

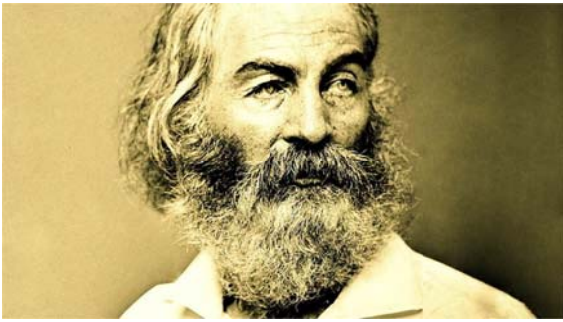
## “Yet God Used It For Good”

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Genesis 45:1-9, 14-15 = God may use the evil we create for good

**W**hat is the most beautiful word in the English language? English has so many beautiful words, there are lots of candidates for the honor.



For Walt Whitman, after having the horrors of the Civil War seared into his consciousness; Whitman says in one of his poems that the most beautiful word of all is: *reconciliation*.<sup>1</sup>

He's right, *reconciliation* should be considered one of the most beautiful expressions in any language. Reconciliation represents the very foundation for everything else: peace, justice, mutuality, equality, forgiveness.

*Reconciliation* in one form or another can be found in an arc from Genesis to Revelation ~ a truly elemental word in Scripture. The entire panorama of Scripture is God's millennia's long search to heal every breach: from the breaking of our relationship with God at the very beginning, to the warring madness of successive generations, to God sending the Son to reconcile the entire cosmos.



God's ultimate intention is to effect reconciliation between every person and God, between friend and foe, between ourselves and all of creation, neighbor with neighbor, nation with nation, sister with brother, parent with child, brother with brother ~ Jacob with Esau. And in our text today, Joseph with his brothers.

**J**oseph's brothers? How would you feel under the circumstances? It is a time of deep famine across the whole land. You were starving back in Canaan, even though it was the promised land.



But you find out that Egypt has plenty. So you go hat-in-hand begging to the most powerful man in Egypt. Shocking surprise! This highest official of

the most powerful nation in the world, this terrifying administrator who holds your life in his hands, he turns out to be the very brother that you in your jealousy had tried to kill. Instead you faked his death and sold him into slavery.

Face to face with Joseph, the brother you had wronged so grievously, what would you expect? Joseph is your judge, jury and executioner. You rightly deserve punishment. He certainly has the right and duty to exact justice. If we were Joseph we would want vengeance too.

But Joseph exacts no vengeance, rather we read **“Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.”** Not anger but tears of joy on being reunited with his family. Maybe, just maybe God has a hand in it.



Reconciliation is sweet ~ sweeter than honey from the honeycomb: *Reconciliation* ~ indeed the most beautiful expression in any language.

**F**or this winsome and wonderful reunion with his double-dealing brothers, rather than execution on the spot like they deeply deserve, Joseph explains it this way from *The Message* translation:

**“Don’t you see, you planned evil against me but God used those same plans for ... good, as you see all around you right now ~ life for many people.”<sup>2</sup>**

All of the sacred texts of the world’s religions wrestle with the unsettling problem of evil. Even up to the present this question of evil remains. It has perplexed philosophers, sages and prophets for millennia.<sup>3</sup>



The Bible wrestles with this question in spades in the Joseph cycle. In Genesis 45, the solution offered for at least a part of the problem of evil is this: **“You meant it for evil, but God used it for good.”** This same explanation can be found throughout Scripture, indeed throughout life: the theme of God’s care for us, even taking the evil we and other humans create, and yet using it to fulfill God’s purposes nevertheless.

**A**n analogy may help us here. There is a unique process in the making of an oriental rug. The artist stands in front of the rug as it is woven. Behind the rug are 10 year olds who the artist tells when to put in the thread and which color to use. The artist has the vision but is dependent on the hands of the weavers to make the vision a reality.



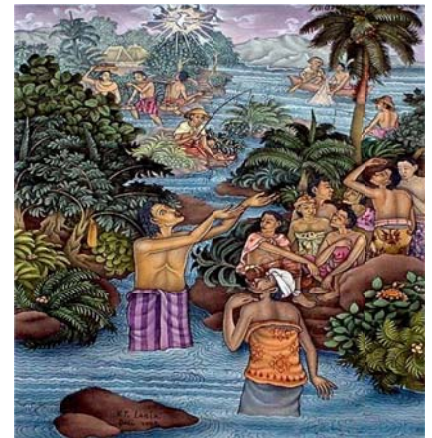
When any of the weavers makes a mistake, the artist does not make them pull it out. The artist incorporates the error into the design. This is because the artist is the only one seeing what is happening and the only one with the total view. What makes real oriental rugs so beautiful is the creative dimension added by the flaws. Jazz and blues musicians do the same thing when a mistake is made. They go with it and create something new.<sup>4</sup>

Albert Einstein said it this way:

“Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.”

We do many things that God does not want, but God can take these things and use them for good because God is the artist who has the vision and sees the whole picture. Even grievous errors can be turned to serve God’s purposes.

**T**he first Christian converts on the island of Bali were rather recent, in the 1930’s. After early efforts at evangelism had failed, twelve were baptized in a river in 1931. The fledgling Jesus community grew up so rapidly that it soon came to be perceived as a threat. These and others who turned to following Jesus were ostracized by the dominant community. They were rounded up and forced into exile to the most desolate, infertile part of Bali.



The only place they were allowed to live was as far away from civilization as possible ~ the place widely believed to be the residence of demons. While yet deportees, nevertheless over time they turned the hard and



unproductive soil into the thriving, prosperous village of Blimbingsari.

Out of necessity, they developed new more effective ways to farm, build and market. In conquering the harsh, demon lands, they became living witnesses to the power and providence of God. Exiled from their former homes under the worst of conditions, they could say with Joseph to the dominant culture, **“You meant it for evil, but God used it for good.”**

**M**ake no mistake: this explanation does not posit that God is the author of evil. Emphatically, evil is not God’s purpose for us nor for the creation. God does not make evil happen, we do ~ a consequence of the gift of free will and our own poor choices ~ a consequence of our generous God gifting us with choice and in so doing, risking that we might fail.



What a concept: even our mistakes, even our failures can be made to serve God’s plan.

Talking to business school students, the legendary Sam Walton was asked to name the single most important factor in his becoming a billionaire. Without hesitation, he answered, “Good decisions.” After a moment, the student came back with “How do you make those good decisions.” “That’s easy,” replied the famous retailer, “experience.” “Okay,” said the student, “how did you gain the right experience?” “Only one way,” said Sam Walton, “bad decisions.”

The great golfer Bobby Jones from hard experience points out:

“One learns from defeat, not from victory.”

**B**ad stuff happens. God only knows why. It is just simply a given. Everyone has had bad things happen to them. Every one of us has done some stuff we deeply regret. God for some mysterious reason doesn’t stop humans from doing terrible things. Perhaps it is to help us see the consequences of our actions and so possibly to lead us to greater maturity.

God is able to take even our failures and to bend them to serve the plan, the pattern, the purpose, the vision. At the end of the Joseph saga, God was able to reconcile even the most intractable estrangement between brothers. How



much more our petty differences? God's will for all and every one of us is to change alienation into loving relations. No matter what our human motivations, God's vision is to weave it into the whole: to take the flaws and instead to remake them, to redeem, to restore, and to reconcile. *Reconciliation* that beautiful word.

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd," 1865-6

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 50:20

<sup>3</sup> cf. Rabbi Harold Kushner's widely read book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* and Scott Peck's latest book, *People of the Lie*

<sup>4</sup> This analogy has been retold so many times that it has undoubtedly entered the public domain.