Crossroads
Tenth Anniversary Celebration
In Memory of Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

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The first thing to say tonight is Thank You. Thank you all for the chance to remember Lorenzo with you. Thank you, especially, Angelo, Olivetta and Maria Theresa, for your kindness to Amy and me and your friendship over the years. It is a friendship that includes Lorenzo, as if he were still with us.

The first thing to say about Lorenzo tonight, is that he was not nice. Nice people do not offend. Nice people do not speak the truth unless it is in their interest. Nice people know how to say no, nicely. Not Lorenzo. Lorenzo could offend. Lorenzo spoke the truth even when it was detrimental to his own personal situation. Lorenzo could say no only with great difficulty, but when he did, it was never said nicely.

The next thing to say about Lorenzo – Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete – is that he was a member of my family for more than twenty years. This order of things is important: he could be a member of my family for many other reasons, but we would never have known that unless he was, like me, not nice.

I can hear him now: “Bob – what are you talking about? How can you and I be members of the same family? Don’t exaggerate.” But of course we could be in the same family, because the biology of a family and the idea of a family are very different. Only niceness – on his part or mine – could have prevented us from enjoying the remarkable similarity of our ideas.

This is itself one of those ideas we shared: the idea that ideas are not limited to expressions of the way nature works. How can this be? Because ideas are not inherited.

Again, I hear Lorenzo: “Come on Bob, enough! We’re both scientists. We know that we are part of nature. So how can anything about us not be part of the information encoded in our genes?”

What a great question. It really stopped me. It made me think again about my own science, the molecular biology and history of DNA-based life. But my reply to him then is my memorial to him now.

We both knew – as you all must know and as we must all struggle to accept as part of the residue of fact left by the scientific method of testing disprovable ideas – that nature itself has no intentionality, no perfection, no ultimate predictability, and especially, no measure of good and bad, right and wrong.
But we also both knew, and I hope you all know this as well, that nothing is more important than that difference between right and wrong, except perhaps preserving our freedom to choose to act according to that difference, for better or for worse.

More than that: we also both knew from our shared sacred text of Genesis/Bereshit, that to have this capacity to distinguish right from wrong while being ourselves the products of nature, has put us in a form of exile while we are in the natural world.

So back to my conversations with Lorenzo.

Yes, we were brothers. The word “brother” has two meanings, and it is essential to elaborate on that distinction before I can say anything more about Lorenzo.

There is the brother who carries a similar but distinct version of DNA from the same parents as one does, and there is the brother who carries a similar but distinct version of the mental world as one does. These populations of brothers can be different because a mental world is not encoded in the chromosomes of the fertilized egg that becomes a person.

These chromosomes encode about ten or twenty thousand different machines and bricks, called proteins. These proteins assemble themselves and each other into the physical structure of a person: we are mostly made of water, some salt, and the majority of the rest is protein, with the DNA that encodes proteins running a distant third in amount, if not in importance.

From the beginning of the era of DNA sequencing it was clear that there was a problem with our DNA: the sum of the sequences needed to encode all those proteins was much, much less than the total amount of DNA in our chromosomes. About 1 or 2 percent, no more.

So what was the other 98% of the DNA doing? It was initially called junk DNA. This label summarized what was known about it: it had no known use, but there it was; that is, it was like the junk we keep around without any use, but not like the garbage we throw away.

Today it has become clear that most if not all of that 98 percent of our DNA has survived natural selection not by being junk, but by being the circuitry of gene expression. Some of that circuitry plays out as the emergence of hundreds of different tissues from the descendants of a single fertilized egg cell, so that each of us is a human being, and not just a ball of about a million billion identical cells. But the preponderance of the circuitry of gene expression has a social function.

“Come on, Bob!” I can hear Lorenzo saying. “Social? Give me a break.” And if he were here he would smile and even guffaw his special laugh, seeing my face fall, as I dug deep inside myself to find the courage to argue back.
Yes, our DNA encodes in each of us the construction of a body and brain, both capable of both experiencing the world and of storing experiences as memories and as feelings. Some of these are held in language, others not.

The way our DNA does this is through allowing experience of one or another sort to tune and re-tune circuits of gene regulation in our bodies and in our brains. These circuits – the main function of that 98% of our DNA that does not encode a physical structure – need not only interact inside our bodies. They can also require social interaction to be played, in the same way a musical instrument requires a musician.

Each of us is in this way the musician for the regulatory circuitry of feeling and memory in all the people who know us. By the same token – the Golden Rule of molecular biology – all of these people who know us play our DNA by their actions and inactions, as the expression of our genes changes in order to construct a memory or a feeling.

So, to be clear: Lorenzo and I have no known common ancestor, although we can be quite sure that going back far enough, we are both descended from the African humans who left for Europe, Asia and the Americas between 60,000 and 10,000 years ago. Like everyone here tonight, we are both American Africans. But we were also brothers, because we thought in so similar a way.

Even before we met we had spent our time on rituals of communal prayer and on caring for others. Most deeply, we each had separately discovered how much we could learn from people whom society at large had discarded as of no utility: the difficult, damaged, and dying people we both knew were our most profound teachers.

Though the science is still in its infancy, I will make the prediction that in time we will be able to understand the underlying similarities in experience-based gene-regulatory circuitry that Lorenzo and I had shared, despite our lack of initial common ancestry.

One last thought, and then a poem.

In my tradition, the world took six days to be created, and then it enjoyed its first day of Rest, its first Sabbath. From that one until today, it had been a gift and an honor to observe the return of the Seventh Day, and in my observance this has meant that colleagues and students know that I will not read email nor do work on a Saturday. From sundown Friday to sundown Saturday is a time set aside for communal prayer and contemplation of that un-natural notion of telling right from wrong, good from bad, and then choosing inside that distinction, how to act and when to be silent.

So I am here right now finally to thank Lorenzo for this gift of spending the last hours of my Sabbath with you, doing precisely that in his honor, as the sun goes down and the new week begins.

Now for the poem. I suppose W. H. Auden is as far from Lorenzo and from me as any guy could be, in ancestral terms. But as a poet, he writes in the language
and the voice that Lorenzo and I shared. On the eve of World War 2, on September 1, 1939, he wrote this poem, just around the time that Lorenzo and I began our journeys.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1939
by W.H. Auden

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture
Of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or
good.

The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote
About Diaghilev
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;
'I will be true to the wife,
I'll concentrate more on my work,'
And helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,
Who can reach the dead,
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;

Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

I'll say good night, and ask that we all pray in our different ways to hold on to the affirming flame by which Lorenzo continues to light our way.