

31 May 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Developers label new suburban communities with artificial names like “Royal Forest Estates”, even though they’re treeless and there’s nothing regal about them. You never see signs shouting, “Shacks by the Sewage Plant, starting from the low 600s!”, do you? But Wortley Village comes by its name honestly.

City life tends towards anonymity, but it’s a feature of village life to see and be seen by people who know us. When Crocodile Dundee arrives in Manhattan from the Australian outback, he behaves as though it’s a village.

“How many people live here?” he asks the cabbie on his way in from the airport.

“Seven million,” he says.

“Imagine! Seven million people all wanting to live together. New York must be the friendliest place on earth.”

Sitting at a stoplight, he winds down the window.

“G’day. Mick Dundee from Australia,” he says, reaching out to shake a stranger’s hand. “How are ya?”

“Um, fine?...how are you?” says the stranger, flummoxed.

“Good. In town for a couple of days. Probably see ya around.”

I’ve walked around Wortley Village every day for more than four years. I routinely see someone I know who also knows me. So, our neighbourhood is well-named. It *is* rather like a ‘village’ set within the city.

Smoked Glass and Hidden Cameras

There’s something primal and necessary about knowing others and being known by them, seeing and being seen. We’re social animals. Tossed on the city’s sea of anonymity, we build our arks of village life. It’s painful to be ignored, unseen and unheard. It haunts us with feelings of worthlessness.

On the other hand, it can be just as painful to be too much the centre of attention, our looks and behaviour dissected, our deficiencies exposed with cold calculation.

When I was five, my mother entered me in our town’s Music Festival run by the Rotary Club. Every classroom in the school turned itself into a choir and performed. Anyone taking piano lessons was marched on stage to bang out a

prepared piece. Before a crowd of unsmiling people, I was made to sing a solo, "My Best Colour is Blue" (I've inclined to melancholy ever since). As I came forward, dragging my heels, I prayed there'd be a trap door to give way below me, or maybe a paper bag to wear over my head.

This 'stared-at' feeling feels a lot like generic guilt. Or is it shame, as in a dream of being naked in public? Is this what Adam and Eve felt as they madly hunted for fig leaves?

Years later, under the menacing scrutiny of a border guard wearing opaque sunglasses and a bullet-proof vest (nametag: "Rocko"), similar feelings flooded me.

"Do y'all have anything to declare?"

"Er...no?" (Truly, I hadn't. Why had my voice just risen an octave?)

"Have y'all been convicted of a felony?"

"*Convicted?* No..."

"Sir, I'm going to need you to go ahead and step out of the car."

Stephen Leacock captures similar feelings in his short story, "My Financial Career". The protagonist is 'rattled' whenever he enters a bank. To enter a bank back then was to cross another kind of border, the imposing threshold of the Temple of Commerce.

"The clerks rattle me. The wickets rattle me. The sight of money rattles me. Everything rattles me."

Mortified, he tries to withdraw fifty-six dollars, his whole account.

"How will you have it?" asked the clerk.

"What?"

"How will you *have* it!"

"Oh." He caught the meaning and said without thinking, "In fifties."

"And the six?" the clerk asked drily.

"In sixes."

I feel just as rattled in modern banks. They no longer model their buildings on ancient Greek Temples, no. But the clinical stare of a CCTV camera captures my every move. Yours too.

It happens all the time and everywhere now; not just with cameras in shops, banks, and street corners, but with 'cookies' on our computers, our 'watch history' on YouTube, Google's record of all our searches, and Amazon's archive of every purchase. You're either a potential criminal or a potential consumer. Possibly both. Nothing else about you is worth knowing.

This way of watching people is inimical to village life. There's something unfriendly, if not downright hostile, in not being allowed to see those who see you. They reserve this right only for themselves. They can see you, yes, but you may not see them. They will know your information (your 'data'), but you shall not know theirs. This is an intimidating imbalance of power. When it dominates our lives, it diminishes them.

Opaque sunglasses, when they're worn indoors for non-medical reasons, unsettle me. Would-be 'alpha males', fearing their own vulnerability, sport them to project a false air of 'I'm in charge here'. Smoked glass in cars annoys me just as much. The driver gets to see 'out' but forbids my seeing 'in'. When we arrive simultaneously at an intersection, should I cross on foot in front of him? Has he seen me? Is this car, big enough to flatten me, asserting its dominance? Wait, is he waving me on? How am I to know? *"I can't bloody see you!"*

To expose the direction of your gaze, to let yourself be 'seen seeing', is to reveal something of your intentions, and to be vulnerable to another's approach. It says, "I'm available for talk and interaction." This is what 'public' space is for, and why it requires a level playing field, socially, politically, and personally.

Crocodile Dundee entered New York with the breezy, Australian openness he'd acquired in the outback. His default posture was the mutuality of village life. New Yorkers found him naive and gullible. He didn't realise that he didn't belong.

Boarding Homes and Marking Trees

Many years ago, a good friend, The Rev. Rodger Hunter, invited me to join his inner-city work in Toronto. He'd invented something called 'The Boarding Homes Ministry'. He wanted to befriend people living isolated lives on the bottom rung of the social ladder, those who don't belong. Many were hidden in the boarding homes of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods. He'd noticed how unnoticed they are; and treated with hostility when they *are* seen.

He gathered small groups of people who committed themselves, indefinitely, to visit a boarding home every two weeks. Their only purpose was to form rudimentary communities of friendship, simple 'villages' of regard. That's all. And that is enough. Because, as it turns out, mutual regard is as vital to human life as oxygen is.

He invited me to join him one day per week for many months, to immerse myself in this experience, and then to write about it in a way that would convey

it to others, not by way of outward statistics and data, but by story and reflection generated 'from within'.

I discovered Rodger was on to something vital, something chronically overlooked by Church and society, but crucial not just to the life of the Church, but to human life itself. Shouldn't those two coincide?

I wrote a long 'tract' and called it *Regarding the Holy*. 'Regard' lives in the French word *regarder*, 'to look'. To pay regard to people and have regard for them is to *see* them in a certain way, with reverence and care, even esteem. In Christian terms, it's to see with eyes tutored by faith, to perceive the magnificence of God's work in a fellow human creature – not in spite of life's tragedy and damage, but strangely in and through them.

I'd had a lesson in 'seeing' much earlier than this. My last forestry job was a long summer spent in Algonquin Park 'tree marking' for the Ministry of Natural Resources. Selective logging was permitted. My job was to mark the trees a logging company would be allowed to fell, haul away, saw into boards, and sell. But I had to do this in accord with my knowledge of silviculture and the Ministry's aims, which were "to improve the forest's health and vitality."

This placed me between a rock and a hard place.

On the one hand, I had to select diseased trees for removal, crooked trees impeding the growth of straight ones, and 'over mature' trees that hogged the light needed by younger ones. But in the eyes of a lumber company, these were the 'worst' trees to cut down. They wanted the 'best' trees, the straight and solid ones that can be sawn into the most lucrative lumber.

On the other hand, as I tramped through the bush like an imperial potentate, choosing which trees would live and which would die, I remembered a hairy forestry professor (no one sent him the memo that the 70s were over). He'd pointed out a 'wolf tree' on a field trip, back when I'd taken a year of forestry education. This tree had grown in the open, as a 'city' tree would. It was as though it didn't belong in the 'village' of the forest. It didn't have a long straight trunk. It had a vast, spreading crown. Its limbs were wild and various. To a lumberman's eye it was deformed and ugly.

"This is just the worst tree for lumber. Useless. No economic value," said the hairy man. "But birds and wildlife love it. They need it too. You want to be foresters? The whole forest is alive. Have an eye for the whole of its life. You will be its stewards. You must live up to that calling."

Did I?

What we choose to see as 'best' and 'worst' in society is largely governed by our private interests. But village life is 'disinterested', in the strict meaning of that word: "*not swayed by considerations of personal advantage.*" That makes it a 'public' space.

The ideal village, never mind the ideal Church, is as open and friendly to all of life as Crocodile Dundee was to all of New York City. Only then can we *truly* see each other, perceiving God's magnificence in each of us, and in all creation.

I came to know some colourful denizens of those boarding homes in the only way I could, by letting them come to know me.

Donald was one, a Korean war veteran. He's dead now. Back then, his back was bent, his steps unsure, his face a manuscript of woe etched in flesh. One day, for fun, he taught us an old country and western song. It was corny and sentimental, just like so much religion.

*I overlooked an orchid while searching for a rose,
The orchid that I overlooked was you.*

Of course, *he* was the 'overlooked' one. Maybe it moved him to sing this song.

We do overlook each other. We overlook precious aspects of our own selves too. But God sees them, 'disinterestedly'. Faith teaches us to find those hidden aspects in each other, and trains us to see them disinterestedly too, "unswayed by considerations of personal advantage."

When I'd finished writing my tract for Rodger, I carried on beside him, one day per week, for fourteen years, until I moved to Wortley Village and had to give it up.

Soon after, Rodger died. It's not unknown for 'saints' to die young. Their vital vulnerability burns them up too soon. This is especially true of those who cannot see themselves as saints. But others see it in them, as God surely does.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew