

On Alienation

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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The urge to write this sermon came to me one sunny warm afternoon last August. I was riding my bike home after having been at Vancouver General Hospital. It may have been the day when I had talked with a young Canadian veteran there whose return from duty in Afghanistan had proven to be very, very hard. I had said something to him like expressing my appreciation for having “served” in the armed forces in Afghanistan, when he immediately corrected me. “I didn’t *serve* over there, I *fought*. I killed people, and saw my buddies wounded and killed. Don’t say ‘served’ to me.”

This young man had been seriously injured when an IED exploded while traveling in an armored vehicle near Khandahar. The explosion killed and wounded other Canadian soldiers who were riding with him that day. His injuries of body and soul lingered and ran deep; he was in a lot of pain, pain physical and emotional. His struggle returning to normal, civilian life here in Vancouver, the difficulty of it, is hard to imagine.

As I rode up Heather and Cambie Streets, though the afternoon sun shone and the streets baked in that generous late summer day, and people walked peacefully hand-in-hand on the sidewalks and sat outside at cafes amiably enjoying each other’s company—it’s as though there was a dark hand blotting out the sun, and a chasm yawned between me and those living normal, seemingly untroubled lives. I felt like I lived on another, quite alien planet altogether: dimly lit, drained of warmth, drenched with pain. Alien. Alienated. Do you know what I’m saying? Do you understand? Have you ever felt that way?

As I pedaled along that August afternoon, my mind traveled ahead to this season, where, though long of night and cold we're supposed to be of good cheer: decking the halls, stringing lights, trimming trees, caroling merrily along "over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go..." But what if giving thanks comes hard? What if this season is haunted with pain, loneliness and loss, and it's difficult to be less than cynical about the festiveness of the season's celebration? What if...? Then this one's for you, for me, maybe for many of us.

What I'm wanting to talk about—alienation: that human feeling of being estranged and out of step from others or things, or even from ourselves—that condition, those feelings—well, the roots of these words and thoughts today, for me, actually go well back into the past. More than forty years it's been. Remember being a teenager and the angsty turmoil of it all? Neither a kid nor an adult, hormones raging, growing into a strange new body, with no one, it seemed, *no one* who really understood how you felt, what you thought, what you were going through—especially your parents? Though hovering and probably trying their best, no doubt—they just didn't have a clue. Those years and feelings lay down deep grooves in the soul.

I was fifteen and marinating in an acid bath of estrangement, when two life lines were tossed my way. The first was a series of televised plays broadcast in the States Friday nights. We had this small black and white TV, and all alone on those evenings I saw a very young Anthony Hopkins play a Dylan Thomas-like poet and the mess of his life and last days, and Richard Kiley performing the part of a doomed medieval king in a play called *The Ceremony of Innocence*.

Dark plays, dark subjects. But what's indelible now, and so important then, was that they spoke immediately to me and my unhappiness, yearning, alienation and distress; that what I was going through, others, in their own dark ways, had as well. And the striking thing about it is that this experience ushered me into a tormented kinship with other estranged human beings; and thus, a recognition that I was not so alone after all.

And, and this is strange and more mysterious still, watching those plays alone on Friday nights while friends were partying it up somewhere, those plays helped give me an unquestionable sense of self, of myself. No one else I knew watched or cared a fig about these plays. It's as though they were meant just for me—and they reached out to affirm my unique being in the world; its dignity and worth.

I've told you about the other life-line; the one thrown to me by Miss Bissinger, my grade nine teacher who knew I was floundering in every way imaginable. She called me up after class one day, reached into her purse and handed me a copy of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and told me: "you might want to read this." I did that night, and returned the next day flustered and stammering—"who is this guy? Why did he do that? Why did everyone gang up on him and condemn him the way they did?" And she smiled, reached in her purse and pulled out *The Great Gatsby* and said: "you might want to read this." And I did that night and the next day. And book followed book thereafter; like stepping stones, they led me through and occasionally out of my dark, tangled wood. Don't question the power of the arts and letters—they can save lives.

Alienation has a simple meaning—the condition of being estranged from someone or something—but it also has other meanings to be found in law, literature, political economy,

psychology and philosophy, in other words it makes its presence known and accompanies us through just about every aspect and walk of our life.

In law, alienation refers to conveyance of property; something is said to be alienable if it can be sold. On the other end of the scale, in Thomas Jefferson's enumeration of rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—these are so tied up to the essence of who we are as to be unalienable—that is, no quantity of gold or silver, no overweening, imperious power can make us relinquish or take them from us. In literature, the theme of alienation most often appears as a psychological isolation of an individual from community and society, from the cosmos even.

Last week, I quoted from Hamlet's Act Two soliloquy: "what a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty..." But wrapped around that more famous line, throwing it into a quite different, grey hued ironic light, are these words:

I have of late...lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition; that this goodly frame the earth, seems to me a sterill promontory; this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this Majesticall rooffe fretted with golden fire: why, it appeares no other thing to me, than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. 'What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an Angel! in apprehension how like a god!.... And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor Woman neither; though by your smiling you seem to say so.

Sounds like Charlie Brown's lament on the cover of the order of service.

"I have of late...lost all my mirth... it goes so heavily with my disposition": To be estranged from persons, communities, self and things is not of recent vintage; no, it lies as well at the troubled roots of religions millennia old, *and* young. East and West, certain singular women and men felt so estranged from societies, times and customs so athwart, so contrary to the realization of the human thirst for justice, quickened aliveness and meaning that from the depths of their prophetic, alienated discontent they cried out their anguished "No! It must not be so,"

and famed or obscure, they named what they believed was the essential problem of their times, revealed its remedy, and set out, in deed and word, to create rites, communities, knowledge and practices to redeem it, and them and others.

As well, who hasn't known how alienating, how fragmented off from oneself work can be? Karl Marx's observation about the rise and entrenchment of industrial labour and commerce how, under the capitalist mode of production, workers are alienated from the products of their labour—they don't own the things they make, estranged from their labour power which they sell for a wage, and made strangers from their own essence, effectively becoming machines in mechanized and commercial heartless systems of production.

Way back in those angsty teenage years, and unknown to me then, was a speech given in Glasgow by the newly installed rector of the University. Jimmy Reid had risen to prominence there as a trade union activist at the Upper Clyde Shipyard, where he led a world famous work action. The British government had decided to withdraw state subsidies from the Shipyard, the effect of which would have resulted in at least six thousand job losses. Reid, along with his colleagues decided the best way to show the viability of keeping the yards open was to stage a work-in, not a strike, and continue to complete what work orders the shipyard had until the government changed policy. The campaign was successful, and on the strength of that success, his skills as an orator and public figure, Reid was elected Rector of Glasgow University in 1971.

In his inaugural speech—printed in full in the pages of the *New York Times* (hard to believe something like that would happen now!) Reid tackled the issue of alienation and described it like this:

Alienation is the...major social problem...today....It is the cry of men and women who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces out of their control. It's the frustration of

ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision making. [It's] the feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel with justification that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies.

Sounds like something that could have been written today, even more so.

Reid went on to describe how the increasing concentration of power in government, corporations, finance, and media were eroding hard-won democratic and economic rights, leaving people woefully misinformed, disenfranchised, tormented and insecure. And where Tommy Douglas once used the metaphor of Mouseland, Reid turned to what he called the “widespread acceptance of the concept and term, “the rat race”: that “scrambling for position” and “trampling on others...all in pursuit of personal success,” and called out to the students that day:

“Reject these attitudes. Reject the values and false morality that underline these attitudes. A rat race is for rats. We're not rats. We're human beings. Reject the insidious pressures in society that would blunt your critical faculties to all that is happening around you, that would caution silence in the face of injustice lest you jeopardize your chances of promotion and self-advancement....The price is too high. It entails the loss of your dignity and human spirit....From the heights of an executive suite...where your success is judged by maximized profits, the overwhelming tendency must be to see people as units of production, as indices in your accountant's books....To appreciate fully the inhumanity of this situation, you have to see the hurt and despair in the eyes of a man suddenly told he is redundant without provision made for alternative employment. From the very depth of my being, I challenge the right of any man or group of men, in business or in government, to tell a fellow human being that he or she is expendable.” (For the whole speech see http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_167194_en.pdf)

While the rest of Reid's speech focused primarily on the need for social and cultural transformation in government, the economy and education, it was that image of the man thrown out of work—the hurt and despair in his eyes that haunt me. I've known and felt that; many of us have: the hurt and despair, the gut-wrenching, self-diminishing alienated feelings that endure long after the hurt like the half-life of some radioactive element. The result of experiences like

that speak to a wounding, a trauma that goes to the heart of what I want to say in the time remaining. For I have come to believe that alienation arises from trauma; and that trauma is far more common than we know or understand.

In a recently published book called *The Trauma of Everyday Life*, Mark Epstein asserts that “trauma is not just the result of major disasters” to persons and communities. It does not happen to only some people. “An undercurrent of trauma,” he writes, “runs through ordinary life.... One way or another, death...old age, illness, accidents, separation and loss hangs over all of us. Nobody is immune.” While we are accustomed to thinking of trauma as the result of major cataclysm, daily life is filled with endless little traumas that cumulatively add up, and because they are experienced privately and don’t pass the bar that’s set so high for something to officially count as traumatic—like experiencing a death, an assault, or a public disaster—because of that, we may not see or recognize the significance of loss for another person. We’re traumatized and thus alienated from self and others, a lot easier and more frequently than we realize. Things break. People hurt our feelings. We disappoint and are disappointed in turn. Pets die. Friends get sick. Work alienates. We’re excluded from the processes of decision making. We age, fail, and confront loss. The holiday season looms, and for some, many of us perhaps, it is a time of haunting melancholy, not festivity.

The world we wake into the morning after “happily ever after” is no fairy tale. It’s not something neatly tied up in a ninety minute narrative arc like in a movie where things go bust, but then come out basically right in the end. It can be more like the keening lyric and minor keyed music that infuses the blues, or Schubert’s *Winterreise* and Shakespeare’s *Blow, Blow Thou Winter Wind* so ably performed for us today by Jonathan and Elliott and the Choir; more

like Charlie Brown's lament on the cover of our order of service—how many times was that poor kid humiliated on the school playground; and with what enduring consequences, I wonder?

One day, years ago, a handsome aged man came to my mother's door (we happened to be staying with her at the time); he arrived at her doorstep on an errand, with unfinished business. Turns out he and she, decades ago—way back in the 30s—had been deeply in love and planning to marry when it all went down. Another woman claimed to be carrying his child, and duty bound, he left my mother and married the other woman who, it turned out, wasn't pregnant at all. But the deed was done. And both he and my mother separately entered into complicated marriages marred with regret and unhappiness. And there he stood, fifty years later, bearing news of his wife's recent death and begging my mother's forgiveness for the unending sorrow that had haunted them both.

I'd really not known anything of this; it was quite a revelation. And I came to see my mom in a different light—so resolute and normally cheerful, the lone steady provider, the gifted teacher and friend so valued by many. The sighs I heard from her growing up, the wistful, occasional expressions of how she wished she had a man who'd have taken her out to dinner, for whom she could have dressed up and gone out with to enjoy a play or an opera—all of that, which had passed me by unnoticed and uncared for—I had no clue how deeply wounded she had been; how dark the hand that had laid over her heart all those years. The alienated teenager growing up in that home, wrapped up in his own discontent, had no idea just how traumatized his own parents were, both of them, and the unfinished business they carried; how alienated and estranged in a society where grief and sadness is not an OK place to be; a contemporary culture

that has discounted or pathologized those emotions and would numb them down under a deluge of consumer spending, endless work, celebrity entertainment and drugs illegal and prescribed.

Any hope of addressing and perhaps resolving the traumas of everyday life, and the alienation which follows in its wake, requires that there must be some place, some person, or community to which we can go where we can speak and be heard, truly heard with accurately empathetic ears and compassionate hearts. When this takes place, the sense of loss, the wounding may unfold and the healing begin.

Two months before his own death, Robert Kennedy quoted these words from Aeschylus to a crowd in Indianapolis telling them that Martin Luther King Jr had just been shot and killed: “Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.” Pain, despair, and wisdom through awful grace. May there be some grace out there, that we may be its vessels and find some wisdom beyond and through our despair.

And in closing, these words by Christine Ristaino who found her voice and strength in spite of abuse as a young person and a violent mugging when she was an adult:

“The next time you talk with somebody who has a story to tell – about violence, oppression, tragedy, illness, death or pain – listen to her as though listening was the only thing in the world you had to do that day. Look into that person’s eyes and make her feel her story is worth telling. Tell her she is brave and that you care about her.” (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/21/listening-turns-victim-survivor>)

May we listen and be with one another, large of heart, patient, and kind so that this season will bring courage, empathy, and healing.