

16 January 2022

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

It goes without saying, though I'll say it anyway, that anything I've been spewing forth in way of words in these letters is purely my own opinion, often *opinionated*, and not to be interpreted as anything 'official'. They're only the musings of my odd and modest mind, such as it is, on any given day.

You knew that, right?

The Soul's Parliament

I've never endeavoured to speak in this forum on *behalf* of Jesus, Buddha, Moses, Christianity, the Holy Catholic Church, the Evil Patriarchy, Western Civilisation, or Wisdom and her Offspring. Nor have I tried to speak on *behalf* of Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Socialism, Rationalism, Mysticism, Cynicism, Marxism, Conservatism, Stoicism, Aestheticism, Liberalism, or any other '-ism' under the Sun.

When it appears that I've been doing just that, it's because fragments of these live inside me. And like every human who has ever lived, I'm not a solid, singular soul, all polished and well put together. Neither are you.

We can't really *see* ourselves whole, can we? That's because we're not 'whole' at all. We're tangled webs of broken thoughts, fractured feelings, and messy memories, piles of puzzle pieces dumped on the floor.

Another way to put it is to say that my soul, like yours, is a Parliament of Voices and Ideas who've taken up residence in my Inner Chamber. Who knows how they got there? Some sit on the Government side, others in Opposition, a few of them lounge on the 'Cross Bench', and a red-faced Speaker bellows 'Order! Order!' He sincerely believes, wrongly, that he's the one in charge.

We use these Voices and Ideas to speak for us, believing they *are* us. More often, though, they make us speak for *them*, as though we're their puppets and mouthpieces. This makes it almost impossible to know if we really have our own Ideas and our own Voice, or if, more truly, they have us.

It's a sign that we're really not in charge of ourselves when we react too vociferously to someone, or when we pout and lash out in a way that's completely out of proportion to a situation, as when we shout with anger at a shopkeeper, a waiter, traffic lights, a MAGA hat, a hijab, an 'anti-vax' sign, or a certain politician's face, or...you name it.

Psychologists might say we're in the thrall of a 'complex' in those moments, even though we'll insist that we're not. In fact, the vehemence of our insistence that we are *not* in its thrall is one more sign that we are.

A political philosopher might say, instead, that we're in the grip of an 'ideology', an '-ism'. Like a virus, an ideology infiltrates our Inner Chamber, commands the floor, and starts 'running' us. It raises the volume of our voices along with our blood pressure. The louder we get and the redder our faces turn, the more firmly we're in its grip. The self-wrought illusion that's it truly *me* talking, not the ideology, is unbudgeable in those moments.

"I'm right. I don't need to listen to you. I only need to *tell you*." I've felt this toxic condition from within. It's very, very real. But I'll never know I'm ill, or be the least bit aware of my own affliction, unless the madness lifts.

There's a high wire act Preachers, especially, are cast to play: to speak *truly*, with humility, not timidly but with conviction, yet *not to succumb to the fake certainty of an ideology*; and yet also to bear, without resentment, the unbearable pain of never being heard. There's only one narrow path along that wire, but there are so many ways to get it wrong, to fail and fall to the earth below.

In fact, it's so bloody hard to do, and so excruciating in the doing, that we Preachers are sorely tempted to cheat, either by sounding more certain than we really are, 'papering over the cracks in the plaster' as it were, or by playing it safe with our boring 'blah, blah, blah', pandering to people's pre-digested prejudices by saying just what they want us say, which sounds like nothing at all.

Teachers, politicians, spouses...everyone at some point must perform their own harrowing high wire act, each in his or her own way. It's a long drop and there's no net. But the fear of falling wakes you right up. Or it should.

The first step to Wisdom is to come awake to our own illusions, to see that there's a little man behind the curtain who's been pretending all along that he's the mighty Oz. *And it turns out he's not me, nor is he you; he's a fragment of an ideology*. That's good to know, though it might not feel good in the moment.

The next step is to find the puppet string, grab hold of it, and follow it to its source. What Voice has been pulling our string? Whose Idea has colonised our soul? Maybe our Sergeant-at-Arms should evict him from our Inner Chamber. Or maybe we could wield that string for ourselves, but *truly* this time. (I know; I'm really mixing metaphors now.)

When I sit down to write, out comes a fragment of something that angers, saddens, or gladdens my heart; something that seizes, puzzles, or illuminates my

mind; something that delights my imagination, or excites my memory. I think this is one way – not *the* way, but *a* way – of coming a bit more awake.

My words aspire to be edifying too. I know. That surprises you. But hear me out. ‘To edify’ is ‘to build up’, even if it means having to tear something down first. And ‘to aspire’ is not to achieve, but only to *aim* to achieve.

“Aim high; perchance you may attain”, Lester Pearson once said to a gaggle of graduates at a University Convocation. He meant to bedazzle them with that word *attain*; but being a chronic melancholic, I can only hear the *perchance* part. I’ll surely fall short. Again. Still, the aim was right.

I should be surprised if I haven’t said things here that have bored you to tears, confused you completely, or fomented your hot anger. I say this because, if I look back and read what I’ve written – (a hard penance) – I feel twinges of those sentiments myself.

Here’s the point. Throughout my bootless ‘career’ as a Lecturer and Preacher, whenever I delivered a Strident Sermon in the morning to a scattering of Pew-Dwellers staring back at me like those Stone Statues on Easter Island, or if I uttered some Wise Words to a classroom of listless Students in the afternoon, a strong suspicion would descend upon me in the evening, the dawning realisation that I’d been speaking to myself all along, trying to come awake.

My other suspicion is that this is how the Holy Spirit works.

The Big Pandemic Hangover to Come

“Actions have consequences!” This we were told in our adolescence. But the telling didn’t always ‘take’.

The cautious and obedient ones may have fallen into line. They avoided harsh consequences by forswearing naughty actions in the first place. But the risk-takers, hungry for experience and daring to experiment, did suffer the consequences – a heavy hangover on Sunday morning, let’s say. It exacted the full cost of the fun we’d had on Saturday night. Or rather, the fun *they* had. I misspoke there.

I think there’s another big hangover coming to us all. But we’ll feel it in varying degrees, each in our own way. Yet this hangover is not the consequence of Covid *per se*, but the effect of the way we’ve *dealt* with Covid. It’s not the result of *reckless* risk-taking, either; it’s the stifling suffocation caused by a paralysing fear of *sensible* risk-taking, the kind that leads to a larger life.

I'm feeling pretty downhearted right now. Can you tell? When I read, watch, or listen to the news, I hear loud shrieks of panic, thunderous sirens of fear, and a shrill insistence that we're at Defcon Four on the Covid Alert System.

What I don't hear is the abundant good news heralding the many good reasons – *sound, scientifically valid reasons* – for hope. It causes me to wonder why. Why do we hear so little of this hope on the news, and why is the 'fear thermostat' still cranked up to a temperature you'd feel in a sauna?

Omicron is definitely not Delta. We hear how transmissible Omicron is, *and it is*. This is very real. Cases, cases, and more cases. But it's not Delta. That fact matters. A lot.

But news broadcasts and 'science advisory tables' have been grudgingly reluctant to report how mild Omicron's symptoms are proving to be, how much lower its hospitalisation and death rates really are, and how different its pathology actually is. And when they do admit this, they're mopey about it, as though they're having a love affair with their fear and they're reluctant to let it go. Why?

Omicron attacks the bronchia benignly, not the lungs lethally. That is a huge and comforting finding. To contract it is still quite serious, medically, for those who are aged and most vulnerable, yes. To me, though, this strongly suggests that we now need strategic, selective protection for the vulnerable much more than we need a blanket policy for the whole damn society.

But Omicron is not nearly as lethal as Delta. That's the point. *We need to know that*. Shouldn't we amend our behaviour in the light of this happy knowledge?

Omicron's astonishing power to spread itself could be viewed as 'good news' too. It's rapidly displacing those earlier, virulent variants. What's more, as it passes through the population, it confers a natural immunity – nature's own 'booster', if you like – so that our immune systems will be more robustly prepared the next time.

This is, typically, how pandemics end. Shouldn't we hear about that?

And yet, although 'science' should be telling us we're in a much better position than we were a year ago, our fear, panic, and timid behaviour haven't abated in step with this good and happy knowledge. If anything, we've become *more fearful, more averse* to the sensible kind of risk-taking that the fullness of life requires of us. That's just wrong.

We're all wound up. We've turned too timid. We're paralysed by panic.

It feels like things are falling apart all over again, and they ought not. We're back to school closures, shutdowns, and vastly diminished limits on gatherings of every kind. Our choir has dispersed itself again. The Session said a big, fat 'no' to Communion, cut the number of verses we could sing, and now cut hymn singing completely. We've been here before. I feel quite defeated.

I get it. I really do. I *understand*, OK? Yes, there's a valid worry about the capacity of our health care system to handle a sudden influx of Covid patients all at one time. It's prudent to forestall this influx, should it come, though I believe that many of our measures to do this will have a very minimal effect.

Still, what has me downhearted is not just *that*. What has me downhearted is the perpetual promotion of *fear* all around me. That's not good. That's not good at all. When it's promoted and perpetuated, as I perceive it has been, fear spreads faster than Omicron. Fear's effects are damaging, dangerous, and all too real. Only, we're not paying much attention to those noxious effects.

It's about time we did.

"Nothing to fear but Fear itself"

"Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me," said Job.

When Covid first came to our shores, we felt our way in the dark. We didn't know what we were up against. Because this was a new and serious pandemic, we turned to Medical Science and our Agencies of Health. "Help us," we said. They did.

Fear focuses attention. That's one of its *good* purposes. And Medical Science is nothing but a highly focused form of attention on *one* aspect of reality – viz., the health of the human body. We needed this in the early days. We flattened the curve while 'science' got busy, discovered how Covid functioned, and developed vaccines to counter its spread and effect. Wonderful.

"Do no harm" is, supposedly, Medicine's first commandment. But what about the collateral harm we do in our Herculean efforts to do no harm? Are we wilfully blind to that? There's a steep price to pay for such single-minded, focused attention. It's like covering one eye with an eyepatch and staring down a long cardboard tube with the other.

What if you're leading others with that tube held up to your eye? Your attention will attach itself only to the narrow patch of reality at the far end of the tube, *but you'll see nothing else*. That's not a good way to lead.

In the short term, it may be necessary and good to restrict your view of reality this way, especially if your enemy is a novel virus. But in the long term, it's not good at all. And we've entered 'the land of the long term' now.

Medicine is that cardboard tube. Medicine did a fantastic job. We should give Medicine a shiny medal and throw it a dinner party, offer toasts and grateful speeches, and let it know just how much we've valued its good work.

"Well done, Medicine! But really, we'll take it from here. We'll call upon you again when we need you. *The rest is not your job.* We have to get back to *real* living now."

It's time to widen our vision, to pay some close attention to the massive collateral damage that our single-minded, medically-focused way of dealing with Covid has caused. This couldn't be helped, in one sense. It had to happen this way, *up to a point*. But I think we're past that point. It doesn't have to happen that way now.

Let me put it this way. When fear focuses our attention for too long on just one place, and we try to stop every kind of harm that comes *just* from that one place, we'll sooner or later realise that this way of seeing the world does its own kind of harm, even as it neglects many others. Now that our recovery from Omicron becomes surer each day, we *must* put that fear behind us. We must.

"Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," said FDR in his inaugural address in 1933. Those were healing words. They needed to be said and they needed to be heard. They were words spoken to an ailing nation by its heroic leader, a brilliant and humane man. Notice that he wasn't speaking of the 'good' kind of fear, the kind that rouses us to action and focuses our attention at the outset of a crisis. He meant "*that unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.*"

It's time for us to convert retreat into advance. We must address the developmental damage that has been done to young children locked out of their schools and isolated from worldly play. We must mend the social pandemic of isolation, loneliness, addiction, and depression in our nation. We must restore ravaged businesses to prosperity and diminished communities to social health. We must repair the integrity of our crumbling institutions.

More than that, we must mend the hurt this damned pandemic has done to our souls, not just to our bodies.

For that, we need to rebuild the Church too. We've damaged it. It's now much less than it was and so much less than it could be. We need to sing again,

to worship, to pray, to greet each other openly, and to return to Christ's Table the way Israel returned to Jerusalem after exile in Babylon. When they arrived home, their very first work was to rebuild the Temple.

We're just a jumble of puzzle pieces, aren't we? We're a tangle of broken thoughts, fractured feelings, and messy memories. We need a deeper, better kind of healing than our mere healing from Covid. And we need it now.

There. I've made some of you as mad as a mad hornet, haven't I? If you're still reading, that is.

Study Leave

This is my eighty-first letter (or so), and the last one for a while, maybe forever, I don't know. I'm taking an extended study leave with time accumulated after many years of no study leave whatsoever. I'll squirrel myself away, like a hermit in his cell, to read and to write. Also, to pray. You need a break from me anyway. I'll be back at the beginning of April to pester you then, OK?

In my absence, The Rev. Keith McKee will cover pastoral emergencies. But your first port of call, should you be seeking pastoral help of some kind, is your own Elder. Don't know who your Elder is? The Church Office will know. You can ring them here: 519-438-3492. There you'll find the help you need to connect with your Elder. Maybe it's a good time to say 'Hello' if you've never met him or her before.

Ministers and Lay Preachers certified by the Presbytery of London will preach and lead worship on Sundays in my absence. Please encourage them by filling a pew every week. Really.

It pains me to say that The Rev. Kathy Fraser, who was scheduled to lead worship on March 6, backed out of her commitment at the last minute and didn't provide a replacement. So, the Church will have to be closed on that Sunday. I encourage you to worship in a different Church on that day.

Many of you won't, I know. But still, I encourage you to do so.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew