

The Lobster Quadrille
April 28th, 1993

The death of a child is perhaps the most painful loss a person can experience. And we've had several such deaths in our community over the years. They all accentuate my own memory of a day in April when I, too, received a mid-afternoon call telling me my son Philip had died in his sleep earlier that morning. He was twenty-three years old. I didn't sleep for the next ninety-six hours.

But fortunately I had the wealth of our culture's religious and literary tradition to support me in my grief. I spent nights reading everything I could lay my hands on. For what does our religious and literary tradition attempt to do by way of *Job* and *Genesis*, *The Psalms* and *Gospels*, the writings of Paul and *Revelation* and Dante's *Paradiso* and poems like Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" but bridge the abyss of death to deposit us in a place of green fields and a city of emeralds and pearls. For example, Philip died during an Eastertide when the very name Philip occurred no less than six times during the Gospel readings - once in direct conversation with Jesus saying: "Lord, show me the Father and I shall want nothing more."

For another example, there was *Alice in Wonderland*, which I happened to be teaching at the time. I found it so therapeutic because here Lewis Carroll, a teacher of logic, tries to show us how all our worldly logic is so relative. He does this by taking Alice out of our everyday world into a realm where rabbits and mice and a Mad Hatter and disappearing Cat introduce her to dimensions of reality that lie beyond the scope of our mortal eyes and assumptions. And among her tutors are a Gryphon and Mock Turtle who introduce her to a mystic dance called the Lobster Quadrille.

It's danced along the seashore (at the edge of that mysterious, oceanic realm that lies beyond the boundaries of life as we know it). And it requires that all the seals and other seaside creatures dance each with a lobster partner, forward, backward, roundabout and then throw the lobster as far out to sea as possible. And as they dance they sing a song in which a codfish invites a timid snail (symbolic of our own inclination to hide within our shells and never trust ourselves to realms unknown) to join them. It goes:

"You really have no notion how delightful it will be
When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters out to sea!"
But the snail replied, "Too far, too far!" and gave a look askance.
Said he thanked the codfish kindly but he would not join the dance.

"What matters it how far we go?" his scaly friend replied.
"There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.
The further off from England the nearer is to France.
Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance."

Essentially the song said to me: don't be afraid; don't stand with trepidation upon the shore of life brooding over the emptiness that seems to await us beyond its boundaries. "What matters it how far we go? . . . There is another shore, you know, upon the other side." Since my son's death that's something I believe now more than ever before in my life.

See you in France, Phil.