

7 March 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

In the early part of my childhood, I lived in a broadcast desert. There was no such thing as 'Cable TV'. The signal had to come through the airwaves or not at all. Nothing could reach us until the CBC erected a tower near our remote town. This was our one and only station.

Medusa on TV

The signal it sent was weak and intermittent. I think its source was in far away Toronto, but it had to be relayed across the province like a bucket in a fire brigade, passing from tower to tower until it met the 'rabbit ears' on top of our black-and-white TV in the corner of the living room, where a cathode ray tube magically transformed it into moving pictures on the screen.

I can't remember, exactly, when the first wonky image appeared on that screen, but I know it was 'up and running' in time to see a grainy likeness of Neil Armstrong taking "one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind."

(Even as a little boy, I thought his words didn't quite make sense. Later I learned that as Armstrong stepped onto the lunar surface he was hit, quite understandably, with a sudden case of nerves. He'd meant to say, "That's one small step for *a* man; one giant leap for mankind." But I digress. Surprised?)

The screen was all 'snow' on Saturday mornings, the holy hour for children's programs. I was denied access to 'Bugs Bunny' and 'Batman and Robin'. Had a wrinkled geezer who loathed slothful children arranged to have the signal cut at 6 a.m. on Saturdays? I'll bet it was our Elementary School Principal.

He'd always had it in for me. Notoriously strict, he kept 'the strap' in the bottom drawer of his ancient desk. Never mind how I knew that. He accosted me one day for running down the middle of the hallway, a region reserved only for teachers.

"See here, you rascal!" Yes, he really did shout '*rascal*'. One never forgets a new word learned in a moment like that. It was made funnier by the mild speech impediment he shared with Elmer Fudd, wherein 'r' sounds more like 'w' (try it), but I was too afraid to laugh in his presence. "What's so *wisble*?" he might have demanded to know.

But here I am again, digressing all over the place. Not surprised now, though, are you?

Television was going to rot our brains. That's the point. TV kept us from wholesome pursuits like homework, healthy outdoor games, drying the dishes, and using our chemistry sets *improvingly* so we'd one day invent cures for cancer. Setting a child in front of a TV was like tossing a fresh serving of cocaine at the feet of an addict. Our viewing had to be supervised and rationed.

"Boohoo!" you bleat. "We never had any TV at all. All we had to play with was a stick with a nail in it!"

Let me guess, you were born before World War Two, as my parents were, yes? It seemed to them, sometimes, as if our TV set were a hideous Medusa crouched in the corner of the living room. Look upon her ardently and she'd transfix you with her hypnotic gaze, drain you of speech, unseat your reason, and turn your soul to stone.

But from the kitchen came a stern voice. "Stop wasting time in front of that Goggle Box. Get up off the floor and *do* something!"

"I have seen the future, and it's livestreamed!"

To this day, I have a fraught relationship with screens.

I do love an old-fashioned, oversized movie screen, the sudden hush when the lights go down, the anticipatory thrill when those thick, velvet curtains slowly open, revealing the MGM Lion roaring his head off, or stately Columbia lifting her torch aloft, or a circle of stars coming to rest over Paramount's mountain. *Magic*.

We're living through a second 'golden age' on the TV screen too. There's the obvious variety and scope and volume of programs that 'streaming' makes possible. I've watched excellent drama and comedy from Israel, Turkey, France, Germany, Sweden, Korea, Japan, the UK, Australia, Taiwan, South Africa and more – also from an up-and-coming country called 'America', I think.

How could the boy who heard Neil Armstrong flub his opening line on the moon ever have imagined such extravagant, visual bounty in the quickening years of his (late-ish) middle age?

Fresh talent blossoms on every kind of screen now. It's too much of a much-too-good, even after you pan for the gold and discard the dross, and it's exploding exponentially every year. I suspect the talent was *always* there, but the conduits for its expression were too narrow and clogged before.

Not now. YouTube is a global production platform, as open and accessible as a stroll in the park. It streams old Dick Van Dyke shows and those earnest David Suzuki documentaries. You can watch films classic and current, foreign and domestic; hear singers long dead or youthful newcomers, accomplished pianists, orchestras, drummers, jazz combos – even *organists*!

You can learn from learned lecturers in history, take tutorials in fashion design, and get pro tips on car maintenance; then watch Martin Luther King preach ‘I have a dream’ and hear Pierre Elliot Trudeau pronounce ‘fuddle-duddle’.

Root around some more and you’ll find on-screen psychologists telling you why you’re so sad, career counsellors listing hot tips that will get you your dream job, and family therapists who can repair your broken marriage. But that’s rather heavy; so, just for laughs, why not watch a German hobbyist restore a model train, a Japanese chef prepare sushi, and then maybe some ‘Stupid People Fails’? Finish with a half hour of Swedish stand-up.

I have an idea for one too. Has anyone thought about filming their cat yet?

It’s all available for free (mostly), all the time, from all over the world. It’s as thrilling as a forbidden sprint down the middle of a school hallway.

And yet, a niggling, nagging voice haunts my soul even now, scolding me. “Stop wasting time in front of that Screen, you rascal! Get up and *do* something!”

“Attention must be paid...”

Of *course*, there’s truth in that scolding – ‘a’ truth, mind you, not ‘the’ truth. Let me try and ‘push back’ on it (as politicians like to say now).

A screen serves not just the needs of ‘creators’ making ‘content’, that army of people who’ve painstakingly prepared something worth watching; a screen is also at the immediate service of *viewers*, people painstakingly prepared to pay attention, appreciate, and admire what has been made for them.

The speakers of a stereo are like screens in this respect. They’re a modern medium of acoustic transmission from musician to listener. Books, too, have always done more than furnish a room. They sit on the shelf, often for many decades, waiting to be noticed. Books beg for readers because the writers who wrote them do.

The screen doesn’t *have* to be a mad Medusa transmuting our souls into granite. A screen can be the place where performer and audience, speaker and

listener, creator and watcher, *meet*. And in that meeting, something sparks and flows, as in a 'live wire', an electric current.

This current was short-circuited in my childhood on those Saturday mornings when I switched on the TV, my little heart hoping for a cartoon to watch, "maybe *this* time", only to be deadened by a dead signal.

Performers feel something similar when, conversely, no shows up to see, hear, or appreciate their labour. I knew some actors in Stratford. "Nothing's more soul destroying than an empty house," they complained.

"Sure there is," I said. "Empty pews."

"These things were here but the beholder wanting," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins, having another of his mystical dizzy spells. The compressed language of his poem, "Hurrahing in Harvest", translates a divine vision into words on a page, where it waits, even now, for us to read and *re-vision* it. God is *always* showing up, *always* shining through nature, he seems to insist. What's missing? "The beholder." God's creation wants *witnesses*, watchers, listeners, admirers, appreciators.

So do we. Let's not be ashamed of that. There's an unbearable moment of poignancy in Arthur Miller's wonderful play, *Death of a Salesman*. (There are many such moments in that play, but this one always gets to me.)

Willy Loman is a tragic, pathetic figure, a victim of forces he can neither understand nor control, including the destructive impulse at war with his fractured, fragile soul. This is the 'tragic' part. But it also makes him truly 'pathetic', meaning *worthy of our pathos*.

There's nothing to be 'done' for him. This is tragedy, not comedy. There's no 'fixing' Willy Loman, no militant busybodies from the 'Protestant Church League for Pulling Up Your Socks, Straightening Up, and Flying Right' who, by grabbing their moral mops, could possibly clean up the mess that is Willy Loman's soul.

That would be 'the religion of *doing*', not watching, hearing, and appreciating. The 'religion of doing' can get pretty self-righteous and smug. It's the piety that provoked the 'scoldings' I received long ago, but now inflict upon myself in the inner voice of a frustrated parent. "Stop wasting precious your time on earth watching TV, reading novels, staring out the window, and listening to music. Get off your lazy arse and *do* something, dammit!"

Did I say this was a tragedy? But how like life! (Willy Loman's, I mean, not mine.) The unbearably poignant scene I have in mind erupts in a speech torn

from the heart of Linda, Willy Loman's wife, the one who truly *knows* the man beneath the 'salesman'.

"I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person."

Can't you hear something of the gospel in this plea? The Psalms too, of course. Not all religion is about 'doing good' and 'fixing things', you know. And when that's *all* it ever is, such religion is very liable to be smug, shallow and one-dimensional. Also humourless.

"You are witnesses of these things"

There is a kind of religion, not of 'doing', but of witnessing, watching, and listening. It registers and feels the truth of someone else's life, or work, or the truth of Nature herself. It's religious because this very action of *witnessing* someone truly is also truly redemptive. In that moment something sparks and sputters. Coming to life, it begins to flow within us and between us, making us both more alive and real, to ourselves and each other. Performers know this.

This makes me think of The Rev. Adam Smallbone, a fictional Church of England priest played by Tom Hollander on the BBC series called "Rev". A truer, funnier, and yet more poignant depiction of the clerical life I've yet to see on TV.

In the opening credits, this clumsy, well-meaning cleric stands by the busy road outside his parish Church. The film speeds up, people and cars whizz by in a blur, but he just stands there, keeping still with a sad smile on his face. It's as though, as the busy world rushes by, his only real job is to witness everything, to take all in, the life of his parish.

"You are witnesses of these things," said Jesus, according to St Luke at least. Luke has him say this in his Gospel's closing passage. Jesus had risen by this point. The disciples have re-gathered around him (sans Judas), perplexed as always. They're sorry they'd slept through his troubled time in the Garden, and they're quite abashed that they'd fled from him on the cross, but they really want to be near him now – now that he's leaving and "ascending to his Father".

Great timing. How like life.

I fantasise that, at the Last Judgment, this Compassionate Christ, the one who knows the man beneath the salesman, won't say to me, "Oy, Fullerton!

What the heck were you *doing* with that three-score-and-ten I gave you? From what I saw, you watched a lot of big screens, listened to mountains of music, read pointless books, and stared into space. What were you thinking, man? What did you *do* with yourself? Why weren't you more productive? Why didn't you roll up your sleeves, get your hands dirty, and *help others*? What a rascal! "

No, I fantasise that he'll say something like this. "Here you are at last! I've been waiting for you. We have a lot of screens up here, but I've been itching to meet you face to face."

"Um...And I you, Lord..." (if I can get the words out).

"Now, I want to hear about everything you saw and felt and heard in your life. Did you admire the beauty of my creation? Did you drink in other people's creativity? Did you appreciate the artistry of painters, the musician's marvellous music, the poet's poetic words, the architect's designs? Did you receive your friends' sorrow as if it were your own? Oh, and did you hear any good jokes? (We could use some new material up here.) Above all, *did you pay attention to your own life*? Tell me everything. I'm dying to hear."

I know. Silly. But it's my fantasy.

In the Unlikely Event You're Still Reading This

For the two of you who may still be here, I have some sad news to share. Joyce Pinches has died. I was honoured to be allowed, in the dark days of this pandemic, to lead a brief graveside service with Tom and his family gathered around. It was sad. Of course it was. Yet it was also strangely good and right to do this. I could feel that many of you were there in spirit too.

Also, Des Perry's sister, Louisa Clendenning, has died. She lived in St Thomas. Des, Sharon, and family miss her very much.

So, let's keep Des Perry, Tom Pinches, their families, and each other, firmly in our prayers in the days and weeks ahead.

Finally, because I have a leftover week of holiday to take, and I feel a need for it, I'll not be at work this coming week. I won't send a Pastoral Letter next Saturday. But I've attached a service for both March 7 *and* March 14 to this one. But don't read ahead!

Yours in the faith
Andrew