

“SHANTUNG COMPOUND”

BY LANGDON GILKEY

Background on the Selection

Langdon Brown Gilkey (1919–2004) was an American Protestant theologian and author of such books as *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History*. For much of his career he was professor of theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Born in Chicago, he did undergraduate studies at Harvard and then went to China and taught English at Yenching University. Caught there during World War II, the invading Japanese put him in an internment camp with other foreign nationals, where they were forced to create a miniature society and face moral and political quandaries intensified by camp life. *Shantung Compound* (1966) is based on the journal he kept. On returning to the U.S., Gilkey earned his Ph.D. at Columbia and embarked on a career of teaching and writing. He and his wife Sonja had three children.

Group Discussion Questions

1 Consider the conditions of the internment camp—two thousand people from several nations in the space of a city block, with no running water or central heating. How do you think you would have reacted? Would you emerge as a leader or a follower? Which role is more difficult in such a situation?

2 How did the type of leadership exercised by people like “Stone of Standard Oil” work in the camp? What do you think of their need to have the “authoritative voice”? What “intangibles” emerged as the real source of power in this setting? What lessons do you draw from this for leadership today?

3 In the early selections, Gilkey talks about the technical problems and how the “business mind” took charge. Contrast this with the passage in “A Place of One’s Own” where he discusses the “deepest lesson” he learned. What lesson is that? Do you see applications from his experience for other attempts to address human problems with technology and technique?

4 What virtues and traits of character were most needed and most valued in this setting? What became of status and class? Why does Gilkey talk about virtues “claiming their rightful place”? What place do these virtues have in your society?

5 Gilkey says we can make any odd or harsh situation “normal.” He concludes that this is a fortunate trait. Do you agree? Can you think of situations where you or others have allowed an unjust situation to become the “normal” framework?

6 Compare Gilkey’s discussion of his generation’s facing World War II with the comparable issues in today’s world. How “realistic” and “idealistic” is your own belief system, in his terms? How would it deal with a crisis of similar gravity?

7 Consider his first move to faith, as part of an “intellectual conviction.” Can you relate to this motivation? What does he see as its weakness? What caused him to regain an understanding of the “relevance” of religious faith?

8 Read the story of Gilkey’s time on the Housing Committee. How did people react to his presence? How did they respond to his “rational arguments”? What did he finally do? Would you have responded differently? What did this experience do to his understanding of human nature and of morality?

9 Do Gilkey’s conclusions about human nature follow logically, as it were, from the evidence he presents? What does he see as the limits of our good will? What surface factors permit people to be “determinedly unaware” of human self-interest? Why, does he say, is such denial so common? Do you agree or disagree?

10 What is your ultimate concern, your “center of loyalty”? Would it stand up to the forced “realities of camp life”? How do you respond to Gilkey’s suggestions in the concluding section?

11 Gilkey argues that unwanted events like his internment can be ultimately creative, even providential, leading us to a more vivid life than we would plan for ourselves. What experiences in your life support or belie this conclusion?

Further Reading

- ♦ *Steering Through Chaos: Vice and Virtue in an Age of Moral Confusion*, The Trinity Forum (NavPress 2001) (contains two different selections from *Shantung Compound*)
- ♦ “The Oak and the Calf,” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1992
- ♦ “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Viktor Frankl, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1998
- ♦ “Surprised by Goodness,” Phillip Hallie, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2002