

Setting Out for Summer
Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson
June 30, 2019
UCV

There's this phenomenon called moral panic: a feeling of fear, usually ginned up by political and cultural elites, that some evil threatens the well-being of society. Sometimes, the consequences have been dreadful—like the going after so-called witches in late medieval Europe. Others, well, it was comic books when I was a kid; and later we've had hues and cries about explicit lyrics in rock and rap music, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and videogames. In the late nineteen teens and early twenties, it was new fangled cinema and packed movie theatres.

Almost a hundred years ago, Karel Capek, the Czech novelist, playwright and journalist sat down at the end of the year 1920 and wrote a short column for the newspaper called "Instead of Criticism." In that piece, he wrote:

"For the whole year I've been reading books and writing about them. Still, I wasn't able to write everything to my heart's content. And now I confess that I often suppressed what seemed to the most vital thing. I didn't always say what I really liked or what was alien to me." So in this column "I'm going to give away my own tastes—[as a critic]. I have judged others, now you can judge me. I'm not prescribing anything, nor am I prophesying a 'literature for tomorrow.' The literature for tomorrow will be done by the people of tomorrow, and no one needs to think what they should do on their behalf."

"Instead, with appropriate humility, I confess a rather low demand: try to find where the people are. They're sitting in picture palaces because something's going on there and because it thrills them. It's very easy to break out in harangues against this destruction of taste. But consider whether the people sitting in picture palaces aren't essentially the same as those twenty-five centuries ago listened to the songs of the Homer, to how the Achaeans and Trojans chopped one another up, how Achilles dragged Hector three times round the walls, or how Odysseus jabbed Polyphemus's eye out. For film, despite all its flaws, has one primitive advantage: it's epic...there's something going on, life here reveals itself in its raciest and clearest form—in

action...People want to be enchanted by heroism, by great and unshaken characters, by simple passions, by a strong and perhaps even fantastic plot...Their enjoyment is a fierce participation, a co-activity with everything that's going on...This is not romanticism—this thirst for powerful living...Indeed, if literature does not become epic again, it will be less and less popular. *For once, I think it would be worth [saying]...that what we need is something remarkable...that we need for our excitement great virtues and deeds, whole people, heroic action, miraculous fantasy and, in a nutshell, the great poetic art of a magician, capable of striking the rapturous spark of the unusual out of life.*”

I'm going to take those words and run with them. First though, it's true, this past year, I read some fairly heavy theology, science and history in preparation for worship services on sanctuary, spiritual insight, climate change, labour and capital in Canada and religious naturalism. I enjoyed what I learned—it accords with my tastes—and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share some of that here.

That said, I'd be lying through my teeth if I told you this is what gets my heart pumping, or what I race home to cozy up to on free evenings. *“Great virtues and deeds, whole people, heroic action, miraculous fantasy and, in a nutshell, the great poetic art of a magician, capable of striking the rapturous spark of the unusual out of life....”* wrote Karel Capek—those I've mostly experienced recently in re-viewing the final four Harry Potter movies—and what I think was actually a significant achievement: a compelling, epic story of young people coming of age. There've been Scandinavian and British TV detective series (*Trapped, Deadwind, Wallander, Endeavour, Collateral Damage*); I've watched German, Danish and Polish futuristic dystopias (*Dark, Rain, 1983*), quiet, under-the-radar movies (*Puzzle, Their Finest* and *The Bookshop*), and I'm looking forward to the third series of *Stranger Things*. (And I might as well add, it's a whole lot cheaper checking these out from the library or renting them from a video store, than going to the opera.)

Of all the experiences I've had recently with movies, what stands out in my mind is the 2018 Icelandic film called "Woman at War." The movie's director, Benedikt Erlingsson, calls it a "musical-action-art house-thriller"—and that only begins to describe this genre bending, visually stunning, audacious movie. "Woman at War" takes as its catastrophic subject matter nothing less than the despoiling human assault on mother earth, globalization, state-control media propaganda and the human tragedy of persons displaced by war; and yet, somehow, does it all with humane warmth, wisdom and humour that transcends national and cultural boundaries.

On the one-hand, the movie's quintessentially Icelandic: there's the breathtaking, rugged beauty of the land, a formidable hero who undergoes extreme trials of physical and emotional endurance, and kinship loyalties tried by fear, greed and the onslaught of modernity. On the other: the subject matter of "Woman at War" is ripped straight from today's international headlines—it has a truly universal feel. I think we could see Canada, or any number of countries and people, depicted in this film.

While not giving the whole thing away: we begin in a remote landscape with a lone woman knocking an arrow into a bow and letting it fly. The arrow trails a thin metal cable that lofts up over power lines strung between utility towers. The effect of doing this causes a massive short circuit which shuts down the works at a distant aluminum smelter.

And thus we are introduced to the hero of the movie—Halla, a bike-riding, 49 year old woman, magnificently acted by Halldora Geirhaorsdottir, whose day job is conducting choirs in Reykjavik, but whose secret life is direct eco-activism; activism aimed at stopping the massive sell-off and plundering of Iceland's remote wilderness plateau countryside to multinational mining companies. And she'll do this by just about any means necessary, including multiple acts of increasingly daring sabotage, clandestine meetings with a government dissident insider and

distributing leaflets spelling out the reasons she has resorted to direct action—actions that have made her an enemy of the state.

That's the thriller part of "Woman at War." We have conventional power held by government, the mining companies, and the media allied to selling off the land and exploiting its resources. And unconventional power; one woman, a couple of accomplices, the beauty of choirs singing Icelandic folk music, and the stunning beauty of the Iceland's wild countryside.

And yet, it's not just a simple tale with the forces of good arrayed against those of evil; we're not forced into one camp or another exactly. Halla's actions become riskier and more audacious. As they do, they also become more fraught and questionable due to unexpected developments in her personal life. This film could so easily have been an exercise in self-righteousness. Instead, it becomes a compelling meditation on the ethics of extreme action, the limits of nonviolence, the workings of democracy and how one responds to global threats to the environment, the economy and mass migration. And how does one respond to the needs of an orphaned child that may come into your life? What then? Can Halla continue to wage her environmental war?

Something I also have to mention, the film's serious subject matter is continually undercut with humour and an off-beat musical score played on screen by three musicians—drums, sousaphone and accordion—whose incidental accompaniment acts like a Greek chorus; they mediate between the action and audience, draw us into Halla's subjective states and lay bare her internal struggle between destructive and nurturing motivations and emotions.

This is such an unusual movie, and I've only scratched the surface of its beauty, off-beat depth, humour, plots twists and decency.

I don't think I've given too many movie reviews here on a Sunday morning; this one, though, "Woman at War, is worth it. It also happens to bring to life many of the topics and themes we've explored together over the year; things we grapple with personally on a daily basis, as well as those that scream from today's headlines that vex, challenge and inspire us on a national and internal scale.

Setting out for the summer? To be sure, I hope these coming months will be full of pleasure, hanging out with family, cool shade and cold drinks on hot days, blockbuster movies, books on the beach, trips to wilderness, water sports and hikes in the mountains—I think it's called summer vacation. It will take me more than a few days to slow down and settle into its rhythms.

Setting out for summer? Do we also need to remind ourselves that a crucial federal election is coming up in October, and that, yes, we're at crossroads? Our children and grandchildren are saying loud and clear that climate change/global warming is the number one, overriding issue in their lives. For the first time, though voted against by Conservative MPs, and though our government, to put it mildly, is sending mixed, confounding messages, nevertheless our House of Commons passed a motion declaring a national climate emergency and supporting Canada's commitment to meet the Paris Agreement emissions targets. And for the first time, a major national political party has placed an ambitious "Green New Deal for Canada" front and centre in its election platform.

You know I can't tell you how to vote, nor would I; but I can say, we can all say to ourselves, that this election matters and that we can do something about it. That this summer, in addition to enjoying its seasonal pleasures, will also see us doing our part to ensure that the people running for election to the House of Commons, no matter under which Party banner, hear

loud and clear that we're in a climate emergency and that we demand action from our government commensurate with this global emergency. We can write letters, make phone calls, lick stamps, canvass door-to-door, attend town meetings, demonstrate and act out—this and anything else that comes to mind, that agitates our minds and hearts, any thing that can move us to walk our talk so that come October, we'll look our children and grandchildren in the eye, and each other for that matter, and say: we did our part, we did what we could, and we'll keep pressing on.

I want to thank you for being the kind of people that I can say these things to. I want to thank our environment team for all the forums, workshops, worship services, organizing, communication and agitation; and to those of you who knew you had to cross the line: thank you. Just this past week, we've started meeting with the rabbi and environment team at Temple Sholom synagogue down the road to collaborate on education, mobilization and outreach efforts on climate change; and we've agreed on co-hosting all-candidates meetings dedicated to this topic. Stay tuned.

In closing, for the love of our children, grandchildren and generations to come, for the sake of other peoples' loved ones and kin; for the sake of the planet, its ecosystems and living things, and for all the tough fragile beauty of the world and its teeming web of life, as we set out for summer, may we be co-authors of an epic to be written, heroes great and small in the pages of its story. It could be us; this could be our epic tale, our story and legacy. May it be so. May it be us. Amen.