

12 July 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Novelty attracts some people more than others. New experiences excite them. Inventions intrigue them. Fresh ideas fascinate them. They're lovers of new music. They're 'foodies' queuing for the opening of a trendy restaurant. They're 'early adopters' of the latest technology. If there's value in novelty, they'll find it. We need these people.

On the other hand, just because it's new doesn't make it valuable. It could be overpriced, unworkable, and downright trashy, despite its shiny wrapping of newness. How can we know?

Newton and Sacks

I've a friend who, at the first chance, buys the latest i-phone, tablet, or laptop, and all the gear that go with them. He's smart about it. He does research. He keeps abreast of developments. He's the one the rest of us would turn to for 'tech advice'.

Years ago, I happened to be with him when he spotted the first mp3 player in a shop window. "I've read about these!" he shouted. If you'd seen him, you'd have thought it was Christmas morning and he was four years old. If you'd seen me, you'd have thought I was Scrooge. I was blind to the value he saw in it. But twenty years later, I have one too. "About time," he said.

Mind you, my friend could be duped. He was the first and only person I knew who owned an 'Apple Newton', a 'Personal Digital Assistant' of the early 1990s. "This is the future," he said back then. But it wasn't. There was little value in its functions. It never caught on, and he was left with a piece of expensive junk. "I prefer not to talk about those dark days," he might now say, as one would about a youthful fling that came to grief.

And yet, the 'Apple Newton' was able to read, clumsily, the user's handwriting. This was new. He let me try. It was fun for a minute or two, then it bored me. But for him, the joy refused to fade. That feature turned out to be a useful step ahead for later technology. Even 'failures' have value. Somehow, he saw that too.

There's no right or wrong in this. Humans have evolved with an array of temperaments. Some gravitate to novelty; others find pleasure in old things. Both instincts live within all of us. Only their proportions vary.

They vary according to our interests too. The author and physician, Oliver Sacks, had a sharp eye for novelty. He studied the effects of rare abnormalities of the brain on human perception and behaviour. His 'scientific' mind paid close attention to aberrations from the norm, for they could teach us something new.

He was a bit 'aberrant' too. From his 'normal' English upbringing, you wouldn't have foreseen his unusual, inventive life. He migrated to California, the far edge of the 'new' world. He rode motorcycles, briefly held an amateur weight-lifting record, and experimented with psychedelic drugs, hoping to open the 'doors of perception'. This was hardly the typical 'career path' for a young man from England born before the war.

And yet, though he was hungry for new experience, he was not hungry for new food. He ate the same supper each night – fish and rice – to spare himself the trouble of choosing something different. He needed *some* stability to pursue his life's work.

Worship in the world of 'New Normal'

A 'conservative' temperament prefers what it already knows. It lives in all of us. It wants to preserve the best of the past, stick to established routines, and uphold the old ways of life, the ones that 'work', whose value is sure. In childhood, didn't we love to hear a favourite story again and again and again?

A 'liberal' disposition, on the other hand, wants novelty and change. That desire, too, has a permanent home in all of us. We express it when we're curious. It thrives when we have freedom to try new ways of life, with a view to making life better than before.

We need both temperaments, for the same reason a car needs both a brake and an accelerator. They oppose each other, in one sense. But it's impossible to make a long trip by using just one of them. In that sense, 'brake' and 'accelerator' are not opposed at all. They're employed in a purpose large enough to contain their antagonism. This unites them. Let's call it the 'common good'.

A phrase like 'the New Normal' plays on this antagonism between 'accelerator and brake', 'liberal and conservative'. How can something be 'normal' if it's 'new'? Conversely, how can it be 'new' if it's already an established 'norm'?

But we get the meaning. 'New Normal' means, "This is a *new* way to do what we've *always* done."

The committee recently established by our Session to create *our* 'new normal' is already hard at work. Thanks to them, we'll be ready when our sanctuary finally re-opens for public worship.

We don't know when that will be, and we don't yet know what it will be like. But when the day comes, it will seem 'new' because it will seem *different* than it was before. Yet we'll be doing 'the same old thing' we've always done. It's called 'worshipping God'.

A few will scowl and say, "I hate it!" A few will grin, and say, "It's about time we tried *something* new!" But most, moved most of all by their desire to worship God together, at the same time and in the same place, will adapt to our 'new normal' and be glad.

The Folly of Youth

Worship, like anything that becomes a 'normal' activity, drifts towards the conservative end of the spectrum. Once its ways are established, we're hesitant to change them. We head for the same pew, rather as we sit in the same chair at the supper table. We stick with bread and wine at Holy Communion, as Oliver Sacks ate fish and rice each evening. We sing from the same hymn book and read from the same Bible.

This is just as it should be. Stability has a large and necessary place in human affairs. Consciously or not, we all rely on routine and ritual, and not just in religion. Who'd want to watch hockey games if the rules were constantly changing and the teams traded their players between periods, just for the sake of 'novelty'?

And yet, new rules may make the game better. Life needs injections of novelty, 'liberal' experiments aimed at improving the 'common good'. It needs 'conservative' hesitation, too, lest we ruin something already precious and good. If we only step on the brake, we'll never travel anywhere. But if we have no brake, we'll careen into the ditch.

When I was a young minister, *sans* (prematurely) grey hair, I was eager to 'improve' the Church's worship. Too eager, I discovered. I introduced some new elements into public worship and removed some others. I assumed this liberal freedom to experiment because I felt the Church-at-large had slipped into tired, stale habits. So does every institution. I was not alone in thinking this, surely?

I'd discovered novelties in far-away places. Some of them seemed better, truer, and more pleasing to me. Wouldn't they seem so to others? In my view, a bit of thoughtful improvement wouldn't go amiss. But such novelty was not wanted! Imagine!

Perhaps I was too 'liberal'. Perhaps they were too 'conservative'. Fear not, gentle reader; the conflict – if such it was – was not lethal. It had its humorous aspects. (I see that now.) A better way to describe it is to say that we deployed opposing forces simultaneously. One was pressing on the accelerator, the other on the brake. We made 'sound and fury', but we didn't get anywhere.

We were missing a driver; that is, we didn't have a common vision of the 'common good', even though we thought we did. Isn't this the unacknowledged problem at the root of many, many political conflicts?

The irony is that my stab at making 'improvements' was not to inject something 'new' at all, but to retrieve *old* practices that had been eliminated long ago, for reasons now forgotten. Sometimes, a recovery of the 'old' feels like a discovery of the 'new'.

But that's another story. It's about how we can change, yet still be the same. Maybe I'll save it for another time. For now, I'll put my foot on the brake. I was told I use too many words anyway.

Updates

I've attached, along with worship material for this Sunday, an update from Des Perry and Dianne Walker on behalf of the Board of Managers. Also, after some prodding, I've conceded to offer an 'audio' version of my pastoral letters. It will be on the Elmwood website under 'Sermons'.

Bill Booth will soon begin a new round of chemotherapy, so it's time to offer a new round of prayer for him.

I'm sorry, also, to report some sad news. Mary Cross's sister, Edith Farrow, recently died. So did Diane Screaton-Abernethy, the mother of Nancy Abernethy. Let us not be shy to "weep with them that weep," just as St Paul said. For joy inflates when it's shared, but grief lessens.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew