

March 2011

*With this issue, we begin a new series of reflections on the life of faith, with special attention to theological questions arising for churches of the Lutheran communion. The brief pamphlet format will be familiar to readers who enjoyed “Thinking It Over” (whose [26 issues can be found online](#)). Now this time is the clear invitation to respond to the author (whose email address you will find at the end).*

*This series is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent official positions of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this reflection in your own settings. To subscribe to this series, please contact [Mercedes.Restrepo@lutheranworld.org](mailto:Mercedes.Restrepo@lutheranworld.org). To propose a brief reflection of your own on a timely theological question, please contact [Kathryn.Johnson@lutheranworld.org](mailto:Kathryn.Johnson@lutheranworld.org).*

## Lessons from our Shaken Neighbors in the Middle East and Japan

“For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble” (Ps 27:5a).

In early 2011, numerous protests swept the Middle Eastern and Arabic countries. It all started in December 2010, in Tunisia, where Mohamad Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old street vendor from the rural town of Sidi Bouzid, doused himself with fuel and set himself on fire in protest over the confiscation of his goods and harassment by the police. Bouazizi, who sold vegetables for a living, had been gravely insulted by the police. When he protested, the police humiliated him further by spitting in his face. Bouazizi complained to the municipal authorities, but his complaint was ignored by the authorities. He set himself alight in front of the governor’s office, an act which caused considerable outrage and sparked off demonstrations and riots throughout Tunisia. Anger and violence intensified and, ten days of Bouazizi’s death, Tunisia was totally transformed. On 14 January 2011, the arrogant and cruel government had to step down and, although shaken by the casualties during numerous intense clashes, thousands of youths were celebrating the dawning of a new era.

Anger and hope transcend social class and national borders. A young, educated computer engineer and internet activist, thirty-one-year-old Wael Ghonum, made such protests public

through various social networks. Ghonum shared his concerns regarding the rights and freedom of individuals, specifically those of Khaled Said who had been tortured to death by the Egyptian police. His message, spread through the social media, attracting hundreds of thousands of people and, on 25 January 2011, more than 50,000 people turned up to express their solidarity with Said. Subsequently, Ghonum was detained for twelve days. In an interview following his release, he stated that the roots of violence in Egypt are to be found in the greedy regime. In the streets of Egypt they continued to cry *kefaya* (enough!), calling for a just sharing of resources, power and money.

While people in the Middle East are coping with the fallout from recent political events, people in East Asia are suffering from the aftermath of two natural catastrophes, namely the most powerful earthquake to date (8.9 on the Richter scale) in Japan and yet another devastating tsunami. Although the Japanese people have managed to remain calm in the face of chaos, the devastation on the east coast of Japan is beyond imagination: only debris and mud remain. The extent and possible long-term effects of the damage to the nuclear reactors cannot yet be fully assessed, and an economic downturn is expected.

Those who were shaken by the earthquake, whose societies were destroyed, are desperately trying to pick up the pieces. While an Indonesian student reports that the cry *ganbare* (endure, hang in!) is echoing all over Japan, an Anglican pastor in the Chubu diocese upholds the faith of Job as his own, “there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease” (Job 14:7). Hearing those voices in the midst of calamity affirms time and again to what extent solidarity among the shaken is of significance. Such “solidarity of the shaken” is the thing we should make our own.

## Solidarity of the Shaken

The people of the Middle East and Japan share with us revealing voices and truths. Our daily activities to sustain and advance ourselves and our environment should not blind us to the shaky ground surrounding us. The Mohamad Bouazizis of this world will always knock at the doors of those institutions that safeguard their own economic and financial interests as opposed to the people’s needs. Voices crying *kefaya* will continue to disrupt the greedy. Our world can shift and shake at any time. While we are busy protecting ourselves and fortifying our homes and countries, we should, like the Japanese, find ways of being in solidarity and to go beyond our own self-interest. Again, the importance lies in the enhancement of the shared *ganbare*, rather than any technical or social security measures.

Jan Patočka, the Czech thinker who died during a police interrogation in 1977, once said that what we take from those who have been shaken is the way in which they move into posttraumatic and open-minded thoughtfulness. To be among the shaken “is to have responded to grimly disturbing experiences, not by retreating into mental amnesia but, on the contrary, by a determined attempt to rethink one’s moral attitude toward the world and to reconstruct one’s life accordingly.”<sup>1</sup>

Patočka’s engagement in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia was in the form of helping to draft *Charter 77*, a petition drawn up by a few Czechoslovakian writers and intellectuals, which demanded that the Communist government of Czechoslovakia recognize some basic human rights. Furthermore, Patočka affirmed that the shaken brought about spiritual movements as a result of their deeply violent experiences during the regime: new self-sacrificial discipline, understood as a turning away from the delusion of fleeting time toward the eternal, a genuinely open-minded thoughtfulness based on the awareness that a higher authority exists.

Not all of those who have been shaken believe in God. Nonetheless, as the faithful we can affirm that in each cultural trauma or natural calamity God will come as the one who, among the shaken, is shaking.

We can see to what extent the shape and understanding of society is also renewed by this thoughtful stance. Some are now thinking more in terms of a step-by-step, piecemeal reconstruction. Social movements are engendered by open civil societies. People’s uprisings are translated through a plurality of solidarity groups. Small can be beautiful.

Therefore, as a communion we could reaffirm our commitment to this understanding and identify our own vocation in the light of what the shaken bring to our daily lives.

## Communion on the Way

Our belief that it is enough (what a minimalists we are) for the church to build itself on Word and Sacrament moves us to join such movements. If the world today is best defined by those who are shaken, and the Word which defines us is rooted in the one who has been shaken and forsaken, then we can agree with the voices and truths born in the midst of adversity. And if the path is to endure in solidarity beyond self-interest, then we must witness to this in our actions and attitudes since the bread we break is never for the sake of ourselves alone, but for all. Our

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Shank is helpful in introducing the thinking of this Czech thinker, see Andre Shank, *God and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

communion is biblically defined as *bodos* (road, way, path) and, therefore, we are not developing in isolation. There exists an aspect of transience in our communion; and Luther's *theologia crucis* informs us that the experience of being shaken, shattered and homelessness is not without God's presence.

On the occasion of his installation as general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Martin Junge reminded us of the nature of the journey of our communion. As he reflected on the Gospel of Luke, he noted that the Apostles' journey on the road to Emmaus was a post-dramatic and senseless experience. Jesus disciples were disturbed and shaken by the brutality of Jesus' crucifixion. And yet, by engaging and listening in solidarity to the one who had also experienced such dramatic and shaken events, the Apostles shared and determined a new open future ahead.

If we are also to follow such journeys, not only will we share in the open future but, as Martin Junge added, our "table becomes a space of empowerment for witness."

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