

14 June 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

When I lived in England, I'd often tune in to "Desert Island Discs", one of the BBC's longest-running radio shows. The first episode aired in 1942.

Each week, the host welcomes a 'castaway'. Usually, it's an actor or singer, a famous athlete or author. But it could be someone who gained renown as a combative politician, a notorious bishop, or (at its most incestuous) a 'media personality', i.e., someone who's famous for being famous.

The format is whimsical. Castaways select their favourite 'discs', the music they couldn't live without if they were stranded on a 'desert island'. Their personal soundtracks always have autobiographical associations. "We sang this at the village fête when I was twelve." "It takes me back to the summer of love." "Those minor chords evoke my homeland."

If you're wondering, "How would they play music on a desert island?", you're overthinking the premise. The music is simply a device. It cracks open the door on the private self, hidden behind the public one. Prising it further, the host persuades the castaways to reveal something more. They always do.

Towards the end of the show, the guest must also choose a book they'd want to have on this imaginary desert island. (No one has ever mentioned *How to Build a Boat When Stranded*. That would be cheating.)

What would you choose? Would it be a beloved book you'd never tire of reading, or a 'classic' book you've been too timid to tackle? Would you read to stave off boredom or for self-improvement?

At this point, the host cheats a bit. She says, in effect, "Don't ask for Shakespeare or the Bible. We'll throw them in as a matter of course. Just tell us which book you'd *really* want to have."

I imagine, early in the show's evolution, too many guests boringly opted for Shakespeare or the Bible, not because it was their sincere choice, but as a boast, a 'safe' choice, the 'culturally correct' one.

Cultural Literacy and Legacy

In biology, a culture is the 'nutrient broth' for growing microorganisms. But in human affairs, a culture is the medium for growing human beings. Stranded on a desert island, we still need culture, a distinct way to be human.

Cultures express themselves in music, stories, architecture, games, food, religions, laws, schools, arts, sciences, technologies, festivals, social rituals, and much, much more. Some cultures are open, inviting strangers in. Others are closed, keeping 'enemies' out. All cultures endure by evolving. Some evolve so much they change into something new. Only the dead ones are changeless.

In the culture of my childhood, a boy earned praise by showing he could catch and gut a fish. He earned ridicule by showing he could speak and write well. It was a 'brag' to say, "I don't even *own* a tie." Knowing how to tie a 'full Windsor' knot, as I still do, was a skill best kept hidden.

The little School and the little Church I attended tried to be channels of a wider, older, and much more cosmopolitan culture. Cultural literacy was the goal and books were the means. They taught us to picture a world so much larger than the little one we happened to live in. Imperfect as they were, the institutions of School and Church fed us what we needed to live better lives. If they hadn't been there, we might have grown up mistaking *our* way of life for the *only* way of life, and our narrow view of reality for all of reality.

Ever since, I've deemed it a mark of cultural stupidity to believe one's own culture, no matter how 'superior' (but according to whose criteria?), is the only way, the 'best' way, to live a human life. There are others. Wisdom knows this.

My boyhood culture, incurious about the 'humanities', philistine, but rich in its own narrow way, was not unique. To this day, Canada produces few scholars of *human* culture – specifically, the arts and humanities – with an international reputation. When we do produce one, accidentally, we ignore him or her, and resent the expense in tax dollars.

The Great Code

Northrop Frye was one such scholar. He was a shy-seeming man from New Brunswick who made his way to Toronto before the war. He tried but failed to be a clergyman. Instead, he secured a place at Victoria College, where he became a masterful teacher of Shakespeare and the Bible. In books and articles that were more praised abroad than they were at home, he spoke of the Bible as the 'Great Code' of Western Culture and Society.

He was on to something. To understand a society's 'codes' is to be literate in its 'language', its ways of speaking, living, and imagining the world, and so to feel at home there. The 'Great Code' lives in our political and cultural life today, even when we're not aware of it. Most of the time we aren't. We just live it.

In that sense, the Bible doesn't just sit visibly on lecterns in Churches, but hiddenly at the foundations of Western culture. For example: secular piety insists, rightly, that each person should be treated equally under the law, regardless of race, gender, or social status; and, further, that we're all endowed with 'certain unalienable rights', *human* rights.

Thomas Jefferson, the American, said this was simply self-evident. But no, it's not. Where did this belief come from? We inherited it, hiddenly, from the more ancient belief that all people are made in the image and likeness of God.

Like Shakespeare's plays, the Bible is a whole library of books we can dust off, return to, yet never be finished with. Each encounter feeds us, yielding more. We can never exhaust its meaning.

This is because, unlike a news article filled with facts or a recipe scrawled with instruction, the Bible is a treasury of images and stories. It won't tell us 'facts', it can't instruct us 'what to do', not without first pressing itself on our imagination, re-forming our perceptions, and re-fashioning our thinking. But that's just what cultures do.

Use Your Imagination

Like watching a Shakespeare play, reading the Bible commands our whole imagination. The Bible's words, seasoned by time, want to infiltrate us *there*, in the imagination. For the imagination is the lens through which we see ourselves, each other, and the world.

We like to believe we live and act in the world just as it is. In fact, though, we live and act in the world as we *imagine* it to be, and how it *could* be. Many failures in love and goodness can be traced to a failure of imagination. Racism is an obvious and urgent example. Racism mis-perceives someone else's culture. It fails to picture their full humanity. It's blind to their living goodness. It's a failure of imagination.

Imagination is an organ of empathy too. It enables us to feel what others feel. It's a private theatre of the mind, a stage for the inner self. There we can try on different cultures the way we might try on a new jacket. We can picture a different path for our lives, discard it without cost, and try another one instead. We can enact, for the mind's eye, different ways of living before acting them out in 'real life'.

Something similar happens when we watch a movie or play, read a story, or (dare I say?) hear the Bible read aloud in Church and take part in Holy

Communion. They may just pry open the door to the imagination, if only just a crack (if we haven't bolted it shut). It's a portal to our private self, hiding behind the public one. Sometimes, something new and life-giving finds its way in there, presses itself upon us, changes our perception of ourselves and the world, and winds up changing our life. This can happen socially, politically, and culturally too.

I think, perhaps, we've been blind to religion's *true* usefulness. The Church is not just 'there', waiting to be the world's little helper, to be unthreateningly 'useful' and clownishly 'liked'. (How desperate we are to be liked!) The Church's usefulness lies in the work of the imagination, our lens for perceiving and acting in the world. This shapes our personal and collective characters. But I fear the Church has shrunk, not just in numbers, but in imagination too.

Can the Church once again be the conduit for a wider, older, and much more cosmopolitan culture? Can this culture grow a full and diverse humanity? Or are we doomed to disappear at the down-market end of the leisure and entertainment industry? Is mine a failure of nerve or a failure of imagination?

Being a clergyman, and therefore annoyingly impractical, I ponder these things. They may well bore and confuse others, but someone should do some pondering, shouldn't they? So, I may pursue these themes in future letters. I know, how self-indulgent. But hey, they're my letters. You can always press 'delete'.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

Our Premier took us by surprise this week. Churches, he said, may begin to re-open for public worship. Right away some of us thought, "Hip, hip, hooray! We can throw open the doors, crowd back in, sing merry hallelujahs, and all will be as it was before, right?"

Apparently not, alas. It's a 'partial' opening. There are lengthy procedures and complex protocols to be put in place. Each one needs to be thought through and adapted to local circumstances. This takes time.

I know. Some of you are eager to be back in the sanctuary. I am too. Others are anxious to adhere to the best advice of experts, wary of taking rash risks with other people's health. I'm one of those too.

The Presbytery of London have implored us not to proceed until they've had the chance to proffer advice and direction. Our Session agreed. So, it will be a few more weeks before we can draw up a plan.

In other news...

As many of you know, Lorraine Clark will retire at the end of June, after eleven joyful years of creative service. I, for one, will sorely miss her kind way with everyone she meets (and I do mean everyone), her gifts at the organ bench, and her outstanding skill at conducting. I'm grateful to have had the chance to be her colleague.

When the dust finally settles on this little pandemic tempest, we must and shall gather the whole of Elmwood-and-friends at an appointed time. We will celebrate her work and shower her with gratitude. If we do it well – and I know we can – we may even make her blush.

The Clark family look upon Elmwood as their Church home. So, although Lorraine will retire, the Clarks will still be a vital part of this community. How fortunate we are!

But there's more. A committee appointed by the Session, under the excellent leadership of Steve O'Neil, have been diligently searching for Elmwood's next organist and choirmaster. They have recommended Angus Sinclair. The Session have unanimously approved, and Angus has too.

This is reason for rejoicing. We have been more than blessed, down the decades, with our leadership in music. A firm, continuous legacy has been maintained and strengthened throughout the tenure of Bert Van der Hoek and Lorraine Clark. Angus is perfectly suited to continue it and add to it.

Some of us know Angus already. He has frequented our pews from time to time. But not everyone will know just how talented he is, and just how fortunate we are to have the chance to welcome him as our next organist and choirmaster. When the time is right, and we're at last allowed, we will welcome him warmly.

Finally, Bill Booth continues his treatment and healing at home. So does Al McLean. Nancy Abernethy's mother is still in hospital in Toronto. And Irene King will have some surgery next Wednesday. I know you'll want to remember them all in your prayers.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew