

2 April 2021 (*Good Friday*)

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Like Dana Carvey's 'Grumpy Old Man' on Saturday Night Live, I'm prone to see regress where others see progress. Have I entered curmudgeon-hood? Already?

Talkin' 'bout my generation

The fury of the 'Grumpy Old Man' was explosive but silly, and therefore funny. "Why...in my day we didn't have these fancy 'seatbelts' to *restrain* you if your car crashed," he whined. "In my day, if you stopped suddenly, you knew exactly where you were going. *Straight through the windshield*. That's the way it was, and we *liked* it!"

I recognise 'Grumpy Old Man'. I heard many versions of his voice as I was growing up. To be born, as I was, long after 'The Great Depression' and 'The War', gave one membership in the 'Noisy Hoard of Young People Today'. We were morally suspect in our elders' eyes.

The post-war period of affluence was still 'on'. We enjoyed the benefits of this affluence. But had we youngsters really *earned* our colour TVs and transistor radios, our blue jeans and ten-speed bikes? It was broadly hinted that we weren't grateful enough for the privileges we took for granted. Were we worthy of the sacrifices wrought by the 'greatest generation'? Or were we spoiled brats, lazy and unknowing?

Deprived of the deprivation *they* had known meant we'd somehow missed the boat. Their glory days were all in the past. Anything meaningful or interesting, we were given to understand, had already happened, long before we were born. As for the future? "Change and decay in all around I see." Maybe they had a point. *Maybe*.

But I remember an equal and *opposite* voice singing loud songs of protest with equal fury. "We're the new generation, and we've got something to say!" It was the 'Age of Aquarius'. This wasn't 'old anger' over the ending of things, but youthful rage, clamouring for a new beginning:

*Come mothers and fathers throughout the land,
And don't criticize what you can't understand.
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command*

*Your old road is rapidly agin'.
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand,
For the times they are a-changin'.*

...and all that. It sounds so quaint now, doesn't it?

But I was excluded from this party too. This was partly because, in the remote town of my boyhood, we never got to have a 'Summer of Love', just a brief and boring 'Summer of Black Flies'. Instead of experiencing the 1960s, my town did the 1950s twice and jumped right into the 1970s: an FLQ crisis, followed by an energy crisis and Watergate, followed by an economic recession, which opened the door to Reaganomics, Thatcherism, and all the ravages of the economic inequality that we live with to this very day.

I was too young anyway. Anywhere I went back then, if I tried to 'stick my nose in', it was as if the world shoved one of those signs in my face that said, 'You must be THIS TALL to go on this ride'. I was never sophisticated enough, or knowledgeable enough, or mature enough. I felt left out, too young to take part.

I belonged to the demographic that Douglas Coupland called 'Generation X'. He coined the term and wrote about it. The meaning of this term has shifted. It now excludes the very people it was meant to denote, effacing our identity once again. But we're used to that.

By 'Generation X', Coupland meant people born in the early years of the 1960s, as he and I were. We lived, unseen, in the Baby Boomers' shadow.

He was on to something. Every generation looks down on the one just beneath them. But every generation resents the one just above it, too.

We felt overshadowed by Boomers, undervalued, and left out. Having no memory of Kennedy's assassination ("What you mean you don't remember where you were?"), and excluded by our pre-pubescence from the hallucinogenic, sexual, and student revolutions ("You should've been at Woodstock, man!"), we were born too late to come to the party. They didn't look down on us as much as they ignored us.

Coupland says we were the *annoying* kids. We were always tugging on our older siblings' sleeves. But when we finally got our turn at the buffet table, we discovered the Boomers had already cleaned it out. "Never trust anyone over thirty!" they'd vowed. Then they turned thirty themselves, took over the executive suite, and locked the door behind them.

But this is ancient history now, and it's bound to bore the Millennials, who, I strongly suspect, feel more misunderstood and more left out than I ever did. Today's social and economic gatekeepers haven't just barred the Millennials (and those who come after them) from the 'executive suite'; they've erected an electrified fence and topped it with razor wire.

I suspect Millennials and their offspring hear something like this from us. (Picture a couple of game show hosts.)

"Tell them what they've won, Johnny!"

"Frank, millennials have won a mortgage-sized debt in student loans of a kind that we never had to pay!"

"Anything else, Johnny?"

"You bet, Frank. They've also won a crappy gig-economy of ill-paid, insecure contract work of a kind that we never had to put up with!"

"Is that all they get, Johnny?"

"No, they've also won years of poverty in housing they'll never be able to afford, as we could!"

"Plus....?"

"Plus...wait for it...*Climate Change!* Caused by us! That's right, Frank, I'm talking about a lifetime supply of environmental devastation so bad it puts their future in doubt."

"And what do we think of this young generation, Johnny?"

"We think they're ignorant and lazy, Frank."

As you can see, the one thing the members of *my* tiny demographic excel at is whining. And if you whine until your hair turns gray, you've officially entered curmudgeon-hood.

I guess I've answered my own question, haven't I?

Endings are Hard

Why do we draw these lines between generations? They're a way to mark transitions from one era to another, aren't they? Each one has its own style of experience, its own kind of morality, and its own assortment of cultural references.

Life is full of transitions. They're thresholds in time. Something ends (a War, a Depression), and something new begins ('Sit Ins', 'Flower Power').

But endings can be especially hard to bear. They're little 'deaths'. That's why Protestants avoid Good Friday. They want their religion to bypass life's

sorrow and jump straight to Easter lilies, painted eggs, and chocolate bunnies. Letting go is hard, and it hurts. But there can be no new beginning until there has been an ending.

Never to cross the threshold that marks the passage from an ending to a new beginning is to stay stuck in the same rut forever, like an old vinyl record that 'skips', playing the same scrap of music over and over.

Phil-the-Weatherman does this. He's the character played by Bill Murray in the film *Groundhog Day*. Phil's whole personality is stuck in a rut. And now he has been condemned to live the same day over and over again, until, finally, he 'dies' to his old, curmudgeonly self. He reawakens into a day that's *truly* brand new, not a repeat of the old ones. He's 're-born', if you like, as someone ready to risk love's sacrifice.

Retirements are hard. So are graduations. Every new job, every marriage, every birth, divorce, and death are someone's 'threshold moment'. One intense period of life has gone forever. We stand on a threshold. Maybe we linger there. What now?

This calls to mind the final scene of another popular film, *Cast Away*. Tom Hanks plays Chuck Noland, a man thriving in the happy prime of his life. He's very much in love with his wife. But he's in a plane crash. He washes up alone on the shores of a tropical island. He survives. He spends many years there. Back home, the flame of hope has snuffed out. Chuck is dead, they believe. His wife grieves, moves on, and eventually re-marries.

One day, Chuck is rescued. He returns home, but to what? Emotional turmoil. *He's* not dead, but his old life is. It's cast away. What now?

The very last scene places him in the American midwest. It's the 'land of possibility' and self-reinvention. "Go west, young man." He pulls up at a four-way stop, an intersection of country roads on the 'blank canvas' of the open prairie. The metaphor is heavy-handed, yes, but somehow it works.

He steps from his car and spreads out a map on the hood. A woman pulls up in an old truck.

"You look lost," she says.

"I do?" says Chuck.

"Where you headed?"

He pauses. "Well, I was just about to figure that out." Then the credits roll, an ending for the viewer too. What now?

I try to believe that the miracle we call Easter is not magic-and-believe, nor is it a 'conjuring trick with bones', as a former Bishop of Durham once called Jesus' resurrection, to equal measures of glee and opprobrium.

I try to believe Good Friday and Easter place us at a crossroad of possibilities for living a new life. They allow us to welcome our 'ends' so we may begin anew. Even when we can't see the 'what' or 'how' of it, God rewards our efforts at new birth in the gift of each new day.

I still try to believe this, to test this promise by leaning on it and living by it, as you do, until the day finally comes when we cross the biggest divide we can conceive of, the threshold that scares us to death because it *will* be our death, the frontier we fear is final.

But the story of Easter begs to differ.

Happy Easter, despite everything

I'll not dwell on the sad truth that we cannot gather in the sanctuary for Easter. We are strong and resilient. If we think we're not, well, we're about to discover that we are. Faith means *that* too.

I won't hassle you with another letter to clog your inbox this weekend. I've attached worship services for Good Friday and Easter to this missive.

Here's a lovely Easter treat as well. The London Centre Branch of the Royal Canadian College of Organists (the RCCO) have produced a musical 'Easter Celebration'. Three cheers for them. You can enjoy it by clicking on this link:

<https://youtu.be/FwYIu2htjUM>

Try and count the people you can recognise.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew