

24 May 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Like anxious parents handing the car keys to an adolescent, authorities gave the yellow light (I wouldn't call it green) to some sectors of our society. "You may drive to your friend's house this once, but then straight home!"

Permission from on high comes with stern strictures. But they're not about seatbelts, speed limits, and 'be home by 9 p.m.' They're about masks, social distancing, and Plexiglas barriers. And remember to wash your hands. Often.

"Stay alert," says Boris Johnson from his doorway on Downing Street. "Stay vigilant," says Justin Trudeau on the steps of Rideau Cottage. Otherwise, we'll make you "stay put" all over again.

So, we venture these first steps the way boys test the ice on a pond before skating; *gingerly*, their cold ears cocked for that ominous 'crack'.

Utopia or Dystopia?

Chatter from below rises to meet these top-down pronouncements.

"This is all too much, too soon."

"No, it's too little, too late."

"Really? I think it's just right."

But opinion-givers agree on this much: the post-Covid world will be different. There *will* be a 'new normal', they say.

I'm not so sure. What's to stop us 'reverting to type' with the passage of time? But their brief consensus falls apart in any case. For visions of the 'new normal' are divergent and various.

Some are certain it spells the end of retail shopping as we knew it. No more browsing in shops. Forget about trying on that jacket. From now on, we're shopping 'on-line'. Others say the same about concerts and sports events. We'll see them 'live' on a screen or not at all. It's the 'new normal', you see?

Schools, too, will change forever. And say goodbye to the rugby team (good luck playing rugby while social distancing). If restaurants don't get into the takeout business, it will be the end of them. The doctor will diagnose you over Skype, your Yoga class will happen on YouTube, your Book Club on Facebook, and your Bible Study on Zoom. And get used to working from home.

Farewell to filthy cash as well. From now on we'll 'click' to pay or hold our credit cards up to a sensor until it beeps its approval. Smart phones will scan our retinas and pay our bills through an 'on-line' bank.

But aren't these an acceleration of trends that were already in place? Their purpose has always been to channel us into 'virtual' interactions and away from 'physical' ones – and, just by the way, to harvest our data in the process.

Those who advance this 'new normal' do so, I've noticed, with a hint of glee in their voice. But it sounds dystopian to me. Brave new world, anyone?

Mind you, even *my* kind of utopia gets its smidgen of airtime. For it hasn't gone without notice, in some circles, that right-wing doctrine has, for decades, promoted private capital and deregulated industries while disparaging government regulation and public institutions. This created massive economic inequality, privatised 'social goods' traditionally deemed public, and hobbled our trust in public institutions, just when we needed them most. If we wonder *why* the next generation flounders, we might look there for a reason.

Now that this pandemic has unveiled the 'cracks' in the system – in long term care, for example, or in sub-living wages for undervalued work, and in the atrocious crisis in affordable housing – things will surely get better, won't they? Now that we've *seen* how unready we were for a pandemic, and how fragile our public institutions have become, how some are privileged and many not, surely our governments will re-assert their rightful role, regulate private industry with a view to public good, and re-invigorate public life, won't they? So says *my* kind of utopian.

But then my inner Eeyore awakens and brays, "None of this was invisible. All of it could be seen before the pandemic arrived. If we didn't pay attention then, why would we do so now?"

Rorschach Tests

Maybe the 'new normal' is a Rorschach Test.

Hermann Rorschach, a Swiss psychiatrist, used symmetrical inkblots as a diagnostic tool. They weren't pictures of anything at all. But holding them before his patients, he'd ask, "What do you *see*?" Their answers told him nothing about the inkblots. "I see two cats fighting; the next one is two eggs with bacon; and the last one deftly captures the meaningless abyss that is my life". They told him something about *them*.

A witty play by Yasmina Reza, called “Art”, opens with a man, Serge, showing his cynical friend, Marc, a painting he’s just purchased for 200,000 francs (it must have been before the Euro). The canvas is all white, and if the light is just right, the viewer can almost make out three crooked lines painted in an ‘off-white’ that may as well be white. That’s it.

Marc is appalled. He insults Serge, calling him ‘pretentious’ and ‘stupid’ for wasting so much money on this fraudulent work. Serge replies, “I might have known you’d miss the point.” He calls Marc ‘boring’, ‘bourgeois’, and ‘ignorant’. A third friend, Yvan, seeking a middle path, tries to say something positive under Serge’s prodding.

Serge: You like it?

Yvan: Oh yes, yes, yes.

Serge: Plain.

Yvan: Plain, yes...Yes...And at the same time...

Serge: Magnetic.

Yvan: Mm...yes...

Serge: You don’t really get the *resonance* at the moment.

Yvan: Well, a bit.

Serge: No, you don’t. You have to come back in the middle of the day.

Yvan: How much was it?

Serge: Two hundred thousand.

Yvan: Very reasonable.

Later, Yvan tells Marc that, yes, their friend Serge is foolish, but it gives him pleasure and it *is* art, after all. “It has something, it’s not nothing,” says Yvan. “It’s a work of art, there’s a system behind it.”

As the play proceeds, their reactions to the blank canvas uncover long-hidden resentments buried beneath their long-standing friendship.

This maddening piece of ‘art’, is, in effect, a Rorschach test of their life together, their little community of three. It tells us about *them*. But because ‘Art’ is a play that toys with universal themes, it tells us about *us* too. It’s rather like the Gospels that way.

Dreams of Ecumenism

When, in the many moments of solitude my life affords me right now, I abandon myself to utopian reveries of the ‘new normal’, I project visions of a better Church onto that blank canvas we call ‘the future’.

Of *course* no one knows the Church's future. Only God does (I hope). But daydreaming is not yet a 'thought crime' and Google has not yet found a way to monetise it (it will). Perhaps we could use this window of opportunity to take our own little 'Rorschach test' to reveal what we project on the Church's future.

Since I've brought it up, I'll go first, shall I? But where to begin?

I'll take my cue from grumpy 'Marc' in Yasmina Reza's play. I'll say what bothers me but make it sound like it's all the fault of others.

I'm sick of denominations. I'm sick of denominationalism.

Robertson Davies set his novel, *Fifth Business*, in Deptford, a fictional village loosely based upon tiny Thamesville, near Chatham, where he was born in 1913 and baptised at the Presbyterian Church. He writes:

"We had five churches: the Anglican, poor but believed to have some mysterious social supremacy; the Presbyterian, solvent and thought – chiefly by itself – to be intellectual; the Methodist, insolvent and fervent; the Baptist, insolvent and saved; the Roman Catholic, mysterious to most of us but clearly solvent, as it was frequently and, so we thought, quite needlessly repainted."

Sound familiar?

When the 'new normal' arrives, could abolishing denominations be part of it? Isn't it time to re-unite, to share our life together, beginning with our closest kin? Not for reasons of efficiency and cost-saving – though what kind of Presbyterian would be against that? – but because the persistence of sectarian splits, sparked by centuries-old conflicts in Europe that few of us can fathom, are a scandal to the world, a harm to ourselves, and an egregious offence to God.

At least Marc, Serge, and Yvan remain one community while they fight.

In the 18th century, the Church of Scotland suffered a series of little schisms. They remind me of a scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. The 'People's Liberation Front of Judea' and the 'Judean People's Liberation Front' hate each other even more than they hate the Romans they're trying to oust!

A small group seceded from the Church of Scotland. Why? Because Parliament re-introduced the right of rich patrons to appoint ministers to vacant parishes. "Heresy!" they cried. They had a point.

But they didn't stop there.

They divided again over whether it's right to swear oaths before a civil magistrate. Doesn't scripture forbid this? One side were called 'burghers', the other '*anti-burghers*'.

But they didn't stop there.

They fought next over the civil magistrate's power to enforce religious law. Should he? One side were called the 'old-lights', the other 'new-lights'. So, there were now 'new-light burghers' and 'old-light burghers', 'new-light anti-burghers' and 'old-light anti-burghers'.

Do you see a pattern emerging? But they didn't stop there.

The old light anti-burghers fought over the minister 'lifting the bread' at the Lord's Supper. Wasn't this Papist?

One historian writes (can you hear his heavy sigh as he wrote it?): "An old light, anti-lifting, anti-burgher must have been the most stubborn bigot the Reformed Church has ever known."

The Protestant Church is not just shamefully divided. It's shameless about *being* divided. True, we no longer fight. We have cordial relations with Anglican and United Church neighbours. Perhaps it's because no one fights over things no longer held very dearly anyway.

An ecumenical 'convergence' did gather steam in the 20th century. A consensus was emerging about worship and liturgy, creeds and confessions, a mutual recognition of Church order and ministry; and there was some inspiring co-operation between denominations in their common life and work. It looked like it would become 'the new normal'. Then, with the passage of time, we reverted to type and crawled back to our 'comfortable pews'.

The common life of every recognisably Christian denomination could truly be shared by all of us within one Church body spread through every land. Why don't we do that?

In Place of a Conclusion

End of screed. Did you make it through? Did you skip the religious bits? If you wish, tell me what you think and how you are.

As has become usual in this 'new abnormal', I'll worship in solitary confinement in the chancel at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday, using the attached materials to pray. I challenge you to do the same, out loud, wherever you are. That way, though physically distant, you'll unite us in spirit and in truth.

Will you keep Nancy Abernethy's mother in your prayers? She has been admitted to hospital in Toronto.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew