

Thanksgiving 2014

Ring In, Glad Thanksgiving

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

October 12, 2014

© 2014 Unitarian Church of Vancouver

Have you ever been listening along to a piece of music or reading the words to a song when all of a sudden there's an unexpected note, a change of key or a word or phrase dropped in into the lyric that slants the music, the words askew? You're gliding along in a major key, it's lyrical or stately, maybe upbeat, and then whoa!—an atonal note or phrase arises, or the music and words drop into a minor key and a troubled, haunting idea or feeling. It kind of takes you aback, and you wonder: Where did *that* come from, what's going on here?

I had an experience like this recently. I don't even remember how I came upon a particular Unitarian hymn; I'd never heard or sung it in the twenty years I've been going to Unitarian worship services—but there were words in it that seemingly had to do with Thanksgiving—and tomorrow's Thanksgiving...so I took a look at it. It's in our hymnal: #290 “Bring, O Past, Your Honor.” For the most part, the song is about calling on us, in the present, to understand and appreciate Unitarian people and values from the past; it's about our heritage, staying true to it and carrying it along in our own way forthrightly into the future. The words were written by Rev. Charles Lyttle, who taught Unitarian and church history for years at one of our seminary schools for ministers. The lyrics are rather stilted, full of Biblical and rather obscure Unitarian historical references, and the music's stalwart in a 19th century sort of way. No wonder it's little known or sung. (As a historian, I enjoyed it—but as a Sunday hymn...don't know.)

But imagine for a moment...

We're singing along about “hallowed lives,” “Holiness, Love and Liberty,” and “minds by Truth set free” when, in the second verse, *one word* slips in, and the whole thing changes: It starts out, and here's the thanksgiving part: “Ring, in glad thanksgiving, bell of *grief* and gladness, forth to town and prairies let our festal greeting go.” Did you hear it: Thanksgiving bells ringing out in *grief*? Gladness at Thanksgiving, OK, we get that; but what about the *grief* part?

So I looked up Rev. Lyttle and this hymn “Bring, O Past, Your Honor,” and discovered that it was written and in first published in 1937. Anything significant about that date?: *The*

Great Depression, Dirty Thirties (and post World War I). Singing that hymn, in those years—especially in a line about Thanksgiving gladness—it just *had* to include some reference, some acknowledgement of the impacts of a devastating war and the deep, deep anxieties of economic hard times. If it hadn't, it would probably have seemed callous and weirdly disconnected from the lived lives of real people gathered to sing on a Sunday morning, even in Unitarian churches.

Unexpected words or ideas that take you aback. Here's another example. I was seventeen, at university and read Jane Austen for the first time. It was wild! Reading one, then another novel, I was allowed at length, to listen in on the thoughts and feelings, the sense and sensibility of adult women—never happened before—and all of it written in such beautifully crafted prose! Heroes and bounders, miscommunication, misalliances, romance, heartbreak and marriage: it was a fascinating, exhilarating experience for a young man.

But there was this *something* unsettling, as well, that I didn't understand or appreciate, perhaps, until later. And it had to do with phrases like: "My dear, he's worth 10,000 pounds a year!" (Mrs. Bennett to Elizabeth talking about Mr. Darcy's income--a good number, by the way.) Jane Austen, and everyone reading her novels in the first half of the 19th century, knew exactly what she was talking about; she and they, in the early 1800s, were intimately acquainted with the hierarchy of wealth, income, their minute gradations and their inevitable implications for the lives of men and women in these novels, including their marital strategies and personal hopes and disappointments.

When Jane Austen wrote her novels, writes the French economist Thomas Picketty: "the average income was on the order of 30 pounds a year...[Austen] knew that to live comfortably and elegantly, secure in proper transportation and clothing, to eat well, and find amusement and a necessary minimum of domestic servants, one needed at least twenty to thirty times that much." I remember being struck from a line about Edward Ferrars and Elinor Dashwood, of how with their meager income they wouldn't go far, and "they were neither of them quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year would supply them with the comforts of life."

(Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 105. The modest heroine Elinore, in *Sense and Sensibility*, says 1000 pounds "is my wealth," while her sister Marianne insists on nearly twice that number. By contract Mr Darcy had a income of 10,000 a year. See Heldman, "How Wealthy is Mr. Darcy – Really?" <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/printed/number12/heldman.htm>)

30 pounds, 350, 1000, 10,000 pounds a year...Austen's novels are full of calculation, the weighing up of worth, class, marriage prospects, wealth, and of humiliating, comfortable or

exalted circumstances of its characters. These numbers and their consequences were clearly known and obsessed over across the pages of Austen's work and world. They disclose as well—they're strikingly accurate documents—of a world of vast income inequality and of the anxieties of generations of English the middle class and gentry. I've never been able to read Austen again with the romantic innocence of those early university days. Perhaps, that's as it should be.

Marriage bells, bells of Thanksgiving, ringing out gladness and happy endings; that Unitarian hymn, these early 19th century novels, toll forth darker tones of anxiety, grief, and inequality as well.

References to Charles Lyttle's hymn: "Bring, O Past, Your Glory," with its Thanksgiving bells are rare as hen's teeth in Unitarian literature. Tellingly, I found a rare reference to it, and it was in Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed's *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*. The white denomination—that's us, the black pioneers are Egbert Brown and Lewis McGee and theirs are deeply compelling, tragic stories that Rev. Morrison-Reed fortunately rescued from the archives of our forgetfulness.

Early in the pages of his book, Mark quotes from "Bring, O Past..." focusing on the following lines from the hymn: "lives and minds by Truth set free," and "builders of the temple: To Holiness, to Love and Liberty," and then goes on to say: this "and other [Unitarian] hymns tend to extol abstract human virtues...When we want concrete imagery, we evoke nature [in detail]...We [name and] praise the heavens...we rarely turn to the Bible. [And if and when we do speak of freedom] the predominant freedom in the Unitarian eye is that of the individual mind."

I think he's mostly right about this as a major theme in Unitarian history and values. Yet, intellectual freedom, freedom of the individual mind, is hardly an issue, or theme in the Bible. By contrast, Afro Canadians and Americans in their churches turned to the Bible for its stories of liberation from bondage—spiritual and political—seeking narratives of justice, the healing, hopeful connection to a God of grace and liberation, and to communal solidarities of freedom in the face of real oppression. We, on the other hand, Morrison-Reed notes, speaking generally, ours is more an ethics of personal responsibility and individual conscience. Our martyrs died for liberty in the face of dogmatic authority of state and church. Is this a morality capable of inspiring a concrete, hopeful passion for social justice? Morrison-Reed asks. And finally, referring to a survey study by Robert Miller several decades ago, Mark notes the following outcomes: the Unitarian orientation "stresses personal realization, individual self-

fulfillment and self-actualization.” “Freedom is ranked significantly higher than equality.” Indeed, according to this survey, Unitarians “rank equality [as a value] lower than any other religious groups surveyed.” (MMR, *Black Pioneers*.... “The individualistic character of the middle class permeates Unitarianism.” 23-9.)

Times have changed in the past thirty five years since that survey and Morrison Reed’s book was first published; much has changed and so, perhaps, have we.

And here I want to turn to two recently published books that have sent shock waves through the economic, public policy and journalistic worlds. They are Thomas Picketty’s *Capital in the 21st Century*, and Richard Wilkinson’s and Kate Pickett’s *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Society Stronger*. Picketty is a young French economist; and Wilkinson and Pickett are epidemiologists—people who study the distribution, control and prevention of diseases. Picketty’s book comes in at a whopping 700 pages; *Spirit Level* 327 pages. A 1000+ pages, and I have three a half to go. But I’m going to give it a try: the main themes and conclusions are fairly, though disturbingly, straightforward.

Using all the tricks of the trade of contemporary economic research, Picketty and his colleagues combed through nearly three hundred years of income surveys and tax records from European countries and North America, with work in world economic data and trends as well. The basic story is this: 1) the rate on the return on capital—that is, the growth of wealth in the form of rents from land, investments, interest, inheritance, etc. accumulates over time at much greater rates than income—that is, the money people like us make from working; 2) that capital wealth concentrates in the hands of a select, small elite who use that wealth to exercise extraordinary influence over public policy, culture, and the flow and shape of ideas, information, and politics. 3) Vast inequality, disenfranchisement, political instability and social health crises are by-products of this process. 4) And finally, there is nothing absolutely inevitable or iron-clad fated about this; the accumulation of capital wealth, its preponderance over income, and the control it and the wealthy exercise in society are the outcomes of conscious, calculated decision making. It could and should be otherwise.

Do you remember the 50s 60s and 70s? I know, it wasn’t exactly a bed of roses; but something positive and unprecedented happened during those decades—according to the data, for nearly the first time in recorded history, the huge gap between the fabulously rich and rest of us, the middle and working classes, the poor, diminished. Inequality fell in substantial ways,

literacy rates expanded across the board, infant mortality plummeted, life expectancy increased dramatically, and broad-based social mobility wasn't a pipe dream.

And when this happened, professional, political and popular assumptions rose such that many believed that as democratic, capitalist nations matured, inequality would stabilize and diminish into sustainable, roughly egalitarian societies. (The future was going to look something like Scandinavia.) I don't believe I was alone in thinking that with a good education and skills training, some prudence, and hard work, the economic future of my kids and their children would be better than my parents' and my own.

What Picketty and others have shown though doing the historical and data research is, increasingly, what many of us are beginning to intuit and experience: *the future isn't necessarily going to be so rosy after all*. The reason postwar economies looked different, truly different—that is, that inequality fell—was due to a series of historical catastrophes one after another: WWI, The Great Depression and World War II. Singly and together they destroyed huge accumulations of private capital, especially in Europe. They unleashed centuries of frustrated, pent up resentments and positive energy: and what followed was a cascade of revolutions, strongly organized labour, demographic growth, technical innovation, and higher rates of taxation that enabled governments to spend on infrastructure, housing, universal education, social security, health, and social assistance.

Looking back from where we are now, today—what happened in Western Europe and North America between roughly 1917 and 1975, when capitalism did indeed create high growth and lower inequality was an historical anomaly, a fluke.

Inequality is again on the rise and accelerating at a very dangerous pace, so much so that we may well find that the 21st century will be one of greater inequality and social discord than even the 19th century. “We will be poorer in every way,” Picketty writes, “and that creates crisis...the present situation cannot be sustained for much longer. When I began, simply collecting data, I was genuinely surprised by what I found, which was inequality is growing so fast and that capitalism cannot apparently solve it. You have to ask what does this mean for ordinary people who are not billionaires and who will never be billionaires. Well, I think it means deterioration of the economic well-being of the collective and the degradation of the public sector. There is this fundamentalist belief that capital will save the world, and it just

isn't so. Not because of what Marx said, but because of what I discovered: capital is an end in itself and no more.

In the six years after the financial crisis of 2008—the effects of which are still very much with us—there is deep unease, diminishing opportunities and hope, growing anger about the magnifying wealth of the truly well off: that 1% operating in a world of low taxation, lax regulation and poverty wages, where short term gain is the guiding principle. Even Mark Carney, the Canadian governor of the Bank of England, laid into unfettered capitalism: “Just as any revolution eats its children,” he said in a recent speech, “unchecked market fundamentalism will devour the social capital essential for long-term dynamism of capitalism itself.” (NYT, May 29, 2014)

Look in our own back yard. Metro Vancouver is among the most educated areas in all of Canada. And yet, in a cross country survey of our nation's 10 largest cities, Vancouver is dead last, and by a huge margin, in terms of median income from those between the ages of 25 and 45. “I was so surprised by the numbers,” said urban planner Andy Yan, “that I had to run [the numbers] three or four times to make sure they were right.” “Why aren't we talking about this,” he asks. We're going to “lose our most talented people because they're [not] going to stick around.” And it's not that it's so great in other Canadian cities: hammered by stagnating and lower incomes, a doubling of housing prices in the last decade, and deteriorating environments, let me tell you—you know this!—real inequality and heart-breaking angst is on the rise and gnawing away on our young people. And why are our governments: municipal, Provincial and federal—why are we—ignoring the financial squeeze on young Canadians? Don't they, don't we know the costs that are accruing? That attention that must be paid sooner or later? That there will be a reckoning? If we dither and wait too long, the consequences are going to be a disaster. (see, Pete McMartin, “Vancouver—Lotus Land or Lowest Land?,” *Vancouver Sun*, October 1, 2014; Paul Kershaw, “Why are governments ignoring the financial squeeze on young Canadians”, *Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2014)

Those costs are not just economic and financial; they're social, existential, and spiritual as well. And that's the main story coming from Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their book *The Spirit Level*. Thirty years of research by these two people who study the rise, control and prevention of disease clearly indicate that unequal societies are bad for *everyone* within them—the rich, the middle class and the poor. Every social and existential problem—poor health, violence, lack of community life, teen pregnancy, emotional and mental distress, absence of

social mobility, lack of trust, low self-esteem and status anxiety, excessive consumerism—is a glaring feature of less-equal societies. To be sure, we can be smug that the US and Great Britain, in one data set and graph after another, are at the extreme edge of messed upness. But Canada, our home and native land—in one statistic and graph after another—squats somewhere in the uninspiring, mediocre, wandering the wilderness middle: neither horribly bad, but far, far away from the good, the healthy, the generative. And from what I can see, since moving here thirteen years ago, we've been drifting away from the moorings of our fair country for some time now. And it breaks my heart.

And speaking of hearts, and I mean this: don't ever let someone dismiss you for being a bleeding heart. Compassion and the crying need for economic justice and equality isn't for wimps. We're the realists. We see and know how things truly are, or should. It's the market fundamentalists, the religious apocalyptists, who live in a cloud cuckoo land of ideological unreality, and they're driving our nation and others into a ruin of xenophobia, distrust, environmental degradation, spiritual anxiety and economic immiseration.

Ring in, Glad Thanksgiving!?!—bell of grief and gladness? Perhaps, given what we're lived through these past forty years and are living now, we have come to see that equality, far from being what Mark Morrison-Reed called a near disvalue among Unitarians, we have come to truly reckon that it is at the very center of our care, our concern, our aspiration.

Let us, I pray, reach out and touch the moral arc of the universe of which the Unitarian Theodore Parker spoke nearly two hundred years ago, and which was echoed by Martin Luther King Jr.—reach out to that arcing, bowing thing under whose cope we would make a world worth living, and bend it, as they dreamed, and as we dream now, toward justice.

A blessing on us all, to each and to our families and loved ones, this Thanksgiving Sunday! That is my prayer, my hope. Amen