prayer.

²Politic (pol'ē-tik) Adj. Having practical wisdom; prudent; shrewd; diplomatic; hence, crafty; unscrupulous.

³Declaration (dek'lə-rā'shən) N. Announcement...a formal statement; proclamation.

⁴Mort (mōrt) N. Death.

⁵All definitions are from Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition, 1966.

Today, I must be up and about by 5:30 a.m.--like it or not--and in Temple no later than 6:53 a.m. (it takes me approximately 7 minutes to remove, place and bind my phylacteries, and say the appropriate prayers in preparation for morning service). I knew that this morning had things in store for me that would be "different." First, the new pants (never worn before) were at least two inches too long. Another pair, hastily yanked from the closet, appeared too short. After all these years, had I grown? No matter; maybe that style will return but, knowing my luck, probably not in time to get me through the day without stares or thoughts. As I bounded down the stairs heading for the back door and garage, our son Mike froze me with, "Hey, Dad, are you expecting a flood today?" Don't respond to that. Say, "Goodbye, Mike, I won't be home this evening. Off to Kentucky. See you tomorrow. Have a good day at school."

Made Temple on time, with at least a half minute to spare, to sit around and meditate, while we waited for morning service to begin. Was in the office by 7:35, made myself a cup of coffee (learned yesterday that my electric coffee pot extrudes lead particles, so I must do something about that rather soon, but not today), spent the next hour revising a manuscript, finished dealing with yesterday's mail and messages, saw three students, one community action worker, one colleague, and a college editor for a Boston publishing house.

Ginny buzzes. Ethel was on the phone. Do I have time for lunch before my plane? Great idea. Meet you at the Near East on Erie Boulevard at 12:15. See you later. I leave a few minutes early. Shouldn't keep her waiting; it's a rotten habit, and I'm a good example of both its practice and why it's rotten. Got to Erie Boulevard early--for me, amazingly early. But where is

the Near East? Have I missed the street? Up and back; let's look around. No Near East. That empty lot looks familiar. Why? How can that be? This is a crazy world. How could they just tear down a Chinese Restaurant and not even tell anybody? Not only did they have the nerve to close down the place without telling anybody but they removed all evidence that the place existed. How is somebody going to be able to find the damn place so that he could learn it's disappeared? This kind of situation causes aggravation. Where's Ethel? I hope she's not too hungry.

Finally we connected and had lunch at another restaurant that, if there is any mundane justice, will be soon selected next for the wreckers' ball. I enjoyed the lunch, Ethel, not the food, but the lunch. See you tomorrow evening."

Check my watch. It's later than I thought. Must hurry to Hancock Field. No time to check my bag. Now I have to go through that baggage inspection. Well the line isn't too long. But damn, the marshall wants to actually go through my bag. I'll ask him to hurry.

"What are these, sir? I'm merely curious."

"Those are phylacteries."

"What are phylacteries?"

How do I answer that one? I'm in a rush; but the air marshall seems interested, so I don't want to offend him. Besides, he's black and he may think I'm prejudiced. What do I say to the man? Should I tell him about the Shema, that the words professing my love of the Lord must be close to me always, that those words are encased by the phylacteries, and I must bind the phylacteries that contain those words for a sign on my hand and for frontlets between my eyes. I don't think he'll understand much about binding hands and

frontlets between my eyes. I think he might understand how we inscribe these words on our doorpost, but it's probably useless to try and explain this frontlet bit.

"What did you say, officer (I'm not sure, do I use the term 'officer' or 'marshall')?"

"I asked what you do with these phylacteries."

"You might not believe this, officer, but a phylactery is a birth control device."

"A what?"

"A birth control device."

"May I ask where you wear it?"

"I'm glad you asked that, officer. I was going to volunteer that information but didn't quite know how to broach the subject. Phylacteries are worn as a binding for a sign on one's hand and as frontlets between his eyes."

"Sir, you say that these leather straps that you bind around your hand and your head serve as a birth control device?"

"Not only that, but they're marvelous for dieting, alcoholism, nicotine addiction, dope addiction, and for those who would otherwise make fools of themselves."

"And, you say that these straps that you bind on your hand and are placed as frontlets between your eyes do all these things?"

"Officer, or is it marshall? I've wondered about the proper salutation."

"Your choice, sir. I asked how these phylacteries operate."

"Well, officer, this is a very difficult matter to explain. You see, in

the Shema, which is the oldest prayer in our religious service, we are instructed to love the Lord with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our might. And, those words are to be bound to our hand and between our eyes during the morning service. We do not bind our hand and our head during the evening service, although we say the Shema."

"But what about birth control, alcoholism, drug addiction? You seem to claim that these phylacteries have a universal, magical, powerful influence to do all those things and even--Did you really say it?--aid in weight reduction."

"Officer, I have to catch a plane. However, I can't run off without saying again that phylacteries do everything as claimed. From my experience--take it for whatever it's worth, but you can ask any orthodox Jew anywhere in the world and I feel he will agree with me totally and absolutely--never since the dawn of civilization has anyone impregnated a woman while wearing phylacteries. Further, I doubt if, while wearing phylacteries, any man has ever become inebriated, dope addicted, or even eaten (much less over-eaten). Officer, I'm guaranteeing to you that these two sets of straps protect a man from infinite varieties of evil. They really are the best and safest birth control device known to humans (and, maybe, known to the Lord).

"Unfortunately, they only provide protection and good habits while the person wears them, seven times wound around the left arm, three times around the left middle finger, and around the head as frontlets between the eyes."

"Thank you, sir. You've been helpful. Have a good flight. Get out of here!"

On the return flight, I read the file of materials given to me by ADVOCATE, an organization concerned with the aged in our community, and what

is being done to and for them. The ADVOCATE constituency includes the aged themselves (a healthy sign; it seems that so many groups working on behalf of the aged--or the retarded or other unwanted people--are not enthusiastic about including those people as members of their organizations), and a sprinkling of professionals and congenial crusaders, some of whom are associated with our own Center on Human Policy. The leader of ADVOCATE is a very decent man, now supervisor of direct care personnel at the State Developmental Center, once director of nursing at a so-called nursing home that didn't provide adequate enough nursing care to meet his standards--so, he resigned, or was fired, but not before waging a courageous battle against the burgeoning and bureaucratic geriatric business.

ADVOCATE's materials contained both straightforward factual information--which was completely new to me and quite informative--and polemical pieces concerning human rights, dignity, and normalization--which I found interesting but so familiar as to provide few new insights or issues to think about. Hey, do you know that, in our county alone, there are 50 million persons over 65 years of age? Further, do you know that there are currently more than one million such persons residing in nursing homes? And, I would wager something that most of you will be astonished to learn--that, if the present trend continues, there will be six million in nursing homes within 20 years.

Page after page is turned, and then I proceed from document to document, in a seemingly endless implosion of paper dealing with the aged and society's callousness toward them. Finally, my eyes find some correspondence with the ADVOCATE leadership. "Enclosed are directions to Christ the King Retreat House...etc., etc....we should plan to be at the meeting at such and such a

time...the document on Human Rights and Responsibilities has been shared with the Priest Council in our state etc., etc....I think we should ask the Council to request of the bishops that a pastoral letter on the document be distributed in the various dioceses etc., etc....I believe this group of priests is ready to act in an aggressive way on human issues etc., etc....See you on the 25th etc., etc...."

I'm in the office early on the morning of the 25th. There are materials to review again, and sufficient copies of "A Declaration on Human Rights and Responsibilities" to have ready to distribute again to those priests who left their original copies at home. I gather my things, permitting sufficient time to arrive at the retreat house by 10:30 a.m. However, I do not allow for time to stop and refuel my tank and, consequently, I arrive about five minutes late. The meeting had begun, already an illustration differentiating the conduct of clerical and academic business. In all other respects, I seem to fit in rather well, comfortable in familiar surroundings.

Around the table they went, each offering a report on parish and diocese work on behalf of the elderly. The chairpriest moved things along, every now and then reminding the participants that there was an agenda to be completed and little time for questions and unnecessary discussion. After all the priests had reported, our turns were next. My colleague spoke about the general situation in our county, emphasizing the suspicious demise of a state school resident and, then, expressing his disgust with a gathering movement by the county legislature to construct a new multimillion dollar home for the aged. Then I spoke, about the "Death with Dignity" movement in our society, about the yearnings people have for lives with dignity, about the almost-infinite variety of separations across this land--children from parents,

parents from children, the wanted from the unwanted, the ugly from the beautiful, the able from the unable, the black from the white, men from women, you from me, me from myself. Briefly, I noted what appears to be a national zeal to separate the different from ordinary society, utilizing whatever means available to deny some people their freedoms: building programs, capitalization of prejudice and fear, any means. I noted that society's urge to segregate runs so deep that even legislation designed to integrate people often has the effect of merely labeling and stigmatizing them.

I especially emphasized the need to create sufficient options for people to lead integrated lives and, therefore, the need for a moratorium on the creation of new segregated settings. We asked the support of these priests, other priests, parishioners. The questions flew, informed and provocative questions; they were interested in discussing these matters. I mentioned that we must be especially careful in analyzing the politics and polemics that have become embedded in the human rights, right to life, and right to death issues. Priests were reminded to read a paper that the chairpriest had distributed earlier, written by a priest, also senior research scholar at Georgetown University's Kennedy Center for Bioethics. It was mentioned that one of the distinctions made by the Georgetown priest concerns the major difference between what he calls the two kinds of "Euthanasia"--taking of a life, and unwillingness to preserve it in all circumstances. The paper suggests that "Euthanasia" now has too many unfortunate meanings and connotations. Although in the strictest terms, that Greek word means merely "to die well," the author believes that another term should be used to denote "a good death" or "dying well." Therefore, he recommends that "euthanasia" be reserved for indicating the morally unacceptable "active euthanasia," and

"benemortasia" (from the Latin meaning "to die well") should be used to signify "passive euthanasia"--which is morally acceptable to the Georgetown man.

The questions and comments intensified. The priests appeared energized and very interested in pursuing the discussion. The chairpriest said there was time for only one more question. "Why?", asked a priest "We must move on. We have an agenda to complete."

There were angry comments from several priests and some nervous giggling from others. We thanked the group for the ten minutes allotted to this discussion and left. One of the priests followed me to the door.

"Would you come to Albany to meet with the Fathers there?"

I said, "Sure, sometime Father when I am in your area. I will call beforehand, and we can arrange a meeting."

I never called, and that priest knew that I wouldn't. Yet, I was grateful for his invitation, and I felt he was relieved that I "played his game." I think his invitation was his way to thank me for saying what I had said and to apologize for the perfunctory behavior of the chairpriest. I think he was trying to say that if mercy killings could be dismissed simply by turning something from Greek to Latin, a friendly gesture might cause one to forgive clerical politics and insensitivity as just another innocent expediency needed to survive in this callous age.

Come to think of it, phylacteries protect one against boorishness and meaningless meetings. Benevivo phylacteries.