Invited commentary--The Distance of the Recent Past

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To have received an invitation from the Martin Marty Center to respond to an interview with Langdon Gilkey would have been flattering under any circumstances, but it is an honor in these because, well, because it is for Langdon, whom I miss. I last spoke with Langdon a few months before his death but it seems long ago. This displacement of time was made more vivid when I turned to my task here to see that the interview was conducted by my good U of C buddy, Jeff Pool, with whom I edited a book on Langdon which Jeff and I finished during my first year at Yale Law School, even longer ago, and with whom I shared much over the years.

And, finally, the topic and the time of the interview. A December 2001 interview about September 11, a crystalline fall day in Manhattan during which I wondered where my father, visiting my new city, was that morning, and watched, from my office window, proud columns and the people in them, whose offense was showing up to do an honest day's work, disappear with a mere "poof." That day, and the utter silence of the city on September 12, this boisterous city quieter by far than the small town I grew up in, seem furthest away of all.

It was long ago, 2001, when the market was high, when we had not yet waged a half-hearted war against those who did attack us in order to reserve some firepower for a halfhearted war against those who did not, when New York and Washington, D.C. had living--and then dead--people in them, real people formerly of full body, who would have bled had they not been vaporized and who had not yet been jingoized into an abstract date on a calendar, when putting on a flight suit had something to do with making a victory happen rather than being a costume-party reprise of a juvenile semi-military semi-vacation.

If what Langdon meant by saying in this interview that 2001, that long-ago time, called for "humble power," is that power must be conscious of its limits and its potential for excess--and I think that is what he meant--it is hard to disagree. Still, and this will come as no surprise to his interviewer or, from his comfortable perch in eternity, Langdon, I would rather characterize that as "bold" than "humble" power. For what is bolder than to look in the mirror, personally and culturally, and to say, yes, this is me, this is us, it is not what I wished to be (even if it's pretty good, or it isn't, either way), and it is, in some way, too late to make it what I would have wished, so I will have to make it something else? Humility, at least in the way we think of it now, cedes the action to another; boldness acts and takes the risk of action. If it does so truthfully, it is so much the bolder.

What would bold power look like now? Not, surely, the craven manipulation of real, dead people into a symbolic excess that strips them not of their existence but of their ever having existed, not just the dead of New York (which three years after voted 4:1 against its self-proclaimed protector) but also Pat Tillman, the former football player, and Jessica Lynch, the POW.

Not, surely, the political response to terror that (with the exception of the timidly executed war in Afghanistan)
has been bold only in its sheer and constant mendacity and boundless incompetence and has shown the depths of its weakness by, well, read the papers and take note that at least three officials in a conservative administration deliberately outed a CIA agent working in weapons of mass destruction and imagine (because we will never be shown them in the G-movie version of this war) the coffins loaded off planes in Delaware and the dead in Baghdad.

We will not see bold power from this group but that does not mean that we cannot look to the eagle and the raven to see what it might be now. It would mean, in large part, doing really what our current political heads said they would do, say they are doing, but--as in their professions of "compassion" and "tolerance"--turn into its opposite. It would mean sustained attention and focus on eradicating those who funded and planned the murders of 3,000 people who were just going to work--window washers, janitors, waiters, investment bankers, lawyers--none of whom deserved to die, much less whose death deserved to be thought of as a victory of the divine. And though I opposed the war in Iraq from the outset, I think bold power has to recognize that we are responsible for the morass on the ground there now and that we, as a nation, have a responsibility to clean it up if it is not already lost. I think that that means that we have to get serious about fighting the war in Iraq for the first time, rather than treating it as a testing ground for silly new theories about how to conquer lands with a patently inadequate number of troops on the ground, landing on carriers in flight suits and crooning about democracy as the blood flows redder.

The eagle and the raven sit together, but at one time or another, we must act more at one's behest than at the other's. In this time, I think this is how we give each its due. The eagle: Whatever the problems of western culture, what happened on that autumn day cannot be laid at its feet but is the responsibility of the pilots and their money train. The raven: If we look in the mirror now, we will also have to say that, whatever the considerable excesses of the Iraqi regime, the disaster there now is our doing, not its (its was an entirely different kind of doing). And we have two choices, both truthful, both honest, both, in their own way, bold power. We can get serious about both for the first time or we can say, straightforwardly and honestly, about one or the other, "We have lost." I hope we have not.

I don't know whether, were Langdon alive now, he would agree. One day I hope to ask him. But I am pretty sure that would be listening to the raven and the eagle and that they would lead him to say something, to do something, to refuse to be paralyzed the political left's timidity (even though I think that speaking too much of humility in these times may exacerbate that timidity) or conned by the jujitsu power-speak of the political right in which to say one thing is to mean its opposite. To be able to do that--and to come down clearly, recognizing the ambiguity of every decision--matters. It tells us who we are. It is, as far as I can tell, one of the things that Niebuhr helped teach Langdon, or at least helped him understand. And he helped teach it to me, or at least helped me to understand. As I said, I miss him.