



Fables and Reflections

Rogan Wolf

Forward

When I wrote a book about the structure of the brain and its influence on culture, I did not expect for one minute that it would inspire artists, poets and musicians in the way that it has. I find it deeply touching to be asked by Rogan Wolf to write a brief forward for these clever and insightful prose poems – for that is what they are. He feels my book provides a fitting context for them. But their beauty and the imagination that created them are all his. They are full of wisdom that we need very badly to hear. I hope you enjoy them as much as I do..

Iain McGilchrist, author of “The Master and His Emissary—The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World.”

Dedication

After this collection was first written, it was produced and circulated as a kind of chapbook. I dedicated it to my son Matthew, now an adult, but at that time still a young boy. One reason for the dedication was that Jason is Matthew's second name and a character called Jason appears in the Fables, about half way through, inhabiting the same landscape as that in which the Fables were written. For this updated version of *Fables and Reflections*, I am asking Matthew to share the dedication with Nicola Knoop, in gratitude for her conviction that the Fables belong in the present and with a public, and should not be filed away as just part of my and Matthew's past.

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Fables and Reflections

Introduction

'Fables and Reflections' was first written in the spring of 1994, during a three month sabbatical spent on the southern edge of the Peloponnese. Those three months away from the UK came at the end of a period of twenty years I had spent in mental health social work, most of them as manager of community centres in London for people with long-term mental health problems.

In 1994, John Major was Prime Minister in the UK, Margaret Thatcher having lost power in 1990. It was to be another three years before New Labour won their landslide victory, insisting and promising that there was such a thing as Society, after all.

Thatcher's famous/notorious dictum denying the existence, and hence validity, of Society ("There is only the individual and that which belongs to the individual"), seemed to exemplify and be the expression of many of her government's philosophies and policies and also of the rather brutish "yuppy" climate of that time. It had left social workers feeling undermined, in question and under threat. They stood for everything she seemed to hate. Whereas she talked only of individual responsibility (and acquisition), social work meant nothing if not *social* responsibility and was rooted in the notion that Society not only exists but matters essentially, social work's whole point being to strive to help realise a Society that was inclusive and just. The social work function signified the State's interest and investment in the welfare of *all* its citizens, especially those in material need or prone to exclusion. Once this had seemed a consensual value, a given. But now? Were social workers and their values to be just another bunch of Wets, waiting to be sluiced out?

So 'Fables and Reflections' were not written as just a long backward look at one individual's focus and work history. They were an attempt to make sense, from a vantage-point in mid-life, of where that work belonged in its space and time. In effect, they were asking the question, "where now for social work?" ; where now for the values of right action and social responsibility and social inclusion, which uphold social work? By implication and inescapably, they were also asking, albeit tentatively: "where now for Society?"

And further, if Society has something to do with sustaining connection between individuals and communities ; if it is more - in other words - than merely a matter of setting loose "me and mine" to go hunting, then what value and what meaning do we give to the skills and strategies and supports necessary for the nurturing of human connection, both individual and institutional?

And if "humankind cannot bear very much reality"¹ and so recoils from that which is central, yet uncertain, core, yet in flux, and instead tends *en masse* to grasp at dogma and demonising and distraction, all the many forms in which we shape our golden

calves, in preference to serving the awkward and hard-to-measure skills of love² and true recognition, then how do we keep practising those skills, in a climate of denial, how do we stay operational, against a tide of fear ?

So, the 'Fables and Reflections' themselves tread warily and a bit from the side. They seek to offer, not just understandings, but strategies - and strategies for survival, no less than strategies for advance.

In 2013, the year this introduction was written, it is actually depressing and maybe even frightening, how topical and still present these pieces seem to be. It forces us to ask, what did New Labour really achieve ? At *base*, the place where all of us have to go at some point, securing and binding, like divers shoring up the foundations of the tottering cathedral, did they do anything meaningful to renew community ? These sixteen years later, with the Right in power again and wielding axes, can we say that Society in the UK is fundamentally more sound and healthier, more socially responsible, and less fixated on individual material gain, than it was in 1994 ? I fear not. In fact, far from it. Fundamentally, I notice nothing new, just the continuing withdrawal of the tide, away from the place and positions where the skills of love are upheld and can flourish.

For the purpose of making these Fables available for others to read in 2013, I have examined them for particular references to events or situations clearly fixed in that time of seventeen years ago. In the relatively few instances where such references seem seriously to date the piece in question, I have made some changes to context or example. I have found the task disturbingly easy, the changes required relatively few.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two periods is that social work itself is now just one of several disciplines or professions concerned with supporting vulnerable people in the community, whose values and skill-set are similar and now equally in doubt, discredited, denied. Thus, the question of 1994 "where now for social work ?" becomes in 2012 : "where now for social care ?" The broader question "where now for Society ?" is surely more relevant and pressing than ever.

One further 'Fable' piece has been written since that sabbatical in Greece in 1994. It is called 'Fishing and the Fundamentalists' and was written in 2006. I have included it last in the series here.

At the time of writing, 'Fables and Reflections' are also being posted, approximately one a month, onto my blog, www.roganwolf.com . When that process is complete, my Trustees have agreed that, since they are in accord with the principles and purpose of the charity Hyphen-21, I should also post them up on the website of that charity - www.hyphen-21.org

Rogan Wolf
June 2013

Footnotes

¹ from "The Four Quartets by T.S.Eliot.

² "The skills of love" is a phrase from the Metta Sutra, a Buddhist tract on kindness. Whilst the word "love" is perhaps the most abused in the language, and therefore needs to be deployed with care, I can find no better to describe that which connects I to Other and makes human society sustainable, through being respectful both of its citizens and of its environment.



Fables and Reflections

One

The Door which Strangely Opens

In front of you is a corridor which stretches on and on, lined on both sides with doors, each one of them closed. You have something to sell, something to put across, and your life and your family's lives depend on your selling it very soon, here, somewhere along this interminable corridor. It would be so much easier if there were a pattern in the way the doors were set out, a cipher, some way of determining who lives behind which doors, which doors are more worth approaching than others. But there is none. All the doors remain blank and the same - alien and opaque.

You knock on the first door. No answer. Clearly the person is not at home.

You knock on the second door. You hear noises inside, but no-one opens to you.

You knock on the third door. Someone comes out. You show your product and name its price. The person examines your product carefully and, after a while, gives you several powerful and well argued reasons why what you are attempting to sell is flawed, possibly illegal and probably already redundant.

You knock on the fourth door. Someone from inside shouts at you to go away.

You knock on the fifth, sixth and seventh doors. You get a response in all cases. This is better. Each one tells you that, sadly, you can expect no customers here, but why don't you try Door No. 15, or Door 36, or Door 73 ; there is good reason to believe that one or another of these positions will yield you something positive.

Although you have not achieved anything tangible at these three doors, and the suggestions you have received here later turn out to be barren, the interest and courtesy you've just been shown lift your spirits. However, it occurs to you later that the suggestions were not in fact so positive as at first you'd thought ; it is very likely they were just a way of saying "get lost," made by people unable to say so with directness.

Someone also responds at the eighth floor. Your products are found to be interesting but crude, unfinished. You are advised to be more specific and use more polish.

From behind the ninth door someone small and crabbed appears, who on hearing your opening spiel, hands you a thick application form and a questionnaire. She says the deadline for applications is three months away and decisions will be made six months later. Funds are short and they are inundated with applications, she says, before slamming the door shut.

No reply from several following doors, although on one of them a notice is pinned which says - "Due to the high status and valuable work of the person behind this door, she is inundated with street people who are awash in the world's pain and who seek her sponsorship. The inundation overwhelms all her capacities. Beware of the dog."

Someone from door fifteen actually questions your sanity.

And so on and so forth.

At last, at a door whose number has no significance except that it was not predictable, someone throws open their arms and hugs you, crying: "At last! Where have you been all this time? And what excellent products! So timely! I'll buy the lot!"

Afterword

It seems possible, after all, that there is no agenda, no director of operations, that nowhere and for no-one is there a pre-figured or discernible plan or pattern, hidden or manifest. Even more miraculous than the notion of individual destiny, perhaps, is this furious and hugely fertile universe we have instead, with its infinite and constant complexity, energy and opportunity.

In these conditions, you need to be active, proud and persevering; stay on your toes, keep all your resources close to hand, and sell your best products with a light heart. Time may be short. Our lives may depend on your resilient athleticism.



Fables and Reflections

Two

Dame Marjorie's dream

This is a story about two women who lived in England in the fourteenth century.

One was an anchoress. Anchorites and anchoresses were not uncommon at that time ; they were a north European version of the early desert fathers. They lived walled up in small cells often attached to the local church. There was no door for access or exit and their contact with the community was limited to whatever could be exchanged through a window. One window opened onto the church interior, so that the person concerned could take part to some degree in church services. Another window opened onto the square outside and through this, food could be passed in for survival, the slop bucket could be handed out for emptying, and words could be exchanged. But chiefly, anchorites and anchoresses gave up outer and physical lives in order the better to pursue inner and spiritual lives devoted to prayer.

The name of the anchoress was Dame Julian of Norwich. The name of the other woman was Dame Marjorie Kempe. They were both remarkable people, on the one hand ecstatically devout – each in her own way surrendered to union with the One, the Alpha and Omega - and on the other hand plain, practical and beautifully down to earth. Dame Julian wrote a famous book about her passion for God. Dame Marjorie wrote an autobiography.

The following story has been taken from Dame Marjorie's autobiography. My version is a rather free translation.

Dame Marjorie had a dream of great power and mystery. It moved, confused and troubled her. She had heard that Dame Julian “good counsel did give” so she decided to travel to Norwich to consult her about the dream.

This was a major decision, since distances were in effect much greater in those days than they are now and the roads were even more dangerous.

Eventually she reached Norwich and when she had recovered from the journey went to the cell where Dame Julian spent her life. After their greetings, Dame Marjorie explained her reason for coming and then described her dream.

Her question was this : “I do not know the meaning or significance of this dream and that of course I can accept. For who am I to know the meaning of all that happens ? But what troubles me and what I want to ask you is this: did my dream come from God or from the Devil ?”

The words she used to describe her trouble sound very foreign to most of us in this century. Like computer experts, or advanced mathematicians, talking their specialised in-speaks.

And the framework, even the trouble itself, seems unfamiliar, hard to translate into present day experience.

Dame Julian was a plain speaker and did not hesitate. She said. "It appears to me that we can only wait to find out. If Good comes from the dream, then plainly it came from God. If Evil comes of the dream, then plainly it came from the Devil."

Afterword

Deception and manipulation are even more skilled and dangerous in the twenty-first century than they were in the fourteenth.

Therefore await results of action with scepticism. For only from the harvest can you tell the seed. Only its aftermath shows you the act's true nature.

So don't expect to know them by their message, their ideology, their propaganda, their sales-talk ; not even by their aspirations or intentions, however genuine and fervent these might be ; and certainly not by the reams of figures they scatter all over the studio to stop you believing in the facts you face each day in your own house.

Know them by the actual effects of their actions over time on your and your friends' common experience.

Look for the signs of good : sufficient well-being across the board ; a cohesive community where difference and complexity is valued and caring matters ; flourishing imaginative work and a sense of artistic vibrancy ; hope and pride in the faces you see in the streets and corridors ; your own sense of being heard and having an active place in a community going somewhere.

Look for the signs of evil : major sections of the community degraded and reduced ; the community as a whole fragmented, divided, fear-filled and suspicious, its carers traumatised, simplistic ideologies and slogans made god ; inertia predominant, mediocrity all-powerful, talent feared and scape-goating everywhere ; systems malfunctioning, the language of leadership perverted, the language of truth tonguetied ; the faces all round you blank, tight and closed ; your own sense of impotence, depression, speechlessness.

Then judge and judge sanely. And *act* sanely and warmly and effectively in support of the good at whatever level is open to you. The good is always the harder option. That is why evil flourishes. But your future depends on your choice of the good. So does my future. So does everyone's future.



Fables and Reflections

Three

Opening to the Stranger

There is an ancient tradition among many peoples that the stranger should be made welcome. You offer your best food, the best of everything in the house, to the passing stranger. Many tourists around the world still benefit from the survival of this tradition in the simple communities they pass through. People with their cameras draped around their shoulders and their pockets stuffed with travellers' cheques sit at the tables of peasants who earn less in a year than a tourist earns in a month back home, and indulge themselves in their hosts' precious delicacies.

Misapprehensions can stretch to extremes. In the early seventies I talked to one woman who lived in relative poverty on her native Greek island. She felt bound to feed regularly and at great expense a group of young Americans who were camping nearby. For her they were strangers who required her hospitality. Not only that, they were clearly poverty-stricken, with nothing but a tent to live in and only jeans to wear.

She knew nothing then about the middle-class hippy drop-out scene, nor about the parental cheques which group members picked up once a week from a bank in the small port town on the other side of the island.

In apparent contrast to the hospitality tradition, is a belief which in one form or another also still persists in small rural communities. This is that the stranger is not to be trusted. You do not know him or her in the round, through the seasons, through the generations. Therefore you cannot be sure that this person is not really the Devil in artful disguise. So it is wise to assume the worst of the stranger for at least two generations.

In fact these two traditions concerning the stranger may not be as opposed to one another as they seem. It is possible that, in origin, you fêted the stranger in order to placate him/her, in order to assuage the unknown evil in him/her.

Whatever their relationship, these two apparent polarities do offer us a kind of scale of measure. They stand at opposite ends of a gauge that can assess how settled and sure of itself a community is, or a person is, or a group is, based on the hypothesis that the more settled and secure (a) feels, the more welcoming and accepting of strangeness and difference (a) is likely to be.

For, surely, few would argue that the more certain of your ground you feel, the less you will need to defend it from whatever is unfamiliar or different; the more uneasy, stressed or unhappy you are, the more dangerous the unknown will seem to you. The truly contented person looks to the unknown not with dread but with anticipation, with hope, with wonder, even with gratitude.

Therefore, self-evidently, the “ethnic cleansing” and racist atrocities we witnessed in the wars of the 1990’s, which broke open the old Yugoslavia, the war which later occurred in Kosovo, the tensions in Germany between German and Turk, the bombing atrocity in Norway in 2011, are signs of a psychic panic in which people do not know who they are or to what they belong. Without an “Us” they can believe in, they create an enemy “Them.” This in turn firms up the sense of a clear “Us” that seems so necessary. But it’s an artificial, racist and pathological “Us”, cowering behind walls, blaming all badness on the hordes that exist outside.

The healthy, secure community does not need to wall itself in, does not need to guard itself from difference and complexity. It does not need to persecute whatever is not identical.

I was once grumbling at how my ideas were continually being rejected, at how many of my letters failed even to get an answer, at how frequently my cautious overtures were treated as being actually dangerous, at how plain badly good people so often behaved in response to my addresses.

“But they don’t know you,” said the professor, surprised I hadn’t realised. “These are anxious times. In anxious times the stranger is even more suspect than usual. People hold themselves on guard. They bunker down.”

“But that’s the whole point !“ I said, hotly. “Here I come offering something that might actually help! And they ignore me ! Why treat hope like an enemy ? Why attack the life-guard ?”

“Now come on !“ he said. “People don’t want help. They just want relief. Help means change and change means anxiety. It means the unknown. Real help is the last thing people want in times like these. Oblivion is what they’re after.”

And the professor downed his pint.

Afterword

In a world of radical uncertainty and instability and in a time in which change and movement is tumultuous, ever-accelerating and omnipresent, we are all strangers to everyone else. We must act accordingly.

If you have something new to present, or find yourself in unfamiliar territory, realise immediately your position. Assess with care the morale of the people round you. The lower the morale, the higher their guard will be and the greater your danger. Adapt your strategy accordingly.

Never present a good idea to frightened people who don’t know you or to people who are depressed. They are bound to tear it down.

Instead, join them in the position in which they feel themselves to be. Genuinely seek a common ground in which they feel heard. Choose your time carefully. When they (with your skillful help) have created for themselves your good idea, be swift and generous with your praise.

Not only might you have just acted as midwife to the effective birth of your idea, you might also have just cured a wasteful and damaging depression.



Fables and Reflections

Four

The Salesman who Set up for Himself

Not so long ago, a travelling salesman came to the conclusion that, for whatever reason - his looks, his wares, the nature of the area he was travelling, the mood of the times - he was not going to win custom. Not a single door had opened to him. None would.

He was exhausted and depressed. All these great houses ! These peaceful and beautiful gardens ! And the maddening sense of these people's power and achieved position in the world ! All he needed to set himself up was here, somewhere, behind one of these doors.

And he, in contrast. Footsore, downtrodden, trying in any way he knew to say the right catch-words and slogans quickly enough to stop the door from slamming in his face, to smile warmly enough to stop the house-child from throwing a stone at him, to walk with self-assurance enough to stop the house-dog from nipping his ankles or peeing on his shoe.

And, of course, as he became more and more depressed, as he felt more and more vividly the contrast between his Have-not and their Have, his dearth and their surplus, as he experienced more and more painfully his dependence on something behind a door he had no power to open - so the worse became his selling performance and the more hopeless his prospects.

Something had to change. To continue in the same vein led nowhere except a bitter death. Any change, however startling, however risky, had more prospect of success than remaining as he was.

So he asked himself, what is the worst aspect for me of my present position ? And can I change it ?

His answer was : the worst aspect is my sense of powerlessness, my conviction which destroys my soul, that all I need to flourish is behind someone else's locked door.

And, yes. I can change it. I will change it.

So he went away and spent the last of his money on some cheap battening, some nails and some pitch. He quickly returned, struggling under the weight of all these materials, and began to build a stall on the nearest street corner. When it was finished he stood back and looked it over. It was tiny and fragile. He was proud of it. He had become a maker.

He got inside, set out his wares and waited for the police to arrest him for obstruction, for council officials to harass him for contravening a variety of bye-laws, for the dogs of the neighbourhood to adopt his stall as their lavatory, for the outraged neighbours to come running from their rich houses to drive him away.

Three children passed his stall on their sleek mountain bikes, each the last word in expensive bike technology. 'Hey' they shouted. 'That's a nice house Can we come in?'

A woman drove by on her way home from the supermarket. She stopped the car. 'What are you selling? Oh, now, that does look a bit special! How charmingly authentic and one-off! Don't go away! I'll be right back with some cash!'

In the evening, several men paraded in a file from the tube station, swinging their umbrellas, clutching their evening papers, loosening their ties - and when they saw the flimsy little stall they all gathered round in an excited cluster.

'That looks really rather amusing,' one said.

'What fun' said another.

'Can we join in?' asked a third. 'Something to do at the week-end and all that.'

Soon there was a small stall at every street corner in the neighbourhood. Every street held a weekly street party.

As for the salesman, he grew wings. No dog ever peed on him again.

Afterword

If what you have to offer is sane, careful and sound, then it is badly needed. You have no right to lose heart. In times of fear, defensiveness and dislocation, your own resources are your greatest asset and the unexpected is everyone's best hope. Do not be afraid. Build. And build just here, in this place where you are. It is the best place. Hurry.



Fables and Reflections

Five

The Fisherman who Stopped Bailing

One day, a fisherman went out in his boat as usual, intending to draw in the nets he had set the previous evening.

The weather felt changeable, the atmosphere charged. But not enough to keep him ashore. He was experienced and felt confident in his judgment. It was safe to go out. He'd not be going far. If the weather got really heavy, there'd be plenty of time to come back in. And if by some exceptional chance, a storm broke on him faster than he could run before it, he would cope. He'd coped many times before.

But what actually happened had no precedent in all his long experience. The world ended.

There was a huge howling, grinding noise on the fisherman's horizon and as he watched, the land which had carried him and his family, his neighbours, his friends, his fellow citizens, his fellow countrymen, his fellow humans, his fellow creatures and all the things of the earth, the land which had carried all this life safely and securely like a great ship through the sea of the universe, now slowly sank. Huge billows of smoke, black, yellow, purple, red, flung themselves into the air. Lightning played and sang all over the surface where the land had been. It was as if a vast electric fire had fallen into a monstrous bath.

Then, several miles away, the fisherman saw a great wave rolling towards him. He shrieked and instinctively began to fight for his life....

Days later, the fisherman drifted in his boat on a sea as calm and smooth as glass. He had survived! There was still air in the world. He breathed it deep. There was still gravity retaining him in this life-preserving atmosphere.

There was still a round world on which he could live, even though it was nothing now but water, a smooth round drop of liquidity hanging in Space.

There was still his brave little boat, with its thin planks and few provisions, suspended on the surface of the round drop.

There was still this I, perched on its platform, the last of all life in the star-scattered universe.

The great wave had almost destroyed him. The boat had just managed to breast it, ascending almost vertically, but the boat's descent and the tremendous impact it suffered when it reached the base of the wave, had sprung several of its planks.

To stay afloat in the universe, the fisherman had to bail almost incessantly. He had virtually no time to do anything else.

For instance, he could not set sail, even if he had wanted to. He would have sunk before the sail was up.

But, in a way, he was glad of the bailing. It kept his body active and his head empty. Splash! Splash! Splash! went his jugfuls into the sea. He was proud of how completely he filled the bailer each time.

He kept a good rhythm going. Gurgle! Gurgle! Gurgle! went the sea as it wormed its way back into the boat, seeping, insinuating, insisting.

This would end, of course, when his provisions ran out. Then nothing of life or humanity would remain on the bald hanging sphere of salt water that was all that was now left of the world. The fisherman didn't think or plan. He kept on bailing.

After a day and a night, weakening fast, he experienced one of the greatest joys of his life. He was not alone! Only a few hundred metres away was another human! Adrift in another small battered fishing boat, furiously bailing. They saw each other at the same moment and both shrieked their joy, their relief, their shared desolation and unhealable loss, their shame and their hopelessness. And then they remembered their leaking boats and bent to their bailing again.

During the next twelve hours, more boats came drifting on the currents to join the first two. Soon there were seven of them, seven survivors. The sea seemed to want to draw them together. And each boat contained a figure frantically bailing, occasionally snatching a drink or bite, but only for a few seconds at a time, so closely was the water pressing in, pressing in.

Suddenly the first fisherman, almost exhausted, allowed himself to think. "Friends!" he screamed out. "What are we doing? We're going to die!"

"Listen to me! There are seven of us. We could get together. We could join forces and build a real ship - something large and sound and sea-worthy. Then we could rest. And afterwards we could sail, and steer, and set a course. Who knows, we might even discover a new world. A new beginning!"

For a long time the only sound was the rapid and regular *splash, splash, splash* of seven jugfuls of water being thrown into the sea; and the *gurgle, gurgle, gurgle* of the sea mercilessly working its way inboard again.

At last, with a roar of rage and pain, the answer came.

"Fool! Stop tantalising us! It's not real. It's not real. The minute I stop bailing to build something solid my boat will sink and I'll drown. Think. Think. And don't disturb me. I'm busy. I'm bailing."

Afterword

I am in two minds as to how to finish this story. It is my belief and to some extent my experience that it is extremely difficult to persuade people to stop bailing their little boats day in day out, even though their provisions are fast running out, even though there's a storm blowing up.

If I am right in this, then the seven survivors bailed for as long as they could and then stopped. They and their little boats all sank and there was a pure silence everywhere and for all time.

The alternative is that, by one means or another, they all came to realise that co-operating to build a real ship should and could be done.

Three jumped out of their boats and swam to the others, dragging their own boats behind them. Using the four remaining boats as a platform, still being bailed in each case by their respective owners, the three broke up their boats and combined their materials to make a large, sound and steady raft. Then all the survivors climbed onto the raft and broke up the remaining boats. These formed the basis for the large vessel originally envisaged. The intermediate stage made up of the first three boats was used at the very end to complete the new craft. They named it "The Ark" and, after a long rest, sailed away.

For their food, they fished. Rain provided them with their drink. I am confident that they did not discover a new world. They had to make do with being the world themselves, burdened as they were with the appalling history of their race.

But at least they learnt to work together in sailing and maintaining "The Ark." This being the one slender platform for humanity in the whole universe, they were pragmatic enough to realise they had to look after it.

And what we can we learn from this story ?

Let's try this : that bailing your own small boat has no value in the world whatsoever except insofar as doing so gives a small pocket of air some occupation for a short while. If you aspire to *value*, you need to become expert at distinguishing without prejudice between what in your life is just bailing and what is building. Once you have achieved that, you would be wise to proceed carefully and methodically to add to your building and subtract from your bailing.



Fables and Reflections

Six

Jason on the Walls

There was a time and a world in which very few people existed. Those who did tended to cluster together in small groups surrounded by high walls. They built the walls to protect them from the other groups. So a crow of that world, passing overhead, would have noted a great deal of empty open space, interrupted from time to time by a heavily protected nucleus of intense human energy, packed with warm life on the inside, guarded cold and wary on the outside.

Crowded inside their walls, people died young. Their average life expectancy was less than thirty. So you can imagine that the atmosphere in which they lived and sought to immortalise themselves had some urgency, intensity and perhaps fatalism. That atmosphere was also greatly influenced by the youth of most of the population. Relatively few people survived to adulthood. Relatively fewer to old age. How did young mothers deal with the loss of so many of their children, so many infants? How did the few old people deal with the fact that, in many cases, all their children were already dead, leaving them hanging, dry and withered, the last fruit on their tree?

There was no nationalism as we have it in our present world. Very occasionally, city states formed a temporary alliance in order to repel outside “aliens” or “barbarians”. But no alliance lasted long. Your main and only consistent reference point was the city to which you belonged. It formed your identity, your neighbourhood, your surrounding world. Beyond was barbarian emptiness, danger, night, non-being.

Neither were there the same definitions of evil as those we are taught today. (Such developments in definition have not of course improved our behaviour in contrast to theirs ; but it has given us guidelines by which to judge our transgressions). For instance, the concept of loving your neighbour was simply unknown there. To be loyal, yes. To be honourable, yes. But to love thy neighbour as thyself was incomprehensible as a guide to behaviour. And to start a war was not seen as wrong at all. No moral justification was required for the war-maker, real or trumped up. Kings became pirates for a while - for the adventure, the glory, the loot. Their victims might hate them as they died ; but wouldn't see them as doing wrong.

Therefore, you lived in your city with the clear understanding that, without warning or pretext, an army could one day appear outside your walls, as likely to speak your own language as to speak a strange one, and this army's simple intention would be to steal you and yours or to destroy you and yours. No mercy expected and none given. If the besieging army was successful, it was very likely to raze the city and slaughter all its inhabitants, give or take the odd strong or good-looking one.

Given the conditions in which you lived, and the extent of your reliance on your city,

that destruction meant not just the end of you but the end of your world as you knew it. And explains why each day spent in safety and in peace would have been lived at a high pitch of urgency and celebration. And explains why your city must invest in high strong walls in case, tomorrow, death flew down from the hills and nested on your battlements. And why the decision of where to site a new city must have felt as crucial to the decision-makers as if they and their gods were participating in the very creation of the world. The survival of a people and their place in history would depend on whether they got it right.

Not infrequently, cities which had established themselves in one place, sent out colonists to found a new city in another place. Here is the story of one such example. A rich and highly developed city named Argos sent a group of colonists along the coast to the east. The group of thirty was an élite task force, carefully selected and trained to build a new world. They were not just fighters, builders and agriculturalists, but philosophers, scientists, social scientists, poets. It was like a new race.

In Argos, close study had been given to all the forms of government then known, all the different systems adopted and developed by which people sought to live successfully together in their isolated cities. How best do you enable a population to exist harmoniously and in celebration of being, while at the same time adequately protected from the real and ever-present dangers lurking outside the walls? The question was fundamental, the answers varied and, to one degree or another, all unsatisfactory.

So, in preparation for the colonists' venture, a carefully selected gathering of constitutionalists had sought to create a new balance, a new political entity, an evolution from previous experiments.

They rejected the often wild inconsistencies and cumbersome responses of the democratic forms of government that some city states had developed, in which decisions of enormous moment were arrived at too often by a mere pandering to mob instinct and mob mood, and power was too often achieved by people merely skilful and unscrupulous in manipulating mob mood to suit their own egocentric and short-sighted purposes.

They were also determined to avoid the random cruelty, injustice and sterility of a dictatorship, which ruled by terror and sycophancy, lies and betrayal, secrecy and the clique, and worked of course even more obviously for the benefit of the Few against the interests of the City as a whole.

They sought a balance through which a leadership of proven talent and relevant qualities could make decisions and carry responsibility on behalf of the community, while at the same time remaining answerable and open and accountable to their fellow-citizens, each of whom was engaged according to capacity and situation.

By mass ballot, the colonists would elect a single leader for a period of five years. There would be a council of advisors and critics, selected by the People. There would be a Forum for the debate of issues, whose strict procedures would create and protect a space for reflective work in quietness and humility, and not just an opportunity for squalling and power-play and mob manipulation.

The structures they set out thus gave real power to an individual to govern in the way best suited to his or her nature and strengths, while at the same time denying that individual absolute powers.

The colonists' ship, 'The Argos,' stayed at sea for many weeks, heading east from sunrise to sunrise. The sea, tideless, stayed calm and smooth, so that the creeping ship and its wake were like a small tear in a shawl of silk, or fragile insect creeping across a bare plain, still and hazy under the sun.

The journey was uneventful. The group of colonists proved well chosen, in terms of its comprehensive mix of skills, its general high level of competence and the open-heartedness and congeniality of its component members. But one of their number soon emerged as the obvious leader. His name was Jason, tall of stature, powerfully built, golden-haired. He stood out due to his incorruptible integrity, his intelligence, his decisiveness, his ability to hear, inspire and communicate on a level with each of his companions, and his ability to carry decisions lightly but squarely, once made. After a fortnight, they appointed him as their first leader, by unanimous vote.

Further and further east the ship nosed its way through silken sea, oar-stroke by oar-stroke. Jason was convinced that they should pass beyond all known settlements. He said "In areas where people have already explored and settled, the best sites for a city will probably already be barred to us. And if through luck or skill we were to find one better than the site the settlers here have chosen for themselves, then they will come and fight us for it before we've had a chance to raise our defences."

Sailing along the coast, looking out into hinterland wild, empty and still, a land apparently devoid of all creature life, devoid of all temperate vegetation, having only a low-slung prickliness and yellow roughness for its thin coat, Jason found himself increasingly unsure of their place in this landscape and even in these days they were living. Were they indeed settlers in the earliest history of this apparently new and fiercely innocent, virgin world? Or were they the survivors, heavy-laden and unconscious, of an ancient, ruined world, scouring it here for a last shame-filled foothold after some unspeakable cataclysm? Was this emptiness truly a before-beginning, a preliminary? Or was it nothing but a vast blasted crater, an after-ending? How much human history could a world bear?

He wondered at the whole meaning of this enterprise, of any enterprise, any staking out of ground and walling it with stone. How did they dare? What was their right? Just to exist through the seasons of a single year was hard enough, a significant achievement, a cause for celebration and gratitude to the gods. Why this further thrusting out, this extra claim? Was it heroism, the subject of some saga of the future? Or just brutish presumption? Were they fulfilling their destiny? Or just abusing through greed, restlessness and plain unawareness the miracle and mystery of their place on this brilliant, tumultuous, bewildering world?

He thought further of the sheer precariousness of life under their sun. Even to eat involved risk - the hunt, the life-consuming labour of sowing, tending, reaping. Even moments associated with joy and passion were a leap into a most ominous darkness.

The couple in their time of passion entered blind into a corridor where at the next doorway childbirth waited and death hovered in avid attendance. To throw yourself into the embrace of your lover - was it a knowing and loving act in magnificent acceptance and celebration of life's richness and danger? Or a quick stupid grab at a given opportunity, a flight from awareness, an ego-centric act of plunder, detached from all sense of consequence? This ship full of the best of Argos - the beautiful slow flight of a heron across the sun? Or a quick grab, an ugly greedy scuttling, half asleep, across the golden face of a doomed world?

At length they reached unpeopled ground. Provisions had begun to run short. Jason, in consultation with a talented council already chosen, directed the rowers to steer their ship to the land.

Briefly they celebrated their safe journey's end and then broke up. Search parties went out, some to hunt, others to look for the best site for their city. The majority stayed behind to build a defensible camp.

We now approach the climax of the story.

Two possible sites were identified. Both had advantages. Both had snags. Neither was the obvious, the outstanding choice. Nowhere in this whole region was there a site which spoke to them - 'Welcome! Here you are at last! All is ready for you!'" Omens, sacrifices, proved inconclusive. A difficult decision had to be made. And a decision on how to make that decision had to be made.

Jason said :

"My friends, I do not shirk a decision which is mine to make, a consequence which is mine to shoulder. You know that. And I accept that the role you've given me requires me to take some weight of responsibility from you, to free you to deal in the day to day with turning this wild place into a new world that dignifies and gives grace to our people.

"But I believe this decision of where to place ourselves, what is our ground, what position do we take that we must commit ourselves to defend, is not mine to make alone. It is for the whole group of us. We all live or die by this decision.

I do not have the power of life or death over you. I did not create anyone here. And it will be the gods of Justice and Destiny who will decide when each of us is to die. I am not a god to determine the world in which my people move and which gives them their shape. I am only your leader.

"Accordingly, this decision is for us all to make and I swear on my life to support in good faith what the majority here decide should be done, and to devote all that is in me, heart and soul, to ensure that our decision is one of which in time the poets will sing."

The majority of his council and virtually all the remainder of the wider group were passionate in their disagreement : "It is precisely *your* task to carry the burden of this decision and it is precisely because we think you have the extra capacities needed to

shoulder its weight that we chose you to lead us. Of course we'll support you in your carrying of it. But you have no right to spread its weight wider than yourself."

A pregnant woman shouted, "How can I feed my child peacefully and with a whole heart if my mind is full of anxiety over the decision you have shed and left at my hearth? What can I say to my child if the aliens take us - that I bore him only to kill him? You carry it, Jason! You must shoulder it. It's for you. If in the end I have to curse you for your betrayal of us, better that than all of us die self-accused, having betrayed ourselves."

The debate destroyed Jason as the inspirational leader he might have been and ruined the prospects of the colony. He agreed to take the decision onto himself and, having consulted thoroughly and wisely, he made a coherent choice and was able to explain his reasoning in a way which convinced the settlers. The choice was a sound one and they were able to find workable solutions to the various problems and disadvantages the site entailed.

But the group's faith and excitement in him was fatally damaged by his attempt to spread the burden of this crucial decision. Paradoxically, it was also disturbed by its own ability to win the argument and change his mind. And as for Jason, he in turn was never able to renew his faith or excitement in a people unable to carry responsibility for its own destiny.

Now lacking that first binding current of shared inspiration, the colonists worked hard at realising the original vision. The city rose. The population increased. But neither ever shone. The hope and promise in the concentrated talent of that initial group somehow never regenerated itself into the beacon of splendour and civilisation that all had hoped the city would become. It was never more than just a doggedly surviving outpost of its parent city Argos.

Jason toiled and played his part to sufficiency and exhaustion, holding unresolved inside himself his disappointment, his questions and ultimately his disbelief in the value of the whole heroic enterprise.

At the end of his five years, he laid down his mantle like a man shedding five lifetimes. He exchanged the mantle for a tattered old goat skin with horns, which someone had gilded with gold. So Jason left the city to wander and ponder on his own in the dangerous waste and openness, where walls could not follow. He took to delivering himself of his thoughts and ideas through great speeches made from a high ledge, where only the odd tortoise, lizard or passing falcon could hear him.

The city eventually fell into ruin, not as a result of attack, but of irrelevance, neglect and depopulation.

Afterword

There is a difference in difficulty between an overhang that is thirty feet up and an identical one which is three thousand feet up; the difference exists in the mind of the climber.

How to forget the drop ? Even more than down below, you the climber on a high face need to concentrate on climbing carefully, in perfect sympathy with the surface presently supporting you. But how to keep your mind clear of distractions - such as raw terror ?

All your decisions are irreversible, their possible consequences beyond your conception. The only thing you can be sure of is that none of them will ever leave the world. All of them, however large or apparently small, are accordingly of equal moment, each one of them crucial.

No decision, on the other hand, can possibly be perfect and the human capacity to make good, to respond constructively and creatively to conditions whatever these may be, is almost inexhaustible.

Therefore, relax. Give all of yourself to your decisions. Whatever your exposure, try to climb as you always do, with scrupulous balance and present care.



Fables and Reflections

Seven

The people who don't appear

The modern state cannot absolve itself of its responsibility to care for the welfare of all its citizens. If it fails to do so it will not survive. Nor perhaps will humanity.

The British Victorians were the first to encounter the effects of the industrial revolution which transformed Europe in the nineteenth century. It took them almost a century to realise that the old social structures of British rural stability - family, church, community, voluntary work by the wealthy and the old Poor Laws as last resort - could not stem the tide of human need, human abuse and human wastage caused by the convulsive social changes and accelerating scientific and technical advances that were now sweeping all of them along.

When the nation's young men stepped forward to join the army at the start of the Boer War, some of Britain's patricians saw for perhaps the first time the full human consequences of unbridled Free Trade in an urban State. The young Winston Churchill asked how the nation could possibly manage an empire when it wasn't even capable of supporting the health of its own native citizens.

Soon afterwards, with pressure for increased state regulation and co-ordination in matters of social policy by now irresistible, the first clumsy components of the British Welfare State began to be put together by the Liberal Government of 1906 under Lloyd George. Several decades later, for reasons and causes which surely still warrant careful and comprehensive study and analysis, those coordinating structures began to be dismantled by the Thatcher governments. The Tories under John Major appeared to slow but not to reverse the process. Then came New Labour's altogether more ambivalent contribution, re-asserting the need for more management from centre, but with one remarkable result that inequality between rich and poor continued to increase during their time in power. At the time of writing, the gloves have come off again and under the Coalition government, and despite the Lib Dems, we are back essentially to Tooth and Claw.

But the impetus behind the State's responsibility for social welfare must not be seen in terms of patrician's guilt, the moral responsibility of a privileged class to share some of wealth's benefits with the under privileged. The guilt and concern of good Samaritans is not sufficient to shape or sustain a modern state. And it is simply inadequate as a description of, or explanation for, the centrality of social responsibility in the structures and management of a state capable and worthy of supporting humanity through the 21st century.

From a purely pragmatic political and economic point of view, no state can afford the avoidable human loss and waste that comes from inadequate education, from under-funding of health care, from unemployment, from poor housing, from the

unremitting degradation of poverty, from the personal belittlement and alienation caused by having no influence, no prospects, no access.

The waste incurred by a Society run at the cost or to the exclusion of a population of Have-nots – whether these Have-nots exist within its frontiers or beyond them - is complex, profound and utterly corrosive.

The simplest form of waste is of course the cost of sustaining that group with what remnants of welfare provision still exist.

Then there is the further cost of containing the consequences of the deprivation suffered by the group i.e. its extra health care needs, the greater crime levels that follow, etc.

Less easily quantifiable is the social cost of running a divided society, in which the ruling group obsessively expends resources, energies and ingenuity in excluding and further weakening the deprived minority group, and in justifying itself for doing so - the chase for Benefit fraudsters, the cuts in Benefits, the scapegoating of single mothers, the massaging of Unemployment figures, the denial of the connection between poverty and crime, the denial that poverty even exists, etc., etc., etc.

The steady corrosion by these means of the delicate and deeply complex communal ties - including, crucially, the ties created by language and of truthfulness in language - which maintain a Society's integrity, cohesion, energy and stability, is subtle, long-term, and impossible to measure. But the corrosion is real, substantive and far-reachingly debilitating and threatens the health and future of civilised Society.

And, finally, there is the even less quantifiable waste of human resources that might otherwise have been available to a Society presently floundering and at sea. I speak partly in economic terms, partly in terms of contributions in non-material fields that might otherwise have been made. We are living through times of great moral and social crisis but also of opportunity. In such times, new answers, new solutions, new resources are probably our only hope. Where will they come from ? The old coffers ? The old thoroughfares ? The old dead heads ?

Anyone awake and unprejudiced who functions on the ground knows that it is simply not true that, in a Society now effectively regressed to an unbridled survival of the fittest, free-for-all state of being, only the unfit fall to the bottom of the heap, to be lost and wasted. Who knows what Society is losing by neglecting the needs of so many of its people, people whose contribution it cannot afford to be without ? Those who flourish in the jungle are not necessarily the best that humanity can offer and our future survival most certainly depends on far richer and more varied human qualities than jungle warlords appear to provide. The resources we need to save us may well by now be sprawled in some decrepit alleyway, a far, far distance from the main squares where the burghers strut, the 4 x 4's parade and the sweepers sweep.

Just to collect myself, as I pursue this purely pragmatic line of thought : I began with the patrician's or the good Samaritan's sense of social obligation, and "moral imperative". I then looked at various forms of un-economic waste created by a State that does not place social responsibility at the centre of its concerns.

Now, moving on from the notion of waste I shall make the pragmatist's final point by asking this most obvious question : what of the social consequences of the division, fragmentation, and anti-social behaviour of a State and a society that does not take responsibility for the social welfare of all its people? What do people do who are faced day in day out with their own lack of access, not just to the goodies cunningly recommended by the adverts and vividly displayed by the shoppers who can afford them, but to the essentials for health and dignity? What do people do who over too much time are left to live lives too greatly debased, who look ahead to their children's prospects and see only absolute hopelessness, who arrive in the end at a state in which they have nothing left to lose?

We keep saying, oh conditions here are not as bad as that - meaning that they are as bad as that somewhere else, over there. We keep saying, oh it couldn't happen here, meaning that it is happening in quite a few places and they are not that far away but still they're over there. Just.

The truth is that it is happening here. The truth is that the present thrust of policy, behaviour and attitude almost requires it to happen here, that it is driving us further and further down a road whose natural end is violent social protest. Do we need to drive our own people that far?

And that is merely one small and obvious aspect of the truth. Equally urgent, a fact that has always faced us but never more obviously than now, is the present all-inclusiveness of our own back yard. We can't shut the gate on something going on "over there" anymore. It's all here and we're all involved in it. We have already, almost certainly, played a significant part in the causes of the turmoil "over there" anyway and now at a fundamental level have to play a significant part in the solution to it. Let the bell toll, let the siren whine, anywhere in the world; the bell tolls and the siren whines for us, for all of us.

And one final and perhaps unworthy point to finish this whole line of thought : there is a difference between desperate rioters running down your own street and a desperate people seething in streets thousands of miles away. You are in danger of encountering the first through the medium of bottle, stone, stick or knife; you are in danger of encountering the second through the medium of organised war.

I have spent a long time pursuing the pragmatic line. I believe it offers important points, genuine aspects of reality. None of them are sufficient, however; and some are actually rather ugly. Is there anyone, for instance, who did not feel uneasy at the point made a few moments ago, suggesting that someone now sprawled in an alley-way might in better conditions have been of real help in moving us on from our present sense of drift and malaise - as if caring for people is justified only by the return one might get from the improved condition of one or two. The point belongs in the grocer's shop and in the accountant's office and is undeniably an aspect of reality. But its ugliness is not reality's ugliness. It is not ugly in the sense that "this is how the world is if only you had the bottle to see it". It is ugly because it leaves out most of the truth and is therefore a distortion of the truth and an attack upon it.

The truth is simply of course, that whoever your neighbour is and in all that your neighbour does, your neighbour matters as much as you do, and to behave as if this were not so, as if you can stand aside from reality and treat people as just commodity, components and elements you can break down, as just mass and material that you can shape and manipulate, as just figures you can draw in common on a sheet, as just passing images on your wall, having no commonality or connection with yourself, is to live and act in a dangerous and anti-social state of delusion.

Delusion is a very common human state, often immensely difficult to wake from. It has been well said that humankind cannot bear very much reality. And reality does feel especially hard to bear at present. In times of pain, confusion and helplessness, to regress to a child's shielded world of ego-maniac delusion can be a tempting option. Perhaps some of us have never really left that world.

As a young child, I am quite certain that I exist at the centre of the universe and everyone I encounter exists solely to serve my purposes or to minister to my needs. But more than that, when I pass down the road I find it logically quite conceivable that people I've just met on the pavement simply disappear the moment I can't see them. As a child I know that the experience of being me is absolutely and centrally different from anyone else's experience. By this I mean that no-one else's experience is real. I am I and no-one else in the entire universe knows what being I is like.

Everyone else is something different, some kind of You, some kind of object to my subject. I look in the mirror and cannot see the back of my head. But I can see the back of everyone else's head. I look out from within my head through eyes that without a mirror I cannot see. But I can see everyone else's eyes. Therefore I conclude that no-one in the universe lives inside a body as I do. Everyone merely lives outside of me. It is not just logical but my conviction and vividly felt experience that I am central and everyone else is peripheral, just You. Which means that if everyone else is human, then I must be God. Or, if I am human, then everyone else is a shadow, some shadows more important to me than others, each disguised to look human and a bit like me. In either case, I shall certainly never grow old as they do; and I shall certainly never die.

The above sounds extreme, although for a child it is surely quite normal, just a step in everyone's development, in some version or other. It sounds mad and certainly mad adults can talk like it - over-powerful leaders and social outcasts, some of them with a psychiatric diagnosis. But extreme though it sounds, mad as it sounds, some form of it stands in the background as the model for a great deal of human behaviour, both past and present, both individual and group, both among leaders and among the led, both within nations and between nations. Life is easier to deal with if other people don't matter, and if I can insulate myself from the effects upon other people of my behaviour, and the effects upon me of their condition. Easier but not real. Less painful but not lived.

There is no middle ground between the mystery and pain of being awake to my neighbour's realness, otherness and equal value, and the dangerous and finally suicidal delusion that life can be lived only from one centre. There are only these two options. Either you and hence all else outside of me matter as much as I do, and I function

accordingly, or I am central in the world and unconnected to it and all that matters is me and mine. It is either the one or the other. It is a choice between reality and delusion, fact and invention, life and death.

The step into life is one of almost unbearable mystery, perhaps the greatest of all. It is not just a mental step. It consists of a leap of true empathy, the whole person. Why am I, I ? Just this I. Why now? Why are you, you ? You look at me and see me but I do not see me, I only see you. And yet each one of us is looking in this same moment and breathing and straining, dreaming and hungering. Who are you ? Why am I I and not you ? How can I best be me ? How can I best be here to you ? How many millions of us there are, all of us as much I as I am, each inside our own sacredly unique body, looking out, just as I look out ! How many of us have already lived on this miraculous orb in its lonely place and now have finished ? How is it possible that I too will soon be finished, my light like theirs quite put out, this agonisingly beautiful light of the sun that is now all around me continuing, but I not there ?

The fully experienced recognition of my neighbour's equal centrality, of my neighbour's being no less real and astonishing as my being, is surely effectively identical to the recognition of my mortality, my true place in the world, my true nature. It is perhaps the case that only a whole and healthy adult can take this step into recognition, of true apprehension of reality. Sometimes s/he needs to be involved in the birth of a baby for the recognition to come home. People tend to reverence life and the lives around them more alertly once they have taken part in a birth.

The child cannot be expected to apprehend in the way an adult can the full otherness of his/her neighbour. So the child has to be taught to behave *as if* his/her neighbour matters. The child is not yet ready for the full mystery of his neighbour's equal centrality, having plenty of other mysteries to absorb in the meantime. So, until the time when the child's own recognition of reality can direct his/her behaviour, s/he has to be constrained from outside to behave in a sociable fashion - is shown good behaviour by example, deterred from bad behaviour by punishment or other unwelcome consequences etc. etc..

For many centuries, of course, the religions have sought to press home and stand for the centrality not of self alone but of one's active valuing of one's neighbour's self as being as real as one's own. But they have tended not to present that centrality as just fact, as the merely sane apprehension of sheer reality ; instead they have tended to present it as if to children, as a way of behaving well, as a code, as a route to heavenly rewards, as an avoidance of dire eternal punishments, as an ideal, as an abstraction.

Accordingly, behaving in witness of plain reality has often been open to the charge of "idealism", or "unworldliness". "Now in the real world of politics, or business, one has to be pragmatic..." "Now let's be realistic about this ..." There is nothing realistic about delusion. There is nothing pragmatic about pathology. There is nothing unworldly or other-worldly about the witness delivered by the various faiths being true to themselves. They have been presenting us with reality, the one world, the world of our only hope.

In present-day Britain, unemployment is high again, with untold consequences both

present and to come. Yet, who among the governing class see this issue in its true meaning, as simply unacceptable on its own human terms. Instead, the common sense of it will be, that if we let unemployment increase past a certain point, there will be a political price to pay ; but so far, we appear to be getting away with it. So that's all right.

Something similar applies to tax. Tax is a subject which wins or loses elections, tax itself having become a dirty word. So Gordon Brown was attacked for his "Stealth Taxes." Yet the idea that one can live in the world cost-free, that someone else can pay for social responsibility, that someone else can be my brother's keeper while I go shopping and plan my holidays, is a delusion so absurd and even wicked that it is hard to believe that anyone would dare propound it. Yet political parties do, in order to keep or win power. To perpetuate that delusion is in itself an act of social vandalism, with untold consequences both present and to come.

The same state of delusion allows poverty-stricken nations thousands of miles away to continue to be exploited and their needs overlooked, as if they are just so many troublesome beggars to hurry past on our way to the supermarket ; it allows our own environment, our endlessly patient wasting world, to continue to be plundered and abused and left unrecognised ; as if it too were just a troublesome collection of rags on the street, to be hurried past on our way to the supermarket.

This is wicked, a word once used by a true, excellent Bishop (David Jenkins) to describe the widening in Britain of the gulf between rich and poor under Thatcher. It is both wicked and unwise.

Here, then, is the chief and fundamental reason why a state capable and worthy of supporting humanity through the 21st century must place social responsibility at the very heart and core of all its structures and systems. Simply because not to do so denies reality and is wicked and unwise.

Because only a state founded upon and fuelled by a position and recognition of our most plain and basic reality will be sufficiently robust, creative and ingenious to bring humanity through this millennium. Because to found a city on the delusion of the non-responsible disconnected self is to build it on sand and to ensure its destruction. Because to care is to be alive and not to care, to be careless, means death - facts that have always been true but never more desperately true than now.

I have included this paper in the 'Fables and Reflections' series, because fables are stories and they tend to end with a moral.

There is a story in this fable too but it is largely untold and invisible, hidden and silent within my polemic. It is the story of those groups of people in present-day Britain and similar nations, who apprehend reality and are equipped with skills in human relationship.

I mean the helpers, the healers, the teachers, the people whose task includes applying the skills of love. If we are to have a future, these may well be among the people we should turn to for help in building a future of hope and sanity.

But this paper has been the story of their essential absence in recent years, their silence, their weakness, their depletion, their defeat in the corridors of power and on the floor of the House, their persecution, their grief. You cannot tell a story about people who don't appear.

Afterword

It is of crucial importance to understand why delusion triumphs. Only thus might you be able to change the conditions which fuel and strengthen delusion.

To arrive at that understanding, it is as useful to explore the powerlessness of those weakened by delusion, and the reasons for their withdrawal, as it is to explore the power of those strengthened by delusion, and the reasons for their advance.

The two groups are equally responsible for disaster. The disaster is everyone's.



Fables and Reflections

Eight

The Ring of Defence

A position given over entirely to defence. It doesn't have to be some sophisticated system of towers, curtain walls, imposing battlements, scientifically organised ; just a simple ring of incessant guardedness.

Since the face presented outwards is entirely given over to the expectation and repelling of attack, that face is made to be impenetrable - sheer, blank and entirely closed.

It is all about fear and crouching and being steeled at all times. There is nothing else to it.

A hunched, armoured ring. A space walled and constantly guarded. A small solitary pill-box on a hill-side. A lonely, fixed posture of defence.

And yet human life is not lived at the centre of this position, inside the defences, protected by them. Something else holds the centre ground and later we have to puzzle over what it is.

Human life is lived *around* the centre, along the rim of it. All human being, all expenditure of human energy, all human breathing, here takes place at the outward edge, where the defences are. And whenever some exchange takes place between this position and the world in which it is situated, that exchange is experienced, judged and remembered here, not by its effect on the life *inside*, the centre, the core, but by its impact on this outward face, the ever-vigilant ring of defence.

Did the outward face stand up to its exposure? Did it intimidate, or impress ? Did it even win praise ? What attacks were made ? How successfully were the attacks repelled ?

A further mystery is that, not only is it unclear what it is that the ring encircles and defends, not only does the centre ground seem to be a kind of taboo space where human scrutiny is not allowed : it appears that the defences themselves do not stand still. They are always in flux, unfixed, unsure, crumbling, resurging.

Constantly and forever, the great majority of the guarding force, a high percentage of the position's resources, are given over to shoring up the outer ring, renewing the frontage, strengthening the supports, making good the mortar that holds the face intact. There are constant anxious inspections, minute and methodical surveys, to ensure the outward face remains effective as a shield . And immediately the

inspections have been completed, more working parties come rushing out to engage in repair work.

And yet no opposition is visible, no attacking force doing damage. No besieging armies firing catapults or mining the foundations.

It's as if there is some fatal fault in the materials available to the position's defenders ; some potent tendency to disintegration, some corrupting agency which rots everything from within, and at such speed that no one can rest. The crumbling takes place so fast that the ring needs to be rebuilt almost from scratch each day of its existence. Not enough this evening to have put all together and have the ring impregnable and without fault, sheer shieldedness in a bleak world ; tomorrow morning it will be a virtual ruin again, ineffective, an invitation to calamity and engulfment, and all today's work must be repeated. Tomorrow. And tomorrow. And tomorrow.

So what is happening here ? Why these walls? What are they defending ? What force is being guarded against ? And is there any connection between the mystery of the unoccupied centre-ground and the mystery of the constant disintegrating of the surrounding ring of defence ?

Maybe some chemical poison is stored here, or fatal virus, or nuclear contamination. This small isolated ring of guard is perhaps a kind of modern-day Pandora's box, its contents forever seething and heaving towards escape.

In which case the purpose of this defended position may not, after all, be to hold out threat, but on the contrary, to hold it in. Not to defend its mysterious contents from the world outside, but to defend the world from its mysterious contents.

From this angle, the guards' attacks upon occasional outside bodies that show an interest in the position and in what the walls contain, might be seen as an attempt to protect the strangers from the consequence of their curiosity.

But somehow this reasoning, this explanation, will not quite do.

Just supposing the more obvious explanation is the true one. In other words, that the defending force is guarding something they see as extremely precious, extremely desirable and above all extremely fragile. Let it fall into the wrong hands, maybe into any hands, and some tremendous catastrophe will take place, perhaps affecting many more lives than those of the unsleeping sentries.

This version does not explain everything in the picture we have drawn here, but does answer several questions. Obviously, it makes sense of the constant guard, the concentration of energy upon thickness of outer face and comprehensiveness of defence.

It offers another and perhaps slightly more convincing explanation than the first hypothesis, for the guards' extraordinary, almost excessive vigilance and urgent care in facing out on a hostile world, the scrupulousness of their guard ; and above all it makes better sense of the desperate fury with which they fend off approaches from

without, the personal hatred they show travellers who wish to gain access to the centre ground which the walls were built to protect and hold.

But it does not explain the walls' instability, that insidious, incessant rotting ; nor the dread of the centre ground that the guards themselves display, leaving it as they do in a state of perfect neglect, a desolate small ringed wilderness.

Perhaps the inner contents of the defensive ring, infinitely fragile and necessary and endangered as they might be, or else infinitely powerful and dangerous and life-threatening as equally they might be, must always remain a mystery.

I myself have a picture of a raving and beautiful demon pacing the centre ground as if it were a kind of sacred cage. And the guards on the walls simply do not know whether they are protecting the world from the demon or the demon from the world. All they know is their own terror, their constant exhaustion and their life-long entrapment.

For there is never rest, nor peace. The guards on the walls understand to the tip of each nerve-end that the demon must not be disturbed. Let the demon be disturbed and all is lost.

And hence their frenzy of hatred against the interloper, the explorer, the wanderer who shows some capacity to penetrate through to the demon's cage. They attack the interloper as if he were the demon himself. As indeed he might be. With demon hatred the guards defend the demon against the possibility that an advancing stranger might be a demon.

The demon must not go free.

But here lies perhaps the greatest mystery of all. What lies behind this terrible dread ? What do they fear would happen if the demon broke free ? What evil could be so terrible as to justify the appalling tension and entrapment from which now they suffer, in seeking to prevent it ?

There is some terrible vision here, some immensely powerful dread of disintegration that transcends reason, transcends all sense. Whole lives are given up to it, and are sacrificed to it. But what is it ?

What would losing this position actually mean?

The ring of defence which concerns us stands alone and desolate in a world lacking all hope and colour.

The world inflicts great and life-long hurt, disappointment and shame and never ceases in its hurting. And time passes and youth and the affirmation and gratification offered by the beauty of youth, fade away, and all that remains is the death of companions and a gathering invisibility.

Is this, then, why the ring of defence is perched there on the hill-side, armed against all further incursion, as if frozen in its isolation, as if set to hold even time at bay,

guarding its demon, protecting life from life ? For it is life itself that will engulf this position if it falls.

The demon is the key. The demon caged endangers the guard, endangers the visitor, endangers the world. The demon has to be addressed.

Afterword

The ring of defence is life-threatening for its defenders.. The “enemy” you dread, the cause of all this terror and stasis, is simply your own strength waiting for you to come to terms. Embrace your daemon. It’s your only hope. Leave the ring behind. Break out.



Fables and Reflections

Nine

The ark one hour long

In the late 1980's, I came across Sue Holland, a psychologist who had lived and worked for many years on the White City Housing Estate, at that time a sort of ghetto for disadvantaged people situated in West London. Inevitably, the estate had a certain notoriety and consequently, in some circles, also a kind of glamour. The glamour inevitably extended to Sue. She won respect by just working in that place for all that time. But what she had achieved was genuinely admirable. She concentrated her efforts chiefly on depressed women, many of them black single mothers. A large number of single mothers lived on the estate and, over the years, Sue helped them develop their own counselling service and network for mutual support. In effect she helped them create their own human and humanising community, where beforehand there had just been concrete facades, dangerous streets and human desolation.

Sue's approach and success gave her a name in professional circles and consequently she began to be wheeled into the various conferences and training courses to do a turn. Sometimes, one of the women from the estate was asked to come along too. I saw the presentation on more than one occasion and admired the effort - even though the reality of those long patient years of development, all that ordinary flawed humanness, and that stubborn *belief* in humanness despite everything, somehow failed to come across to a big audience in a hall, where the pressure was more for an instant answer, a sound-bite to take home.

A few years before she left the estate, Sue Holland said some very striking things to a group of social workers on a course. They are worth passing on.

The first thing she said was this : every day the average single mother on the estate received an onslaught of sophisticated "communication". But it is a corrupt form of communication, fundamentally and incessantly manipulative.

Much is one-way - all directed *at* her and not in relation or response *to* her. Most, of course, comes from the TV screen, for which she is just a dot in the vast TV audience. Much else is entirely and solely concerned with getting something out of her - a sale, a vote, assent, compliance - so the smile, the concern, the manners, are all a front, a soft cover for hard purposes that takes no account of the real and particular *her* at all.

Much else again is fragmentary, responsive only to the odd bit of her, not the whole person. Everywhere she meets the State or other supplier of her human needs, it is through some kind of glass screen, some line of defence, the other side of which sits some harassed and overworked official. That person's main interest inevitably is in the least possible individuality and the greatest possible speed - so when she goes for her State Benefits, or to the post office, or to the health centre, that is what she is most likely to meet - a defensive screen, an official who will respond badly if she asserts herself in her own specialness and particularity. And always she will meet *haste*, a pressure on her to impose herself as lightly as possible and to move along, quickly please, there are others waiting.

She goes shopping and meets more rush, more communication based on a fundamental disinterest in her welfare and in her as a whole person. The customer may always be right but only so long as s/he keeps his/her place in the queue and has a purse s/he can be persuaded to empty. The pretence of the relationship, the exploitative truth lurking behind that pretence of relationship, are clear, rarely acknowledged but absolutely clear. Do you have a Nectar Card ? asks the cashier ? Would you like some cash-back ? Have a lovely evening.

And through the door and onto the computer screen each day pour the usual floods of hard sell literature, those phoney personalised messages belted out on the processor - "Dear Felicity Fudge, I am delighted to tell you that you have just won..." - the *appearance* of the personal touch, the *reality* of the cold claw scratching and raking without cease.....

In all history, have human beings been more isolated, more cut off, more belittled, more fragmented ? The vast majority of the technologies and learned skills of communication which that single young woman encounters on her wretched, ugly and dehumanising housing estate, constitute a neglect and an abuse of her as a citizen and whole person, day in day out.

The purpose of Sue's example was to put into relief for that group of social workers on their course the sheer healing power a properly conducted old-style social work interview could have for this young woman.

"What?" they exclaimed (they all seemed depressed about the reality and purpose of their chosen occupation.) "The *healing power* of a social work interview?" They did not associate their role, these days, with power or with healing.

Members of the general public, on the other hand, do probably associate social work with power: but a hostile bumbling kind of power to do with depriving people of their liberty or failing to do it correctly. But *healing power* ? - no way.

We presuppose here the sort of social work interview that is already largely out of date, since the social work approach has been much reorganised since Sue Holland spoke on this course. We also presuppose a reasonably competent interview, conducted by a worker able to do justice to the basic skills and concepts of the discipline, and who as a person and as a professional is warm, genuine and accurately empathic. For, while disciplines, functions and approaches change, our basic need for effective communication does not change and never will.

So, in this interview, the woman is listened to properly and as a whole person. She is not compartmentalised and the interview is not conducted according to the needs of a bureaucrat's form. She is engaged with in a warm and genuinely respectful way. There are no glass screens. She is given time, as much as an hour. She is told how much time she has, so that she knows where she stands and can pace herself accordingly. Her needs and experience across a broad spectrum are looked at, possible services examined and described, her choices and options discussed. She is helped to make her own decisions.

For an hour she matters. For an hour she is neither Thing, nor collection of Symptoms, nor Customer, nor outward edge of a segment. She is ordinarily human, in the round, with a shadow. She is allowed a self. Sue Holland was effective in relaying the sheer power and healing impact of this - in contrast to virtually all the rest of the young woman's dealings with the world. That social work hour stood out as a raft of sanity, civilisation and community in an

ocean of human detachment, desolation and despair. It stood solid and meaningful and potent - the surroundings a flux and clamour and steady draining.

But the example suggests a wider and more pessimistic conclusion - that for all the astonishing advances in communication technology over the last century, for all the hugely learned and intelligent assimilation and deployment of knowledge on communication with people under various conditions - conflict, stress, bereavement, etc - true communication has not in reality advanced at all. On the contrary perhaps. All that knowledge, all those techniques, all that technology. What after all has it really achieved?

Are people really better connected now than they were? Do individuals and groups feel more empowered as a result of all this accumulated expertise and this new technology? Are communities more communal? Is the world more peaceful?

Surely not. What has advanced beyond doubt is expertise in *mis*-communication, distortion, dissimulation, mass manipulation, the abuse and perversion of the tools we made at the beginning of history to help connect us. And this is where the new technology really seems to flourish - in the hands of the mind-benders, the profiteers, the spinners, the phone hackers, the speech-makers, the featherlight and slithery “public relations experts”, the artful dodgers - eating away at the ties and bindings that hold a community together, driving each individual into a defensive shell.

Afterword

I shall conclude this piece with an appeal, as follows :

If you are a member of a helping discipline or caring profession, please hold to your faith in and practice of your basic communication skills. If Society is to survive, a time for you and your skills will come. The skills of human connectedness are Society’s only hope. Maybe you can teach your skills to others who might wish to learn them.



Fables and Reflections

Ten

The pernicious appeal of the “Strong Model”

I intend to pursue here a line of thought that explores the appeal and attraction of different forms of idolatry for people in disarray or under unusual stress.

That line of thought will begin, almost at random, with the “hippy” culture which flourished in the United States and Europe during the late sixties and much of the seventies. And the direction the line will take touches on mental health and social work and other related disciplines and topics. Some of the images or examples I use come from the end of the twentieth century rather than the beginning of the twenty-first, reflecting my age as well as the time this piece was first drafted. But those examples are sufficient to make and even strengthen my point, I believe, and I have decided to keep them. This side of the Millenium, there are plenty of new examples, and they seem to be multiplying at horrendous speed. But the point is less what the examples are, than that they keep appearing, keep multiplying. As time passes, this piece seems to become not so much dated as more and more urgently relevant.

Before embarking on my line, I would like to set out two propositions.

One is that the true facts of any matter tend to be complex, closely related to the facts of other matters and to demand personal involvement ; put more simply, reality is never plain and simple, it is mountainous and complicated and to understand it you have to climb into it. You can't hang back in your laboratory if you want to understand.

Thus, where reality is, facile and easy answers are not - so why do people keep inventing facile and easy answers as a way of addressing reality ?

Where reality is, you cannot remain uninvolved - so why do people keep trying to detach themselves ?

The other proposition concerns mental health. I have worked in the field of mental health for most of my adult life. Having done so, I would conclude that the only fixed point, the only constant, the only fact I can always be sure of, concerning this subject, besides its complexity and final mystery, is that the practitioner who wishes to be usefully involved in it needs above all to be good at relationship.

Now to the beginning of this piece : in the late sixties and early seventies, there flourished a phenomenon called the “Counter-Culture.” To many people - and not just the young - it was a source of strength, hope and meaning, a force for regeneration, a kind of movement which one could join and feel part of. Much of it

was silly, much was not. Some genuinely talented people consciously attached themselves to it. Books were written about it. It shaped lives, provided martyrs, even perhaps helped to stop a war (the Vietnam War). To be part of the Counter-Culture was to be beautiful. People were convinced it would save the world, it would change the way people were and how Society worked, it would make the world beautiful.

Some surprisingly diverse elements went into this immensely powerful phenomenon and in Britain (and beyond) there is no doubt that the writings and mythos associated with the psychiatrist RD Laing constituted one of those elements. His fame and following extended far beyond the professional world of psychiatry. To be a friend, or even to imply you were a friend, of “Ronnie Laing” was to be beautiful. So that’s what people often called him - “Ronnie Laing” – even though the vast majority had never even met him. To imply friendship in this way earned instant social credit for the speaker.

The reason for Laing’s enthronement as some kind of guru seems to have been that he found poetry and significance in madness and - perhaps more important as far as his status went - the sensitive readings he took of the experience of schizophrenia found a richness, a resonance and a depth of meaning in that experience which the modern urban and suburban experience of ordinary living did not provide. Almost it seemed that becoming mad made you real, substantial and even heroic as a human being ; your madness made sense as an honest and consistent response to a senseless, immoral and alienating world.

Thus, at least as a concept, madness became trendy. Like having an LSD trip. No longer did madness mean some sort of failure to cope, some terrifying fall through the floor of coping and acceptability, some sort of unbearable mental shorting-out. On the contrary, it was a way of becoming. It was a passport to reality.

Consequently, the words “normal” and “sane,” spoken on their own without qualification, became taboo for a while. Everyone - from psychiatrists with the most narrowly biological approach to mental disturbance, to gossip columnists in popular newspapers - everyone felt bound to string together a doubt-filled floating phrase where once a single absolute would do. So Sanity became “So-Called Sanity.” Normality became “So-Called Normality”. These word-parades were usually delivered with a kind of conspiratorial chuckle. As if each was a kind of Masonic sign that gained you entry into the land of the beautiful people. That chuckle seemed to say : “Yes, well, we agree the conventional world is completely barmy, don’t we ? And we don’t truly belong here, do we , you and I ? We’ve seen through all this nonsense, this un-cool shit. Let’s hit the road, babe. Tomorrow, or the day after, let’s hit the road, okay ?”

Most people didn’t actually behave very differently from the way they always had, of course. But across an extraordinarily broad swathe of the population, the language did actually change for a while. And for some at least, it meant a genuine willingness to wake and stay awake to the complexity, the relatedness and inter-dependence of people and their behaviour.

In actual fact, at a level beneath the foolishness of some responses, and the faddishness and the glamorising that went with the guru status, Laing had much to

say of real value. In actual fact “mental illness” is a highly relativistic concept, varying in its definition and its social meaning from age to age and from culture to culture. In actual fact, mental ill-health remains no less a mystery, a complexity, a fluidity, a subtle balance and constellation of factors and forces, than does mental health. And can anyone stand up and say with confidence and in a few words what mental health is ?

In actual fact, the treatment of most forms of mental illness by purely medical means is now almost everywhere accepted as being insufficient ; and people from all the relevant disciplines would agree that the notion and in some quarters still the hope that its causes and cure belong in the purely biological sphere, is untenable and doomed to disappointment. What is, after all, the “purely biological sphere ?“ Does anyone live there ?

We need to say immediately that none of the above denies the reality and cruelty of the experience of mental disturbance, nor the damage and distress it causes, nor its intractability in so many cases, nor the frequent inadequacy of all known treatments, non-medical as much as medical. All disciplines and approaches concerned in mental health are insufficient and, accordingly, from a position of appropriate humility, all need to respect one another and work closely together.

But Laing’s influence both in psychiatry and as cultural guru did not last. By the mid-eighties, his appeal, and that of the “Anti-Psychiatry movement” with which he was associated, had almost entirely faded. The mid-eighties was not a time for anti-anything. Laing became fatally associated with the whole Hippie scene and suffered from the general derision in which that whole era was now held.

Suddenly and most pointedly, it was okay to know definitely what “normal” meant and to know precisely what was “sane” and what was not. And it was okay to use the term “mental illness” again. In fact to do so showed that you had bottle, that - like Mrs Thatcher - you had the guts to call a spade a spade when all around you were still failing to grasp the nettle. To hell with all this tentative relativist middle class nonsense, all beads and therapy !

For the practitioner in the field, this shift of approach led to some bizarre contrasts. It became more and more common to work with a psychiatrist who was not just concerned with someone’s medication, but had an interest in counselling and a concern for that person’s housing conditions. I think there were various reasons for this, but one was advances in knowledge within the psychiatric discipline based on solid and generally accepted research findings.

At the same time and in contrast, hardly a mental health social worker one ever met in the mid-eighties questioned a rigidly narrow and by now anachronistic medical approach to mental ill-health. Out of all the disciplines, one would have expected social work to stand firmly for a complex and comprehensive view of both the causes and treatment of mental dis-ease. Not a bit of it. In course after social work course, the highly questionable and in my opinion misleading phrase “mental illness” was trotted out without a single challenger - when only five years previously no-one would have allowed so un-cool a term to pass their lips. And in many a hospital ward-

round the most rigidly medical position was being taken, time after time, not by the medical staff present but by the social worker. So what was going on ?

I went to ask a social work trainer.

"It's quite obvious !" she said without any hesitation. "The medical model is a strong model. It's like the bible to a fundamentalist Christian. It offers clear-cut simple answers, concrete rules, material explanations that permit no doubt. It doesn't matter that those answers have often been over-simplistic, crude, often completely false. Because the medical model is a strong model, it offers security and detachment, a firm position in difficult weather. Therefore medical professionals are often adventurous, assertive, innovative. When your home base is strong, you feel confident to range out a bit.

"Now look at social work. What sort of models does social work have ? All greys and complexities, all relativity, all emotional voyaging and non-material values, all self-doubting and fellow-feeling. It may be reality but it ain't comfortable and it ain't clear. You can't grab it. You can't count it. You can't control it. So no wonder social work keeps gravitating to strong models, however unsuitable they might be, however fictional, however alien or often plain wrong they are. What did the Israelites do when Moses left them to climb his mountain? Meditate on the ineffable? No way ! They reached for the golden calf ! Something they could get hold of !

"These are difficult times for the people professions [she said, all those years ago in the 80's]. Don't expect them to behave well. Expect them to lurch about in the storm. Expect them to stand winging by the road-side trying to hitch a lift from passing strong models. Expect them to go flying off in all directions, everyone else's directions, since they cannot find their own. Expect what is weak to have a most unhealthy reverence for what seems strong and oppressive and to make far more room for it than is necessary or honourable, out of sheer self-hatred and self-doubt.

"Who was it said 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality ?' Too right, baby."

Exit a bitter trainer, stage left.

I believe that our future depends on how skillfully and wholeheartedly we relate to our fellow citizens and to our environment on the basis of our recognition and experience that we all matter with equal centrality. Our shared centrality is both extraordinary miracle and fundamental starting-point , a miracle and starting-point it is our destiny to address. No society will now survive or deserve to survive unless it organises itself on the basis of the extraordinary fact that stands at the core of all our lives. The idea that only self matters, self in detachment, and that life may be lived on the basis of detachment and singularity, is simply a denial of reality, a pathological fiction which threatens the world's future.

If the above holds good, it surely follows that disciplines and professions concerned exclusively and rigorously with skill in relationship have great significance and great value. Their knowledge and experience have much to offer the rest of us. And their

state of health at any one time, whether they flourish or languish, whether their practitioners function with confidence or in disarray, whether their ground is firm or unstable, whether they know where they stand and have standing there, or flounder and function in perpetual shadow and doubt, is all of great general interest and significance, having a crucial relevance to the state and prospects of Society as a whole.

So let us stay a bit longer with the notion and story of the strong model as it pertains to social work, alert as we do so that we are concentrating on a human activity of central significance, where reality is particularly vivid, difficult and direct, where - if we picture its position somewhere close to the centre of an accelerating centrifugal wheel - the forces pressing it outwards towards fragmentation at an extreme and one-dimensional edge grow and grow.

(In focussing on social work in this way, I am most certainly not seeking to imply that these points apply only to that profession. I believe they apply across a spectrum of “people” professions, including teaching, various therapies and, to an increasing degree, nursing. I have stayed with social work here partly because I am a social worker myself, and partly because social work was more prominent in mental health community support work at the time this piece was first drafted).

And we can look at other examples besides the one mentioned earlier, in which social work can be said to have lurched or been driven off its central and hence difficult ground where reality is relative, complex and demanding of involvement, and has turned instead to a foreign “strong model.”

Take Equal Opportunities, as it was called in the 1980's, then a newish set of strategies and methodologies which aimed to increase the openness of agencies and systems and finally Society, to people still in minority and seen as “Other.” The intention was fairness, accessibility, transparency. Quite plainly, the essence and spirit that informed the whole Equal Opportunities movement was quintessential to social work. Equal Opportunities was and is about justice and basic human rights. It rests on the self-evident principles that everyone matters equally, that everyone has absolute and equal value. It is the essence of social work's meaning and integrity to be concerned with challenging prejudice or injustice, to be working alongside the excluded and disinherited towards a just and healthy and human society.

But too often in social work, Equal Opportunities, at least in those early days, was turned from a movement based on central human principles into a fundamentalist and often highly intolerant system of outward right-on postures, from a campaign to do with inclusiveness and understanding to an opportunity for a new form of divisiveness and intolerance, from a movement for better connection and truer humanity to a game of almost totalitarian intimidation, from something of the heart and soul to something that all too often meant just a game of numbers, from something that everyone could respect to something that too many people found merely silly and irrelevant.

Unsurprising, but in a way ironic, that this opened social work to attack from the Right, under Thatcher. One group of fundamentalists attacking another for being

“politically correct.” I believe there is a simple reason why the Equal Opportunities movement was often and too easily corrupted or oversimplified or driven to excess, from within ; and unsurprisingly but ironically, the reason for it was the same as the reason why the fundamentalist market dogmas of the Right were imposed so widely under Thatcher, and are still in place, so fanatically, and in many cases and activities, so inappropriately ; it is because in times of confusion and for people under stress, an apparently straightforward and externally imposed way of understanding and managing conditions and behaviours offers comfort, a sense of control, and relief from personal responsibility. I exchange my conscience for a rule-book; I deny my complexity of experience in favour of a set of instructions and a wardrobe full of postures; I step back from the hard-to-measure quality of my involvement in relationship and instead start counting numbers as a mark of my progress.

On from Equal Opportunities, take Unionisation, once an important element in professional life, with an honourable history. Social work never had its own Trade Union (unless BASW counted as a Union). Instead, most social workers in the last quarter of the twentieth century in the UK were members of what was then the main union for local government workers, called NALGO. This Union itself kept getting confused all through the seventies and through much of the eighties between the complex inter-dependent present and the gloriously simple barricade-divided past, between the concerns of their present day local government office workers and the shop stewards’ own infatuation with the Thirties rhetoric of Industrial Action and Brothers and Sisters of the Working Class.

The notion that social work was somehow an industry and that the withdrawal of its labour was somehow a potent act in the class struggle was a pathetic illusion. Who cared a damn if social workers “withdrew their labour” ? Who but their already struggling clients were in any way affected ? But it was a delusion frequently succumbed to by a large number of sensible, caring people. Presumably the union meetings, full of rant and anger and ritualised defiance of every possible governing body, represented a glorious hour or two of escape from the complexities of being a caring adult professional in an ungrateful world. It gave people a different, easier role to play, a sense of being part of a power-base. Only by degrees did people realise that the power was illusory - it was all a mirage, a children’s war-game.

Social work never was an industry and neither the rhetoric nor the traditional activism of manufacturing industrial workers had anything in common with what social work meant or what it could effectively have done as a genuine movement for social justice in its own right. Rather than adopt some already anachronistic shape from the industrial world, why could social work not have functioned in its own shape, spoken with its own voice and acted in accord with its own rightful nature as a civil activity concerned with social responsibility ? Throughout the eighties a lonely Bishop, David Jenkins of Durham, seemed to be substituting for the entire social work movement in giving persistent and effective voice to the nation’s social conscience.

On from Unionisation to a later social work “Strong Model” - imposed by government but accepted with no resistance whatsoever by the profession. Where teachers, doctors, police - all activities to do with skill in relationship and all under

attack - where these activities fought back with varying degrees of effectiveness against Thatcherism's fanatical and wholesale imposition of the market ethos and structures, social work offered itself as butter to the knife. From some quarters there seemed even to be a tone of glazed enthusiasm for this new cure-all, this new wonder-drug, this new bible.

The rather unsatisfactory social work term of "client" changed in many quarters to "customer" - as if this would somehow induce an appropriate servility in the minds of the helping professionals involved as they wrestled with the varying forms of desperation they met in the people who sought their help or required their statutory intervention. Co-operative planning - rare enough in the most favourable of conditions - was replaced by 'the discipline of the market-place' (meaning fear, fragmentation, insecurity, inconsistency, mutual suspicion, glossy brochures in which market-speak covers for truth telling). Through a traumatising process called "competitive tendering," an already pulverised Town Hall disgorged its progeny in all sorts of new shapes and sizes, suddenly required to function as "Businesses," each with its annual "Business Plan" and hugely time-consuming criteria for "quality assurance" based on measures that originated in the car industry. Radical surgery split the service into separate entities called "Purchasers" and "Providers," causing in some cases huge disruption and distress to service workers and service users alike for which the glad tidings of market-place dogma offered incomprehensible justification and no sign of any significant improvement in practice.

For a time, the word "Business" carried an indefinable magic, an extra ring. Social work recruitment adverts blazoned it as an irresistible attraction of the parent body. "Join our Business" as if somehow in doing so you would enter some sort of new state of grace, a new vibrant potency, in which other happy thousands were already marching, heads held high towards some sun-blessed horizon. One was reminded of the early Soviet posters.

What was this if not a form of bizarre religion, a new cult that invited people to forswear the weight and complexity and individual painful creativity of all they really were and did and experienced, in order to become blind and bought-up followers ?

One was sure at the time that the Business "Strong Model," introduced under Thatcher, would not last long in social work, that it was too offensively absurd a borrowing to last, that it distorted, undermined and denied the reality of social caring to too dangerous and socially-irresponsible an extent. One was wrong. The "Purchaser/Provider" split is still in place. The "tendering" still goes on. Market thinking continues to spread deeper and wider, whichever party is in power.

But just supposing the Business Bandwagon as applied to social work and other people professions is destined - like Stalin's massive statue - at last to be dragged with ropes down into the dust and be mocked there, can we be sure that another foreign body won't immediately be set up in its place, some new crude cult or idol before which the practitioners of social care will rush to debase themselves ?

To help answer that question perhaps we should ask what the models I have listed here have in common - the medical model, the equal ops model, the union model, and the business model. I suggest the following :

- rather than emerging or evolving from the experience and practice of social work and social care they tend to be imported as complete systems from outside; they did not emerge from within as a part of a creative process ; they were adopted or borrowed from other fields and imposed on social care practice like moulds.

- as interpreted very often by social care professionals or bodies, they provided systems or perspectives or guidelines for action to which the person deferred, with which the person complied, into which the person fitted or behind which the person hid - rather than being sources of individual inspiration, aids for individual expression and openness, support for individual initiative and creativity. Rather than a set of principles designed to support and inspire, they tended to act instead as a system of rules whose over-riding purpose was control and conformity.

- they had a tendency to compartmentalise, to externalise, to simplify ; they all in different ways were systems which demonised, which saw themselves as divided from and in opposition to a force of badness or sickness or antagonism lurking outside their own charmed circle.

- they tended to be divisive, diagnostic, materialistic and reductive - condemnation and fragmentation coming more easily from all of them than connection, reconciliation and wholeness. And in which system would it be safe to use the word "intuition ?" In which system were the words "warmth" or "subjectivity" welcome ?

And having made that short list, which may not be exhaustive, we should perhaps refer back to our starting point. We said that plain reality is relative and complex and demands full personal involvement. And we asked why - if reality is complex - do people keep trying to invent answers that are facile and easy ? And we asked why, if reality demands full personal involvement, do people keep trying to detach themselves ?

We have to conclude, then, that social work's lurching from strong model to strong model is simply one attempt after another to escape the discomfort of its exposure to involvement in the relative and complex, in other words to the raw reality of relationship and social responsibility which is its task and humanity's hope. By the same token, we are bound to expect social work and related disciplines, and whatever range of similar activities succeeds social work, to continue to surrender themselves to inappropriate "Strong Models," as these become available.

Before widening the focus of this line of thought, I should like to explore a bit further a connection which has been hinted at earlier - between the "Strong Model" and idolatry. Both phenomena offer a false comfort, the delusion of a simple clear answer ; both require a subsuming of the self which in return absolves you from personal responsibility by providing an external power, a clear code, an externalised book of rules, which you follow like an automaton, a puppet ; by offering outward forms and objects for your worship as a way of soothing you, both ease your confusion or your isolation by lessening you ; in both, there is the reassurance of some material massiveness, power and tangibility, something you can get hold of at whatever expense to inner integrity, wholeness and truth. Both represent an avoidance of and an escape from reality. Both, simply, are counterfeit, a turning away, a defeat.

And then the further link between Idolatry and Fundamentalism - for is not Fundamentalism a form of Idolatry ? In following the letter of the written law as if you are a slave, an automaton, in the absence of your own full and active and personal involvement in what essentially those words meant for their own time and how this translates in spirit into the present time, then you worship the external form of the letter and you neglect and even forswear the spirit that created it and gave it meaning in its time. For the letter - like an autumn leaf, the statue of a god made of precious metal - is bound in time and is a part of its time. And in time it fades. In time it withers. The spirit within the letter, the spirit that made it, is not bound in time but needs time, time after time, for its expression. To follow blindly the letter that was formed in and belongs to its own one time, to follow it as if it applies to a turning and evolving world for all time, is to worship a fixity, a dead husk, a discarded gathering of matter, an idol. We each have a responsibility to hear the spirit of truth that speaks for our own time. God is forever a new language trying to make itself understood. The living truth exists nowhere for us but now and here.

I do not seek to turn this piece into an exercise in amateur theology. I am looking at ways in which we deal with truth and reality, and ways we find by which to avoid doing so. These ways of avoidance spare us the pain and confusion of being fully alive in ourselves and to each other and to our surroundings. They ease us by allowing us time out. Some of us perhaps spend our whole lives taking time out. Ultimately, our ways of avoiding pain and reality threaten our survival, the survival of our children, the survival of the race.

If the linking of the "Strong Model" to Idolatry and then on to Fundamentalism is valid, it allows us to see that positions and movements and policies and practices on the face of it widely different and even in some cases opposed to each other, are in fact powerfully connected and often essentially the same. Thus two states go to war against each other - each of whose ruling parties have far more in common with one another than with the peoples they rule. Two political parties fight an election - whose conflicting policies mask an essential sameness of interest, for instance in their centralising of control and in their intolerance of opposition.

Outside the sphere of social work and the storm-tossed position of social care, the obvious candidate for the Strong Model in the 1980's and 90's was of course Thatcher herself and the extraordinary phenomenon called "Thatcherism." I would list some of the personal characteristics that seemed to be especially valued and promoted during the time of Thatcher's ascendancy as being tough, resolute, adversarial and dominant ; and - being obviously no supporter - I associate with her generation of the far Right a florid patriotism, a nineteenth century utilitarian materialism, the "Business ethic," and its accompanying worship of market gloss at the expense of human substance, a denial of the subtle and fragile connections and ties of community, a love of conflict and division, compartmentalism and simplification, the assertion everywhere of a central control, the denial everywhere of central responsibility, above all a glorification of the Self and Us as against and in comparison with Other and Them..

Thatcherism was surely notable not so much because it was placed politically on the far right but because, powerfully and persuasively at a time of drift, disillusion and insecurity, it offered a strong model in denial of and as an escape from the plain and appallingly difficult facts of our predicament, which are relative, complex and

demand involvement. It turned social vandalism and lives of sleek individualistic piracy into a virtue. It offered a lost people a false and ugly god. It held reality at bay. Its success in achieving the influence it did (and still does) is not at all a measure of its stature or even its credibility, let alone its true merit, but a measure of the lostness and desperation of the people it appealed to and of the power of desperation to drive people blindly into the influence of a cheap and wicked nonsense. One is reminded of the dictum of Dame Julian of Norwich that you dare not judge an event by its aims or claims, you dare not judge either the singer or the song. You wait to see what comes of it, what follows. If good comes, then it was good. If bad, then it was bad. What came of Thatcherism ? What followed ?

But it would seem clear from the earlier thoughts discussed in this piece that, however hateful Thatcherism may have been in so many respects, it was not the repository of all modern ills. While causal of much, it was symptomatic of more. Things were not necessarily going to become more sane or reasonable or moderate in the UK once the Tories were driven out. Thatcherism was just one symptom among many across the world of a universal desperation for firm ground where none seemed to exist. From now on, any strong model, from whatever place on the political spectrum, from any religious source, from any position in any argument - provided it is strong enough - will have extra appeal.

From whichever place it comes and in whatever sphere, all that is required of it is that it should offer escape from uncertainty and from the pain and fragility of being fully human. For instance, Thatcherism shrinks into insignificance compared to the growth of Fundamentalism across all religions, whose causes and attractions are essentially the same as those of Thatcherism and whose potential for harm and destruction has been, and is still, also far greater.

And in Britain, now, all these years later, after the final fall of that Tory era, which ended with John Major, then ten years later the end of New Labour under Blair and then Brown, in this new era of Coalition Government keeling rightward, the urge to succumb to new strong models continues as powerful as ever, if not more so. Those who see, are diminished by it. Those who are blind to it, prosper.

Afterword

We are left at the end of this piece with three main questions. Each has surely far more political urgency at the present time than any that come from the present Right/Left polarities, with their arguments over one form of budget management vs another, or one way of relating to Europe vs another.

Question One. If it is true that “humankind cannot bear very much reality” (Eliot), but at the same time we can see that humankind is doomed and doomed soon unless it takes up a lot more reality than it does at present : if it is true that people who feel secure and sure of where they stand are less likely to be attracted to false gods than those who are bewildered, diminished, persecuted or otherwise at sea - if both these things are true - what can be done by leaders at all levels everywhere to help people increase a sense of their own value, reinforce a sense of their own autonomy and influence, secure the bindings of their own local communities, and build on and strengthen the few places in modern life that hold firm and hold still ? For the more people there are who are willing and able to address reality in full and find realistic

solutions to its problems, the greater chance we have of passing on to our children a world that is humanly endurable.

Question Two. In these times of bewilderment, what else can be done in all Societies and in all spheres to counter-act the appeal and force of the Strong model, so dangerous it is, and so threatening to healthy initiative, human creativity and civilised Society?

We introduce Question Three with a quick resumé. The piece began with a fairly light-hearted look at changing fashions in mental health theory. We seem to have come a long way from that beginning. And yet, perhaps the whole piece has been about mental health in the sense that mental health has something to do with a capacity, or the lack of it, to deal with reality. If, as we have said, reality is essentially a matter of relatedness, complexity and involvement, then people who are directly and fully engaged in precisely that central task of being involved with others, people in the caring professions, these people are living at present in a place of almost impossible difficulty and yet huge importance. We need to get close to them. They need our support.

How can they hold their ground ? How can they so manage, protect, strengthen and heal themselves that they succeed not just in holding but securing and extending their ground ? How can they combine, flourish and multiply, in order that they in turn can help us, who so need help, to secure and extend that same central ground of plain reality and build there the cities of the future ?



Fables and Reflections

Eleven

Jason nameless fights despair

I have no name. I wear nothing but a stinking goat-skin, its horns tipped with gold, fine-worked. But the gold is scratched and dented. And once my hair was gold and I stood straight and tall and my limbs were lithe and I trod easily and with hope. But there was too much horror, too much failure, too much fear, too much loss, too much unworthiness. So I cast off hope. I cast off the city that surrounded me like a cloak. I cast off my name. I cast off my aim for a destination. Now, scratched and dented, I go nowhere but deathward. I am free. I dance. I hop about.

I walk a landscape which yearns for heroes. In its drama and sparseness it is fabulous. Who can be worthy of it ?

I chant my thoughts, my dreams, my poetry, my anthems, to the beasts and the birds as they pass me in their beauty, living their lives of serene, ceaseless struggle, according to the laws they were born to and never question. I believe they hear me. If they do not, then let them just hear my passion, my ache, my love, and I will die knowing I have left a mark.

Years ago I wondered whether this fierce dour land I travel is bare because youthful and untried, and here in my time I am therefore part of a first wave stealing over an innocence ; or because the land has been swept bare by some cataclysm, ravaged by some disaster, whose memory still hangs over it like a poisonous film, a shameful echo. And in that case I am part of a dangerous remnant, and my shadow that follows me carries the guilt and poison of a race of destroyers.

How can I live in this landscape forgiveably and be worthy of it ?

So often I'm looking down, I'm looking low, I'm caught and held in webs of experience and memory that breed nothing but shame and disgust and despair and leave me no hope for my race. I am ashamed of my race. I want no part of it. My shame and my despair paralyse me. I am like a fly in a web, my insides sucked out of me by despair.

Then I suddenly realised what a sin despair is. I look out on iniquity, on crime, on injustice, on spoliation, on ruin - and I despair. And in despairing, I not only give victory to these evils, I give them myself. I surrender myself and my energy to the causes of my despair. They have cast their great shadow over me and I have crept inside. In allowing myself to be absorbed by them, I have in effect assented to them. In despairing, I give my name and being to the very thing that has repelled me so greatly that I despair. In repelling me, it siezes hold of me. I join it in its crime and its guilt. I become worthy of the same condemnation which it deserves. I who once cast

off my name now surrender my fresh namelessness, my lightness, my strength, to the cause of my despair. I am no longer unclothed, dancing in my absurd goat-skin with its luxurious dented horns. I am bound. I am sewn up. I am eaten.

And immediately I looked up and there above a crag against the clear evening sky I saw a falcon. The falcon was moving fast and with urgency. And then I saw a far larger shape, the slowly wheeling silhouette of an eagle, with its broad square wings and spread fingers. The falcon swept upwards above the eagle and then stooped on it in a parabola of absolute and exquisite beauty whose speed was so great that it was as if someone had dashed off a most lovely curve on a piece of paper and the curve had almost instantaneously disappeared.

The great eagle baulked, its rhythm broken. Then it continued forward. And immediately and again, the falcon stooped on it - so much smaller - wheeling and swooping round and always back in on the much more massive and clumsy shape of the eagle, as if there were some essential and beautiful geometric relationship between the two being worked out up there, so very high above the crag, against the pure blue sky. The shapes were now far away, entirely in silhouette, and all that I saw was soundless. And as I watched the majesty of that encounter so far away from me, I said to myself, this is what belongs here. This is no unusual drama that stands out for a few seconds. This is the meaning and expression of the landscape here.

And I wondered, how can the falcon keep insisting, keep believing, continue inspired enough, to maintain its prodigious assault on the eagle? How can it maintain this superiority over a creature three times its size, so that the eagle, which always looks as if it could so easily reach out and simply grab hold of its tormentor by the throat, is instead pushed here, baulked there, always defending, always driven, and in the end assents to the other's will and beats its way slowly away over the horizon, while the tiny falcon dashes back to its chosen camping ground on the crag?

Why did the falcon not despair?

Afterword

Out of the parable which the landscape itself had told me, I established the following principles for how to do battle with the forces of despair and destruction :

Keep to your own ground either literally in a geographical sense or internally in a metaphorical sense. Stay in the place where you are strong and which feeds you with strength, passion and surety. Ensure that you are not fighting with your opposition as your focus. That is likely to weaken you. Instead you must fight from and for and focused on the power of your own ground and your love for your own ground.

Keep focused on what it is you mean and build on that. Do not be distracted by the size and weight of the enemy bearing down on you or by the feelings your enemy arouses in you. Your meaning is your power, so make your meaning clear to yourself and hold to it, even when, *especially* when, your situation seems insoluble and overwhelming. This is difficult, so take care of yourself, treat yourself, please yourself, train yourself, feed yourself in the best possible way so that you are in good

shape, good health and good temper for your task. Take lots of time out.

So long as your meaning is the truth, so long as it is there secure in you, then you can afford to lose a surprising number of battles. After your defeat, after your disintegration, you will return to your meaning, smashed into particles and find that the smashing was illusory ; before your eyes it will form again, it will renew itself and return to shape, and you can return to your task, strengthened and made battle-wise by your experience. The truth cannot be destroyed, only lost hold of.

Always enjoy your own powers. Your powers and meaning must always remain your focus. Fight from joy, from celebration of the life and gifts you've been given. Fight in celebration of yourself and your meaning. In other words, fight with passion from a position of love, lightheartedness and good nature. That way you will be flexible, you will be mobile and you will be hard to target. You will keep doing the unexpected and you will never be worn down.

Your enemies are likely to function on the basis of fear and hatred. The power of your enemies is likely to thrive and increase from the fear and the hatred they can arouse in others, whether their supporters or their opponents. Since fear and hatred is at the core of your enemies' power, then remember that the more threatened their defences are, the more desperate and unscrupulous and perhaps more devastating their attacks and influence will be. For they will have nothing to lose. Accordingly, you may be wise to oppose them, not by heightening their anxieties, but by lessening them, not by fighting, but by soothing them.

Remember that, if your meaning is true, you may not need to be powerful ; all you may need to do is stay still with a great deal of ingenuity and help your enemies to the defeat that is necessary for their good as well as your good - the good of all of us - by a skilful redirection of their franticness.

Above all, seek to stand back from despair. Face the causes of it, face the facts and the pain the facts arouse ; but do not feed on these things. Cast your own shadow and never let it be stolen from you. Let nothing ever cast its shadow over you.



Fables and Reflections

Twelve

Jason compares Place A with Place B

*“The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”*

WB Yeats

Jason unnamed, Jason dis-mantled, lost in his time, having no place, the faded gold on the horns of his goat skin his only reminder of a human's touch, got up on his rock and spoke to an Agora long deserted. Only green lizards and goldfinches heard him.

He said this:

Let us imagine Place A.

Place A is made of illusion. Consequently it is strongly built. The walls are thick and tall. The roads are straight and tidy. The position is high up at the top of an isolated hill and consequently easily defended with its powerful weapons of illusion. The inhabitants of Place A feel at ease. It is well governed (tidy streets) and it is safe (thick walls etc.). There are no taxes to pay. There are large luxurious shops where the fancy can be fed and tickled all day long. It is a good and comfortable place to live, a firm base, a safe harbour. Its only drawback is its untruth.

Let us imagine Place B.

Place B is made of fact and reality. Consequently its position is disastrously exposed to attack from all directions at all times and its inhabitants are constantly rushing to defend the walls. The walls are badly built due to weak management and constant conflict. The weapons at the people's disposal are thin reeds and badly written tracts printed on recycled paper. Place B is appallingly led, with dispute, cowardice, and hesitation the predominant features of its government. Morale in Place B is so low that the hospital doctors report spiralling increases in illness both physical and mental; the police report spiralling increases in crime levels. There is a constant dribble of deserters to Place A. To live in Place B is like living on a raft in heavy seas.

Let us imagine a great crisis threatens the planet upon which both places are situated - Planet AZ. Huge fissures have begun opening up all over the surface. It transpires that the mining required to build the walls of Place A have done real and irreparable damage to the planet's inner structures.

Furthermore, a plague of insects has been reported streaming towards the two cities and it has been established that the insects are a new race that has bred and multiplied on the artificial fertilisers used to feed Place A's population and the insect horde has now exhausted its local food supplies.

Furthermore, war has broken out both on the planet and in outer space and the war has been caused by the extremes of poverty experienced by peoples far away who have been grossly exploited to keep the inhabitants of Place A in the manner to which they are accustomed. Various peoples are involved, the carnage is appalling and the weapons being used (sold to them by Place A) threaten the whole planet.

Clearly, solutions have to be found in this emergency. New answers are needed. Old patterns have to be changed. A leadership must operate which inspires the noblest possible response from the inhabitants of the two cities and is able to focus and contain that response to the maximum possible effect. For, clearly, the best human skills have to be applied, new and unprecedented levels of co-operation, the wisest possible application of knowledge, understanding, strength and organisation. From which city would we expect that leadership, that level of response, chiefly to come? The firm but illusory base of Place A? Or the insecure but truth-facing raft of Place B?

My answer has always been that the solutions needed must inevitably come from the exposed position of fact and reality. Despite the chaos there, Place B contains people whom experience has trained to live skillfully with truth and insecurity without deserting to Place A. There is nowhere to build except upon fact and there are no builders you can trust except those skilled and practiced in handling and addressing fact with familiar affection and without anxiety. Therefore, the skills and experience upon which the planet's future depends must reside in Place B.

Afterword

But nowadays I am in doubt of my initial conclusion. For is not the exposure to reality experienced by the people of Place B so debilitating that just existing there saps all available energy? Perhaps just keeping your balance on the raft takes up all available hope and skill. For instance it seems that the word "intuition" which for me describes an experience of fact, is used quite easily nowadays in the world of science, which I fear I still tend to associate with Place A. On the other hand that word can no longer be used at all in the world of social work and social care, which I still - despite everything - associate with Place B. The reason that "intuition" has become taboo in social work and similar activities is that it does not seem "scientific" enough and cannot be measured "scientifically".

Perhaps, after all, it is people used to the comfort, security and illusory self-belief of Place A who will come up with the answers. It will be answers already known in Place B, but not propounded or practiced effectively there, due to the habitual confusion, timidity and exhaustion that runs through the place like the very cement with which it was built.

Small children range far from a secure home, precisely because of its security. The more secure the base, so the more adventurous you feel you can be, and the further out you feel you can go, and the more solid and settled in yourself you feel. Remember to whom Shakespeare handed the crown of the future, after the death of old Lear: not to a prince from the facile new world, the new mentalities of the Renaissance, but to Edgar, a prince from Lear's old tired and corrupt mediaeval world, a prince now purged and scoured by Lear's own experience of purgatory on the heath, a man still

based in the old solidities but made whole from them and renewed out of them.

Perhaps, after all, the teachers, the leaders, the discoveries, the changes, the solutions, will come from the false but strong and firmly established position of Place A. Initially adventurous due to its security, initially strong due to its strength, they will survive and be made whole by the scouring, the mortification, the transformation that is now required of them in order to emerge in the doorway and lead us clear.



Fables and Reflections

Thirteen

Jason's sermon from a ledge

There was a place in Jason's landscape to which he returned often, almost obsessively - a ledge half way up a steep cliff whose bare rock face, chiefly the colour of burnt sand, was tinted in parts a beautiful faded rust. Behind it, a shallow cave offered a few still hours of partial shade each day. But poor Jason did not come here for the shade. His skin was all cracked leather by now and, sun or shade, it made no odds to him.

Something unresolved on that high ledge kept drawing him back.

A flat boulder in the shape of a huge disc lay up there like a great creamy squashed egg.

Writing covered its surface, scratched deep, chasing it round and round like growth rings on a great slice of tree-trunk. Looking closer, you could see that the rock was etched all over, as if the scribe involved in it had worked less to make a particular statement than simply to scratch and interfere with each square millimetre of the hot stone. Not only that, but the writing itself was scored and doubled up and super-imposed, full of corrections and after-thoughts, full of trouble, unable just to come out in one go with its own true clean voice. It was all torture, this huge disc shimmering day after day on its high ledge in the raw sunlight, every millimetre of its surface a contortion.

Jason had studied it for years, having to decipher not only the strange script and the language, but the very shape of its letters that time after time had been formed and re-formed, twisted and tangled on the tortured stone. What demons had the wretched artisan wrestled with in order to produce this thing? And how long did it last, this obsessive bid for terse perfection etched in stone for the centuries?

The etching consisted of sermons, or controversies, or reflections on chosen themes, a collation of lines of thought. They were full of anxiety, of anger, of a sense of emergency, of slender hope. The stone-carver seemed to have been desperate to persuade.

Finally Jason decided to let it go.

He found broken branches from the valley below to use as levers. And he collected stones and boulders that would enable him to support the great disc at waist level. At length it balanced there, poised on the piled stones, still horizontal, a great round table half way up the cliff, its surface a jagged muddle of flawed aspiration.

Jason bent down to take the great stone onto his shoulders. With a huge effort he struggled with it towards the cliff edge. He began slowly to revolve, sweat washing off him, knees wavering. Faster and faster he spun the disc and somehow the faster he spun it the steadier he became, as if speed was the one thing that kept him stable. At last with a great cry he heaved it away from him over the cliff edge. The stone plummeted down to the valley floor, still horizontal and briefly still spinning. It hit the ground and broke into bits, explosively. A great cloud of dust frothed and spiralled up the cliff-face. Rock fragments and splinters shot in all directions across the valley.

For an hour Jason watched the dust settle, his heart filled with relief and a sense of lightness. All finished. In the beginning, the word. To the end, dust. And peace in silence.

But where now can I place myself ? Where can I place my trust ?

On what may we concentrate now ? On what firm ground may we build ?

At length he stood up and, as the animals began to move again in the valley, the lizards and snakes emerging from their holes, the tortoises from their shells, the small birds from the low thorny bushes, he told them his reading of the final sermon of the stone-carver.

“We come from ancestors whose world was different from ours. But more, we come from ancestors whose way of being human was different from our way. In other words, not only was their world different, and hence their experience of the world, but their experience of being human in the world was different too. Or again, not only was their experience of being alive in place different from ours, the world being then so much less crowded and man-handled ; their experience of being alive in time was different too, since time did not behave then as it does now.

For time has changed pace. There has always - you could say - been time. Certainly, since time began, there has always been change. But quite suddenly and quite recently, change has changed and now rushes at us so fast, accelerating all the time, that we in this twenty-first century are almost a different race compared to all previous generations of humanity. The difference for us is as qualitatively enormous as the difference between being human with a tail and being human without one. The difference is so great, it's as if, a generation ago, the heartbeat in every human being doubled in pace, or as if the human race has spent all of its previous history walking along a plateau, gently descending, but has just now fallen off the edge.

It is the *rate* at which we live, the *rate* of world-transforming change within our lives, that has changed so fundamentally and it is a rate from which none of us can now escape, however far away we seek to go. In less than two centuries it has become inherent, integral to being human. It will remain so until either we adapt, or we hit bottom, or we learn quickly to slow change down.

Of course all through history, people's worlds have transformed all round them, often very suddenly, often catastrophically. Cities have fallen. Disease has swept away thousands. Economies have switched, dragging whole populations after them.

But until recently, the wider world upon which all this took place felt constant, massive and dependably long-term. The back-drop, the over-arch, the underlying rhythms, supports and binding elements - these held firm. Perhaps people were not just ignorant or merely superstitious when they conceived of the Earth as a vast flat platform full of gods and supported by a tortoise. That was a true experience, accurately pictured. And as that picture was superseded, so its successor, formed in the mind, established through voyages, seen from satellites, the image of a small sphere orbiting round a medium-sized sun in a dark vastness, seems also now inadequate and due for replacement, no longer true of central human experience. A more accurate portrait of present-day human existence is surely that the Earth is now a flat centrifugal wheel, a seething disc, revolving faster and faster, turning everything on its surface to a whirr and blur of speed and fragmentation, forcing all outwards to a far edge where nothing remains but flattened shards. In fact there is a sense in which the final fragmentation has already taken place, and each one of us, flung far outwards from the edge, now hangs atomised, weightless and solitary and detached, with no sheltering anchorage anywhere in the universe, no meaning, no connection, no firmness in all existence to support our feet or be held in our arms.

I shall spend no more time presenting this thesis. The ever-accelerating pace of change is a familiar subject, even though so many of its implications continue to be ignored.

I now want to answer these two questions : what does our new state mean for us ?
What does it do to us ?

In answering the first question, I find myself still speaking in imagery, but often wondering, are these pictures, these images, these likenesses that I am drawing, these connections I am making, are they truly just ways by which I seek to establish the fact ? Or are they and the fact one and the same thing, all the same fact ? Pictures driven into fact by the sheer force of accelerating time.

What does this new state mean ?

I change house. I move from one immediate surrounding to another, one base and refuge to another. In moving, I experience upset. For a long time, the loss of old familiarities, old habits, old shapes, each with its own associations and memories, leaves me feeling quite raw, quite disorientated and at sea, often sad. And it's not just the building, the rooms, the furniture in its particular established positions. It's the old neighbours and that system of intimacy that we developed over the years, and the tree on this corner and the shop down that street - all the associated aspects and ramifications, like capillary roots stretching far out and all round, and each one now torn up. So, truly, I feel raw, a tree transplanted. For quite some time, the new house simply doesn't fit. However pleased I am to make the move, the new house takes time to become me. I need time to settle into it, to get established there, to let go of the old shapes and habits and places of my being, and take hold of, and fill out into, the new ones. I need time to make the transition, like a snail easing its way into a new shell. In effect I have to rebuild myself into a new place, over time.

Another image: I move to another country. I leave my childhood, my growing, all behind me. My original language becomes a dead skin. And for months and perhaps even years, my new country's language is all meaningless noise to me, facing and blocking me like a blank wall. I feel cast adrift in a tiny boat with no provisions. And again, not just the obvious and major things, but the small particularities of my life as it used to be, are most painfully now torn out of me and I am altogether depleted, shorn of a present meaning for my past, shorn of a full belonging. I take nurture from a shallow soil but when I try to spread out, to reach down, to belong, I find myself resisted, blocked, the suspect stranger, the outsider, the alien. I am mis-met, I am mis-trusted, I am mis-used for being unfamiliar. Day in day out, to one or another extent, I am denied.

It is surely the fact that we experience our surrounding world as a kind of house. Or, equally, as a familiar home country. It is literally our house. It is literally our home country. And if our world becomes continual rapid flux, an onslaught of unceasing change, then it is surely also the fact that our experience of life becomes that of a continual removal from old house to new house, of a continual immigration from home country to alien country. In a vital sense, we are all now homeless. In a vital sense we are all now immigrants. And there is never time to catch up with losing the old, or to become familiar and fully integrated with the new. For the new is replaced and fades before our eyes faster than we can absorb it. We never have time truly to absorb anything. Accordingly, we are always now in the middle of moving house. All of us. We are always now immigrants newly arrived in an alien country. All of us.

Furthermore, in addition to that permanency of trauma, is the fact that we have no choice. It is not as if we choose to be constantly moving house or changing country. It is forced on us.

It is thus not we who keep removing. It is our house which keeps removing us. Our lives have become a corridor of new houses all advancing on us, surrounding us and then deserting us, an endless and ever-accelerating succession of mobile homes.

Likewise, it is not we who keep migrating. It is our home country which keeps dropping away behind us and forcing us to travel a dry road from strangeness to strangeness, a permanently enforced alienation.

Thus, a major factor in the transition trauma which fills all our lives now, is our own powerlessness, our own helplessness to affect our condition. We are like puppets dancing in a hurricane that is sweeping our stage away. Who is the puppeteer ?

If we have a clear picture now of what all this means, we are bound to go further and look *behind* the picture, and all *round* it, and at all its implications.

Psychology has something to say about transition. Transition is almost synonymous with bereavement and Psychology has established that people follow a certain pattern in the way they respond to and emerge from the trauma of loss and change.

The process begins with denial, a refusal to accept. It can be accompanied by experiences that seem almost psychotic, in which the lost person or item appears still to be present and participating in one's life.

Denial becomes protest, anger, outrage, as the fact sinks in. This stage is often accompanied by the need to blame something or someone for the fact of the loss and the pain it is causing. Blaming somehow makes pain easier.

You find it hard to let go, to relax. So sleeping can be difficult, and tiredness becomes an added feature and causal element.

Protest leads to depression as the fact settles and enforces acceptance. The bereaved feels inert, incomplete, raw. Often you retreat into isolation, severing old contacts.

Slowly, time and active mourning, active recall of the lost companion, active and pain-filled awakens to the difference between the togetherness of before and the aloneness of now, heals you. Slowly, life becomes something that can be lived again. It becomes real again. In many cases, if the lost companion was very central, life will never be as real as it was before, never as joyous or dependable ; but it becomes a possibility again, a tolerable experience.

For some, it is possible to emerge from a major loss actually stronger than before, more complete, having internalised a strength that once belonged outside, having rid yourself of old false securities.

So the bereaved person emerges from mourning permanently changed, perhaps renewed.

Or the bereaved gets stuck. For one reason or another, open mourning cannot take place, or move the person on. So the disturbance caused by loss breaks out in other ways. Symptoms gather. The person's life draws in. Growing ceases.

Clearly the time all this takes varies according to the centrality of the lost relationship. And the different stages can flow into one another or interchange or recur, depending on the situation, the person, the relationship.

But all of us know from experience which all of us have had and will have again, that loss takes time, recovery from a major loss takes much time. And we all know too that loss and the feelings it brings is not restricted just to loss of close friends or family. Losing a limb involves the same process and sequence of mourning. And moving house. And being an immigrant.

So what happens when each one of us is being removed from house to house, country to country, world to world, *all the time* ?

We remain each one of us stuck in the middle of bereavement. We become fixed and paralysed in one or another stage of loss. In the stage of denial. Or of anger. Or of depression.

And it is not good enough to say, observing some of Society's more obvious casualties crouching in some back alley or main street door step, beer cans in hands, "There sit people who can't manage change - unlike me who ride the storm like a butterfly, so elegantly that my salary is now high and rising and my car gets glossier each year and my holidays range ever further afield. Please accept a small token of my esteem, oh gods, that thanks to you and with a bit of help from me, I am not as these others are."

In fact we are all casualties of this new onslaught of change. It confuses, bombards and threatens us. It reduces and lessens us. It numbs us. To an extent which can never be measured, the world of tumultuous change which now surrounds each one of us, discolours and distorts all our behaviour all the time. It debilitates us. It debilitates the whole population. It has become causal and crucial as a factor in, and as an explanation for, events that take place in terms of individuals and of societies, in the political sphere and in the cultural sphere.

Events and processes, issues, behaviours and movements were once understood and explained in terms of ideas, or social class, or economics, or whatever. Such rationality was surely never sufficient as a way of properly understanding things as they are and doings as they take place. But now it is beyond all doubt that nothing that happens makes any sense whatsoever unless it is at least partially evaluated from the perspective of incessant tumultuous change and the psychological impact of incessant tumultuous change upon human functioning.

What is the reason for the appeal of fundamentalist dogmatism in so many parts of the world, in so many spheres, in so many guises? It is another form of materialism, a new idolatry. What is the reason for the appeal of the grossly materialist far Right that continues to abuse and cripple the countries it governs even while time and time again it has been exposed as incapable and unworthy? What is the drive that still makes "ethnic cleansing" possible, in one or another form, or part of the world - that brutal, regressive urge to achieve a sense of security through the atomising distinction or severance of race from race? What is the drive that justifies ludicrous and anti-social wealth for some individuals - as if absurd material superfluity is a kind of insulation, a protective fence?

Why this depression which hangs over such huge numbers of people, driving more and more of them to their battered health services for medication, or to the friendless bleak streets for narcotics?

The forces released by the turning wheel grip us and none can escape. They smash and tear and fragment and even while we are flung to the wheel's farthest edge we grab at some flying splinter that just might save us. Some illusory shield. Some false covering. Some pretence at certainty. Some simple strong answer. Some plausible excuse for detachment and disengagement. Some scapegoat. Some relief.

Dysfunctional and adrift, in a pathological state of permanent mourning and transition that distorts experience, perception and action, we might turn to the demagogue for our guidance and salvation. In doing so we forget that our leaders are

afflicted with precisely the same disease as we are and their actions are no less infected than ours with the identity crisis the disease creates and the loss of all sense of control over events which it means.

So what we are told are solutions to our problems are in fact too often just the expression of our leaders' pathology and distress ; what we are told are attempts to address the situation on our behalf are in fact just our leaders' search for personal reassurance at our expense.

The certainties and inhumanity of dogma give more reassurance than the complexities and involvements of reality ; so dogma rules.

A whirl of furious and radical activity gives the illusion of mastery and control to those who instigate it ; so instigate they do, instigation after instigation at frantic pace, doubling the trauma experienced by the remainder, debilitating still further an already debilitated population.

Never has it been more true that the surgeon is wounded who plies the steel. How is it possible for any surgeon's hand still to be steady? Or if steady, at what cost?

Never has it been more true that the blind are leading the blind. The leaders look to the led to show them what will be popular enough to keep them in power with some semblance of control. And the whims and yearnings of the led are caused entirely by their lostness, their despair, their craving for a clear lead. Bound together, despising one another, the two groups stumble towards the edge.

We lurch from answer to answer, straw to straw, with ever lessening belief, respect or hope. In the end, our hopelessness will be total and we shall deliberately choose disaster.

Is there anything better we can do?

We can alert ourselves at all levels of leadership and responsibility to our own symptoms of transition trauma, to ensure that we at least limit those aspects of our behaviour that merely reflect our dysfunction and hence add to the burden that others have to carry.

As leaders at all levels, in all that we do that affects others, we can take account of transition and its impact so as to minimise the malfunction our activities create in our fellow citizens and maximise and facilitate their ability to absorb and come to creative terms with change, rather than continue just to be its helpless victims. We have to teach people to defend and take care of themselves.

Leaders at all levels, but especially leaders at the top level, need to see transition and its effects as a matter of highest possible priority. Society must be stabilised. That which offers real (as opposed to illusory) stability must be prioritised. The traumatised individual must be offered new conditions of belonging, continuity and personal valuation, for Society to survive. This must be the centre-point of any political programme, whatever its place on the political spectrum.

Of all the crises now crowding in on humanity, each created by our own nature and activities, this is perhaps the greatest one, intangible and barely recognised though it is.

The crisis affecting the whole Earth caused by rampant and universal transition is the fruit of a triumphant human mind and human science. Perhaps mind and science will now help humanity deal emotionally with the consequences of the conditions we have created for ourselves by finding a way to drive us through a rapid new stage of evolution, so that the conditions of stability we still need to keep us emotionally healthy are no longer necessary to us. But it is unlikely that mind and science will find such a way. It is almost certainly undesirable they should try. They are not to be trusted.

In the meantime there is little that can be done to control, to manage, to limit, to slow. But what can be done should be done. For all our sakes, what can be done has to be done.”

Jason came to the end.

He had now passed on all that had been etched upon the great stone. And the stone was smashed and there was nothing left to say.

He began to sing. He had no real voice but could arrive at notes roughly as he intended.

His song came from nowhere and went nowhere, followed no pattern and had no words. It was filled with passion, love, grief, anger and a great yearning. It lifted from him into the valley.

We leave him standing on the empty ledge, freed of his song as it drifts beyond him into the clean blue glare of the sky.

Hold true to your passion, Jason. Fare featly. Sing on.



Fables and Reflections

Fourteen

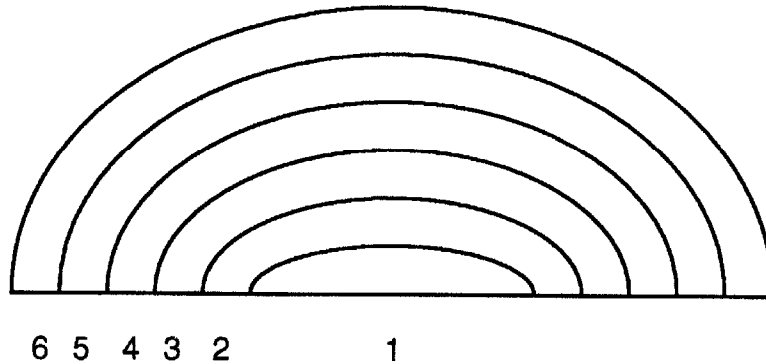
Rome Burning

We live in times when none of us can be sure of the ground we stand on. In effect, the ground moves too fast and in too many directions. The process can make us feel insignificant, meaningless, powerless ; and this does harm to our capacity to act.

Either we fail to act altogether, we “don’t get involved” , so switch off, disconnect, go shopping ; or we act halfheartedly, in despair, confusion, doubt, fear for ourselves ; or we hide in action behind precedent, rigidity, over-simple ideology, conformism, fanaticism. It becomes ever more difficult just to act rightly, with whole conviction, all one’s faculties free and unfearful ; and to know where and how to act with effectiveness and meaning.

In a burning Rome, why iron shirts ? In a burning Rome, what is the point of treating someone for a head-ache ? In a burning Rome, what do you do ?

The diagram below is often useful to me :



The horizontal line represents ground, the ground of our being. The surrounding arcs represent spheres of operation. Arc 1 represents the inner or most immediate sphere. It could be a person, or the core of that person. It could be your immediate family or workplace. The outer arcs, getting wider and wider, represent the different spheres of operation this unit occupies and relates to.

For example, Jane Smith carves her name on the old school desk. She writes : Jane Smith, 3 St John’s Road, Personhampton, England, Europe, the Earth, the Solar System etc. If we apply Jane’s carving to the diagram, she herself will occupy the space created by Arc 1. In Arc 2 is her house and family . In Arc 3 is the street she lives in, her immediate neighbourhood. In Arc 4 is her town. In 5 the country. In 6 the continent. And so on.

Or a community centre, where people otherwise isolated might gather. Arc 1 is the centre. Arc 2 contains its membership. Arc 3 those people's families and communities. Arc 4 local resources, support services and institutions. Arc 5 the centre's place in and relationship to the whole community work scene. Arc 6 that scene's place in and relationship to the country's welfare provision as a whole. And so on.

Or Rome.

Arc 1 contains a Roman official. Arc 2 the office where he works. Arc 3 the aspect of Roman life for which his office has responsibility. Arc 4 the whole organisation of Roman life and culture of which his office is a part. Arc 5 Roman life as it relates to other cultures, for instance there on the walls which have just been breached by barbarians carrying torches.

And so on. We can now put the questions : in which arc, or sphere of operation, does Jane Smith mostly live ? To which arc or sphere of operation does our community centre mostly belong ? Which arc or sphere of operation should hold the attention of the Roman official ? Where should they concentrate their functioning ?

My answer is that they belong equally in all spheres but in different ways. They will function in one sphere more than another, depending on circumstances and character.

I believe the diagram offers guidelines for action. I propose its use has the following implications :

Whatever your sphere of operation, your activities will neither be meaningful nor will flourish unless your centre, the innermost sphere, the core, is in good shape, is secure, focussed and operational. Literally, your centre must be solid to avoid the outer spheres collapsing on it.

Thus, you need a secure home-base, a secure centre, to go out from, and to return to, and to trust in when you are away.

Wherever you go, in body, in thought, or in action, you need to validate yourself by means of a solid centre before extending yourself beyond it.

If all goes well in the outer spheres, or if colleagues placed there are functioning adequately, then you can concentrate on work close in, without risk to creativity, integrity or meaning.

But in the following circumstances, you are obliged logically and morally to function in the outer spheres, remembering that you will function better there the more solid, meaningful and operational your inner centre, your home-base, remains :

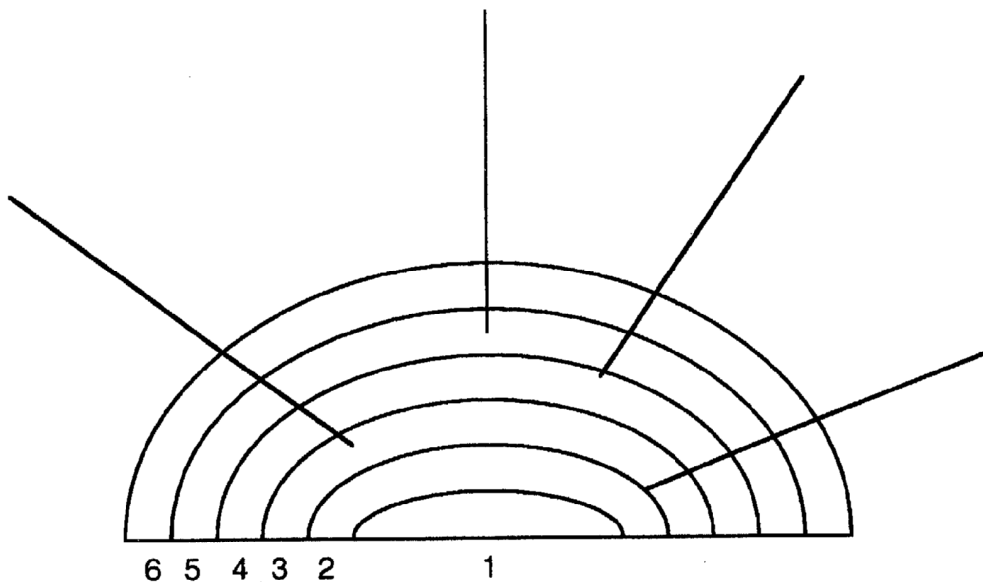
- if your centre, your home-base, is threatened from without, in literal terms, or in terms of principle, meaning or credibility, and the appropriate organisations or people in authority are not providing adequate protection or articulation.

- if what you have or do in your inner sphere, or home-base is of special value, meaning or relevance to other spheres, and is not already in evidence there, for whatever reason.

In these circumstances, you do not need an end in view and should not presume to know one. You should merely extend your functioning outward from sphere to sphere as far as resources allow and only so far as your initiative remains meaningful, relevant and solidly based. What results, what follows, cannot be planned for and to try would be both presumptuous and unwise. All you can be sure of is that if the original position is sound, the *products* of that position are likely to be sound as well.

In uncharted territory, lost in turmoil, I have used this diagram of the arcs, of the spheres of operation, both as a kind of map and also as an anchorage. It is my Jane Smith. At a time when it is harder and harder to hold centre-ground, when out-dated concrete and linear thinking (in steely bright new guise) have such a powerful and all-conquering attraction, the principle and system given shape by this diagram have acted almost as a platform, a foothold in the midst of breaking ground.

I have used it too as a system of prioritisation, as a way of selecting action from action. To develop the use of the diagram to offer detailed help with prioritisation, the diagram itself needs to be changed slightly. Thus :



In this developed version, the additional lines, the “rays”, represent events, or claims upon the attention of the person or persons in the inner sphere. If the rays have a direction, it is inward, in towards arc 1, and they come to rest at different points relative to arc 1, depending on the sphere of their chief impact.

For example, if four events have just now taken place, or there are four claims for attention simultaneously pressing in on the actor(s) in sphere 1, the following simple principle can be used to help with the decision on how and in what order of priority to respond :

In normal circumstances, the more close in is the point of impact of the event , the more immediately it should be attended to. For instance, a client in crisis comes before the need to write the centre's business plan. A fire in the office should be tackled before keeping an appointment for a business lunch.

In times of threat and crisis, however, it would be consistent to reverse this rule. If an event takes place in an outer sphere that threatens the whole operation right through to the centre, then that outer sphere requires an immediate response and all available resources from within must be co-opted to help face out.

The Roman official, for example, presented with Rome burning, would do well to forget the untidy state of his office, his anger with his boss, or his personal career ambitions ; he needs to face out ; and offer what help he can at the point at which the fire is burning.



Fables and Reflections

Fifteen

Jane Smith goes to the doctor

In an interview with her doctor, a pregnant woman of 40 is advised not to have her baby at home.

Statistics reveal that among women of 40 and above there is a greater risk of complications than among younger women. Accordingly, the GP was only concerned for her safety in counselling her the way he did.

After the interview the woman feels distressed. Her name is Jane Smith. Jane Smith cries (husbands are taught that women tend to be especially emotional when they are pregnant).

It is not just that the doctor has tried to dissuade her from having her baby at home.

Although that matters of course. She wanted to have both her two previous babies at home but was dissuaded each time. The first because it was her first and the second because there'd been a complication during the pregnancy. Statistical findings of risk and mortality ratings ruled in each case. They and the fear they carried overbore her.

But throughout this time, her desire for the experience of a home birth has been growing and here quite clearly is her last chance for one. So whatever the doctor says, this time she's going ahead. It matters that he has tried to put her off, but actually changes nothing and is not the main cause of her distress.

Jane Smith cannot put her finger on why she's so upset. She feels somehow reduced. Her longstanding and truly affectionate relationship with her doctor has somehow evaporated, has somehow been swept away. She feels he has somehow forgotten her as she is. In a few seconds of talk, he has managed to de-materialise her and replace the space she thought she occupied here in this room with a statistic.

It is as if the fact of Jane Smith has been made one-dimensional. She has been reduced to one overriding factor. From this factor, just one abstract conclusion has been drawn which for her has virtually no relevance to the particular person she is in the particular situation which is hers.

That factor is of course the number of years she has lived, and the conclusion drawn from it comes from the statistical link between woman of 40+ years and child-birth mishaps. It is a conclusion that could still profoundly affect the shape, direction and memories of her life. No doubt it has already profoundly affected the shape, direction and memories of many lives.

The doctor's proper and professionally correct advice takes no account of other elements and factors that go to make up that most complex fact of *her*, Jane Smith, who and how she is, her being, her particularity, her fitness to be. She doesn't consist only of the gender she belongs to, the number of years she has lived, the size of her belly. Her fitness to give birth must soon of course be checked by the simple biological age of her body. But not yet. Her fitness to give birth and to have her baby safely at home still also depends on how she feels, her state of mind, the extent and reasons for her determination, her adult history and experiences, her emotional inheritance, her relationship with that inheritance, her friendships, her genes, her physical health, what exercise she takes, what she eats, how well she and her husband work together, how well she and the doctor work together, how good the community midwives are, etc, etc.

Jane Smith must not allow herself to be shaped by the imposition upon her of a single dimension. It is not the truth of her. Jane Smith is a precise and beautiful constellation of dimensions, a unique and miraculous complication. A meeting-point. A concentration. A source. A possibility.

She and the doctor must meet again. They must negotiate.

Afterword

Some facts belong solely to the page, being one-dimensional, inactive and relatively shapeless. But such facts are in the minority.

Most facts have many dimensions and elements, are active and have a traceable, variable shape. They exist in the universe like rafts in a great storm, fragile platforms in chaos, footholds on the sheer cliff.

By shape I do not mean necessarily just a physical shape. A fact can exist in the world, take shape in the world, without necessarily becoming material.

You do not establish most facts from just one position or vantage-point. You establish most facts by discovering them at the complex and shifting meeting-point of a whole range of aspects, factors and elements.

To establish a fact, to take a position based on fact, usually requires many starting-points which seem at first to bear no relation to one another. Their relationship comes later - at the meeting-point at which the fact is established.

The establishing of a fact is a work of creation and therefore demands a willingness to be surprised.

Furthermore, in order to establish a fact, you will certainly have to relate to it and attach yourself to it to the extent that you and your work become one of the factors that shape it at the meeting-point.

Every living creature is a fact. Jane Smith is a fact. Her connection to, and dependency upon, the world and her fellow creatures there, is fact. Jane Smith's

recognition of the fellow-centrality and experience of all her fellow creatures on Earth is the creation of a fact. The crisis now facing the world as the result of a universal failure to face these facts, is a fact.

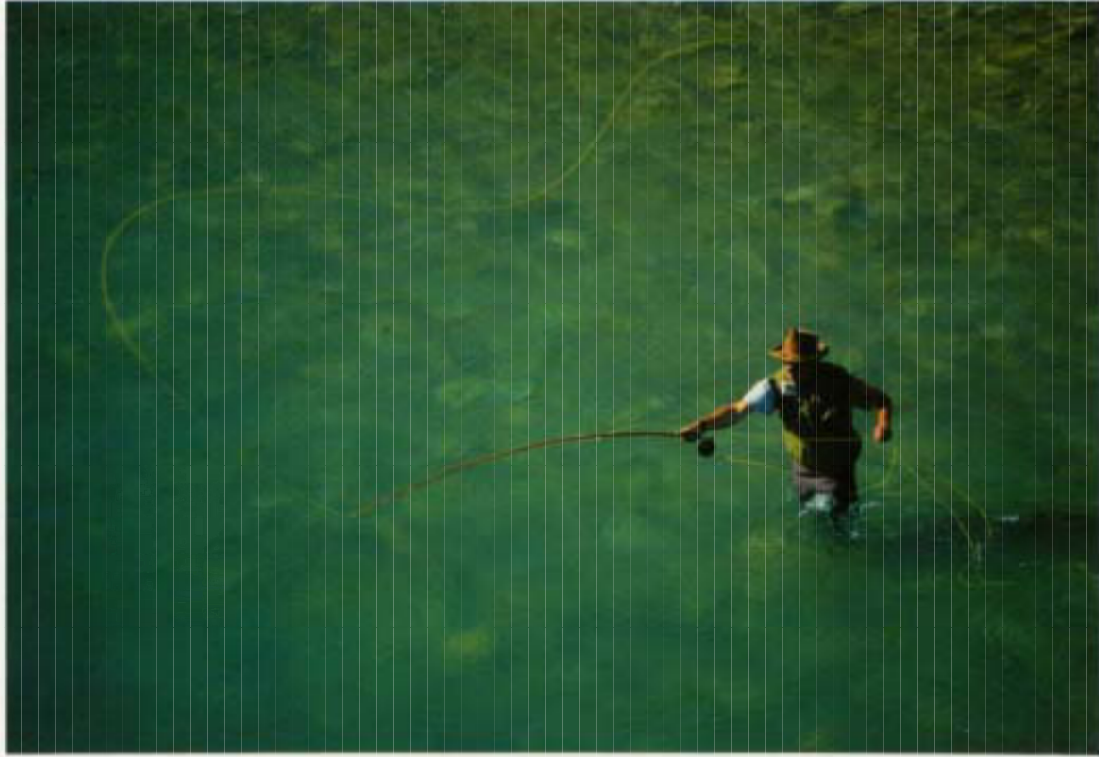
A fact is an end-result, a vital meeting-point where various elements and factors come together. It is also an energy source, a creator of further facts and developments. A fact is thus both an end-result and a starting-point.

As a matter of course and of self-preservation, you must treat with reverence every fact you encounter. To distort it distorts you. To belittle it belittles you. To dismiss it dismisses you.



Fable Sixteen

Fishing and the Fundamentalists



Picture by Nathan Bilow. Getty Images

(i)

Moses is always portrayed as a venerable elder with a long white beard, but it's hard to believe he was especially old when he led his nation out of Egypt. He was certainly not feeble. Just think of the influence he had over a whole people, to convince them to go on that trek with him, into the unknown. And he must have been fit, to travel so far, in such heat. So must his nation.

He believed that there was something true in the world, in opposition to the false ; a living spirit at the heart of things, in opposition to dead outward shows, hollow gestures and set motions ; a reliable and active essence, the Alpha and Omega, the Word.

And of course the only way to commune with this inner essential, this One, was to climb a mountain, all alone. Only at the absolute summit can the Word be met with.

But also he needed urgently to re-establish his credentials as receiver, confidante and translator of this Truth spoken on the holy mountain. His people were on the move and without roots. Nothing stayed still for them and nothing was sure. They were

desperate, down-hearted, disillusioned and becoming dangerous. He had to keep winning them over if any were to reach the Promised Land.

But we know what happened on Mount Sinai. It wasn't easy. Moses had to strain all his faculties to hear the Words of Truth, and even then couldn't be absolutely sure. All his preconceptions, his images of the Absolute, proved unfounded, facile and impertinent. As they were bound to. He came down from the mountain bewildered and spent. As he was bound to.

And down in the valley he found his brother in much better shape than he, giving the people what they wanted. After all, you knew where you stood with a golden calf - it was shiny to look at and solid to the touch. And sure enough, it spoke to Aaron in terms everyone could understand, giving instructions, ordering sacrifices and blood-lettings, showing them exactly what to believe and what to do. Here was Certainty and Belonging. Here was Relief from Doubt.

Relief from Doubt and Desolation is the false god which Fundamentalism proffers. Moses' word for Fundamentalism was Idolatry. He was a prophet.

(ii)

The poet TS Eliot said "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." In other words, each of us will flinch many times a day from the difficulty of connecting fully and honestly with fact and truth. Or, in other words again, there are many ways of escaping into a fundamentalist mode of operating, and each one of us will succeed in finding one or another of them several times a day, day after day.

(iii)

Here's another angle :

The historian Hugh Trevor-Roper asked, what can we learn about human nature from a study of the burning of witches ?

The point is, those persecutions didn't happen in a single burst or particular place, or consistently, but in irregular waves over a long period, and in different places over a wide area.

I suppose we might ask a similar question about the Inquisition and other heresy hunts, or the pogroms which at different times all over Europe (and beyond) killed Jews or gypsies or other easily blamed "outsiders" and scapegoats.

But as far as witches were concerned, Trevor-Roper found that outbreaks of persecution occurred either along *borders* of special uncertainty and insecurity, or in *times* of special uncertainty and insecurity.

Obviously, during the centuries when witch-burning on occasion took place, there was ready to hand an intellectual framework, mind-set, belief system or what you will, which rationalised and excused these persecutions and murders of particular women in the community. Some of the women were perhaps a bit strange, others a bit special – making them all the easier to pick out and target - fair prey. But nowadays that belief system is discredited and no longer available. So the women are safe.

But uncertainty and insecurity haven't gone away. In fact, some would say that these present early days of the twenty first century are uniquely uncertain and insecure for all humankind, whatever material comforts some few of us enjoy.

And all over the world, fraught borders and walls continue to divide people - fault lines of fear and hatred. Guards patrol them ceaselessly, their sole aim to enforce exclusion.

So if we still believed in the existence of witches, and our right and need to destroy them, we should perhaps be looking round today, some of us nervously, for new billows of smoke, crackles of flame and puckerings of skin-surface.

But maybe these days you don't need to be judged a witch to be in danger of burning. Or, put another way, maybe we are all now liable to be hunted down.

For, clearly, there's a new post-medieval mind-set, shared by significant numbers of intelligent and competent people, that says you don't need to single out victims for this or that reason - it's perfectly okay just to blow people up at random, wherever and whoever they are, their only qualification for execution being that they are vulnerable, compressed into a crowd, and killing them terrifies everyone else. Various fervent believers (of opposing beliefs) seem to favour this form of high-tech witch-burning and think it does good.

But, in addition to the new random version, I personally think there is still a process in operation similar and in some ways successor to the witch-hunt, by which a singling out takes place, a victim is chosen, and destruction follows in which the community participates and from which it gains some sort of satisfaction.

I shall develop the thought by giving a specific example. I work in the field of social care, often with people who have mental health problems. In other words, some might say, I am stationed at one of the most troubled borders and fault-lines in the world. On one side of the line, reason, order, control, sense – all our bright dreams of grace and balance ; on the other side the furies, chaos and bewilderment – all our worst nightmares of pursuit and engulfment. And for many people, the only way to protect the former good dream from being overwhelmed by the latter bad one, is to have guards ceaselessly patrolling the fine line between. Here, where sanity meets madness, is a border, par excellence, of special uncertainty and insecurity. Here, most certainly, witches in plenty have been burnt.

But something else is in constant danger along this crucial border. Not literal witches

these days, perhaps, not burnable bodies, but the qualities and skills needed to connect people across the dividing line - forms of communication, forms of recognition, forms of reconciliation, forms of *connection*. These are “soft,” difficult and complex human creations and applications, high arts and subtle crafts, and on the face of it they are mysterious and hard to measure. They are realities which do not speak with a voice of thunder from on top of the mountain. Nor are they shiny. But, speaking still and small, they are the qualities and delicate bindings on which community relies, they are central and our future relies on them. We attack or belittle them at our peril. To attack or belittle them is truly insane. But attack and belittle them we do – constantly and across the board.

It’s easy to understand how it happens and how it’s rationalised. For instance, the issue of Community is vastly complex and can leave us feeling helpless and at sea. So let’s *reduce* it to a bureaucrat’s view from the window, whereby Community becomes just a matter of implementing equitable policies, challenging prejudice and organising street parties.

By the same token and process, attending to someone with extensive problems comes to be judged by the bullet points written afterwards, summarising what the person said during the meeting. Offering someone long-term support comes to be placed in columns under slogan headings – such as “Empowerment,” “Recovery,” “Inclusion,” “Employment.”

Consulting with people who use a mental health service is another area of great complexity, requiring care, skill and judgements ; but a pressured system *reduces* the whole topic to inviting those people in ones and twos to management meetings in management offices, following management agendas.

The way too many harassed service managers communicate with people who have mental health problems is to speak to them as if they were mirror images of themselves, sharing the same view from the office window, part of the same committee-room persona and performance.

Training becomes the panacea, the valium that cures all ills. A few days’ “training” will transport us from chaos to order, bewilderment and conflict to enlightenment and harmony. It will teach the drowning how to swim.

The high, central, difficult, long-taught and hard-won inter-personal skills of warmth, genuineness and accurate empathy are allowed to wither on the stem or are consigned to the odd specialist consulting room. They can’t be counted, they can’t be weighed, they can’t be summarised.

A psychotherapist I’ve known said : we need to make precious the space between us.

At the fraught and questionable boundary between the sane and the mad, we have balked throughout history at the complexity and difficulty of making human connection across the space between us. And in new different ways and disguises we are still doing so. But through turning against that preciousness, through denying,

reducing, rejecting it, through making a witch of it, we are destroying our hope and meaning, our capacity for a future. Perhaps beside our latest witch also burns the right hand side of all our brains.

(iv)

When a certain strident lady said : “there’s no such thing as community – only the individual and that which belongs to the individual” there was a strong reaction. Some Christian vicars who until that moment had been reasonably content to have a Conservative Government in power, suddenly jerked awake. No such thing as *community* ? But the gospels are about nothing else ! Community is God’s sphere of operation ! That lady is making a fundamentalist attack on the very foundations of Society. She’s a woman of metal who’s gone seriously off the rails. A few years later she fell from office with a mighty clang and the aged gentlemen returned to their after-dinner dozes.

A few years later still, a very different government was returned, firmly committed to the recognition that community is both real and essential. Yet too often, the tools it has reached for to renew and modernise community, have been the lady’s own tools.

For we are still mesmerised by the merely material and outward, the solid, simple and shiny, just as the lady was. And now the denial of reality which she represented is working even deeper in.

So “only someone who has experienced mental illness themselves can properly relate to someone in that same position, because only they can know what it’s like.” This statement has become a truism in the mental health services. Is it any different, essentially, from the Iron Lady’s denial of the existence of community ? It is saying in effect that human empathy does not exist and we are mere computers, only able to connect to those with the same past and programming as ourselves. In this new and dangerously simplified world, nothing is real unless it can be weighed on a grocer’s set of measuring scales ; and because the human skills and qualities that connect Me to Thee can’t be touched by those measures, they are given decreasing value and currency. Too much we meet Community as a mere presentation exercise – as Customers wowed and wooed with Choice and crude externalised Targets and Indicators ; so it becomes just a Big Sell shop-front, with computers in the window, connected by wires and flashing lights...

All external shows. In the meantime, those workers whose job it is to function in areas where community is most obviously in the making and under strain – the teachers, the social workers, etc - are constrained, belittled, driven, unsure of their expertise, scapegoated – their skills lacking in social weight and credit. As workers they are reduced by inference to being shop assistants, passing care over the counter as a kind of commodity.

Behind the Shop-front Community of the present-day, witches are still being burnt, fundamentalism is prospering, and the human self continues to reel and flounder.

The Moses/Aaron argument is not that different from the trouble Christ had with the Scribes and Pharisees.

The tension is a fundamental one. Perhaps here is another central dichotomy of opposing forces, which between them form a larger whole.

It is the tension between the original principle and its outer form, the spirit and the letter. At the top of Sinai, Moses found the true spirit difficult to decipher ; down on the plain, Aaron took an easier route and went for gold, solid and tangible.

Christ's case against the Scribes and Pharisees was that in devoting themselves to the Law's letter, and imposing it on others, they had lost touch with the Law's informing spirit. In effect they were worshipping what was now a human interpretation and artefact, locked in time, fixed and material like Aaron's golden calf. They were actually fundamentalists and idolaters, in one.

But this hardening of inner spirit into outer form - so that in time the form becomes stuck and brittle and inadequate as an expression of the original meaning, a perversion of it, even sometimes the expression and vehicle and disguise of an opposite and opposing force - is a necessary process. Creation has to take form, in the first instance - otherwise nothing gets done. And it needs to survive in a world not just of time but also hard knocks.

So we're stuck with this tension. And now that history is imposing comprehensive change at breakneck speed across all elements and aspects of our lives, the tension is enormous and ever-present. New creation is hardening into viable form and then into a brittle perversion of itself, almost simultaneously.

And the policy-maker simply cannot know the spirit informing and motivating the people he or she relies on to make the policy happen - and therefore whether the finished article will bear any relation to the original dream.

For my example I turn again to the aspiration that health and social care services should be more responsive to and shaped by the expressed needs of the people for whom they exist. That aspiration is expressed by policies and directives, sent down through hierarchies of over-worked and often disempowered public servants.

And too often the aspiration emerges at the work-face as a set of perversions and posturings that do the very opposite of what was intended. The aspiration of better listening manifests itself as an irresistible top-down pressure to supply bodies to sit on committees, arenas which are notorious for supplying the worst possible conditions for good listening. The aspiration of greater sensitivity and responsiveness manifests itself too often in one or another form of collusion and manipulation, both expressions - if not merely of unthinking haste - then of unspoken resentment and contempt.

As a result of the process described above, it is possible to observe that in many cases a well-meaning vision of inclusiveness, made into policy, has manifested itself almost immediately in forms which merely add to division, disempowerment and exclusion.

I have no satisfactory answers to this difficulty. If I did, I fear their almost instant transformation into yet another aspect of the problem !

My only suggestion is a time-honoured one - to keep forcing a way back to the guiding principle as check and monitor of all our doings.

(vi)

And among so much confusion, here's yet another duality, or dichotomy.

(Whether it's Nature that comes up with these dualities and oppositions, or whether it's just human nature that keeps inventing them out of need, is beyond me to answer.)

This latest duality may perhaps be causing us trouble, and getting in the way of seeing the others clearly. So it's worth trying to identify it, if only then to pack it away.

It is the secular view of reality, versus the religious view. This duality seems often closely parallel to another one that has played a part in history - eighteenth century Reason vs Unreason.

The scientist Galileo recanted on his knowledge that the world was round. If he'd carried on insisting on what he knew, and we know, the Inquisition would almost certainly have killed him. Faith in this instance and for that time was an enemy of Plain Fact and refused to allow it air. And for years people of Faith saw Darwin as an enemy of the Word made manifest and they fought his findings. The Christian Fundamentalist Wing is still doing so.

In these situations the secular approach has been defended as the merely obvious and sane.

Fundamentalism grows ever more tempting as a retreat position, and threatening as a force of unreason and denial. "I know this is true." "How do you know?" "Because the Lord told me so yesterday afternoon, after lunch, in a dream," or "In the Sacred Book it is written...."

Perhaps in opposition to that retreat into fundamentalism, unreason and idolatry, one is tempted in turn to over-simplify the secular approach, so that it excludes anything that is not material and measurable in the crudest terms. All too easily the extreme secular, turned exclusively materialist, becomes as destructive of reality as the blindly fundamentalist devotee....

Fundamentalism in two forms, both equally enemies of reality.

I picture the dry-fly fisherman.

There he stands in the flow of the stream, thigh-deep in water. The current whirls around and past him. But he is concentrated, his movements circumscribed and pre-ordained.

He flexes his back and arms, to send the rod arching on before him so that the line flashes further still across the surface of the water. Yards and yards of perfect reach. The fly comes to rest, an inch or two above the surface, but too briefly to be seen, and then flicks back - over and behind the fisherman's head - as he and the rod flex again and the long oval continues and continues.

And all the while as the water gurgles, the rod and line are singing as if a strong wind is using them as reeds.

The fisherman stays intent. He is the centre of each cast and it relies absolutely on the committed perfection of all his movements. He takes joy in his action, in his placing, in his place, in this time. If he thought of a catch, a hit, an end, his cast would suffer, making the catch less likely. He is given over entirely to his instruments and their proper deployment, this moment and its proper living.

Let the fisherman keep casting his line. Let each cast seem to hang in the air as the next one comes to join it.

Let him persist in his joy and be endlessly prolific with his casting.

I remember this picture whenever I become distraught at my lack of progress or achievement !

Rogan Wolf
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About the author



The poet Rogan Wolf has been a social worker for many years, specialising in mental health. He spent much of this time acting in a freelance capacity. He founded and still runs a charity called Hyphen-21, which aims to identify and support sound principle and mature skill in the charged and fragile space between I and Other, helper and the helped. See www.hyphen-21.org

One of the projects instigated by Hyphen-21 is called “Poems for...” It has been running since 1998, funded by the UK Arts Council among others. It supplies small poem posters, most of them bilingual, to schools, libraries and health and social care settings around the world. See : www.poemsfor.org

Rogan also runs a blog : www.roganwolf.com

Believing that poetry is most needed and speaks clearest at fraught frontiers, he offers poetry readings to mental health workers and managers, hospice and other palliative care workers, workers supporting older people, carers of people who are disabled or otherwise in need, users of care services, nursing and social work students, student teachers, drama school students, etc.