

SERMON

THE PERSONAL AND THE PLANETARY: Part 1

by Geoffrey R Usher

The Lawrence Lectures on Religion and Society were established to inquire into the nature and relevance of religion as it relates to personal meaning and fulfillment, to formulation of values and ethical commitment. The Lectures were associated with the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, California, where I gave the annual Earl Morse Wilbur Lecture in January 1986.

On 17 October 1980, Theodore Roszak gave the Lawrence Lecture entitled "The Personal and the Planetary". My sermons today and in two weeks' time are based on Roszak's Lecture, for which he took as a text a couple of lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins:

And what is Earth's eye, tongue, or heart else,
where
Else, but in dear and dogged man?

We begin by going back some three centuries to the period when the ideal of democratic equality first entered the political consciousness of the modern world.

Few of us today would question the great transformation in moral identity which first taught people to think of themselves as *equals*:- equal in dignity, equal in their access to the rights and goods of the commonwealth. That conviction holds an axiomatic position in our lives.

And yet, it was once a shocking and disruptive new idea.

From among the artisans and farmers, the housewives and the menials, there emerged enthusiast preachers and raggle-taggle prophets: god-intoxicated people who called themselves - or were contemptuously named - Ranters, Diggers, Quakers, Shakers, Familists, Fifth Monarchists.

In the eyes of the intellectual establishment of the day, the unlicensed theologies and bizarre Biblical speculations of these cults were both dangerous and ridiculous; they were the delusions of feverish, untutored minds.

They lacked sophistication, scholarship, culture. And, in fact, it **was** a pretty wild and woolly mixture. And yet, at the same time, there were the first politically conscious assertions of human equality, freedom of conscience, civil liberty, constitutional government, the inalienable right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

In their unauthorised Biblical readings and their sometimes alarming ecstasies, these sectarians had discovered the politically pertinent question:

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

It would be another century before that question would be taken out of the streets, and fields, the chapels and meeting houses, and charged with the energy of democratic revolution. By then, the absurdity of one generation had become the self-evident truth of another generation. The rough stones of the sectarian rabble

The old ideal of "The Rights of Man" have hardly been fully implemented anywhere on earth; but another political ideal has arisen: the rights of **the person**. Beyond the minimal level of democratic equality, people everywhere in our society now reach toward a sense of personal uniqueness that calls into question all the assigned identities of the past: identities of class, race, sex, ethnicity, age, nationality, normality.

As these new, individual and personal rights struggle to find their proper balance and stature, we can discern a new agenda of social priorities, that may salvage the best of the liberal and collectivist traditions and introduce us to a new quality of life: - a new quality of life that answers to the industrial / ecological crisis.

All of us have been touched by this transition of moral identity. We have been touched by it, and profoundly transformed by it, as people throughout the world have been transformed by the conviction of equality.

We find it easy to ask: Is this not what people have always known themselves to be? Have people not always seen themselves as persons - as unique events in the universe, as embodiments of unexplored possibilities, each born to a vocation that is uniquely their own, as a matter of right?

The answer is: NO. Personhood has never been the cultural property of people in general. Rather,, people in general have been the property of various collective fictions: tribe, class, nation, movement. Theodore Roszak claimed that:

Only such marginal types have dared to pledge their allegiance to an unprecedented and surprising destiny of their own making, a word never spoken before, an original gesture. Only these few - like the poet Walt Whitman - dared to sing their song of myself.

But now, increasing numbers of people have been infected by this ideal of the free and self-created personality, although perhaps it exists more often as a thwarted aspiration than as accomplished fact.

What *is* personhood? When do we begin to become "persons"? Roszak claimed that we begin to become "persons" when we

first experience a certain nagging sense that the world we live in just doesn't **fit**. When the jobs we hold, the schools we attend, the merchandise we are sold, the institutions that claim authority over us (the government, the corporations, the unions, the courts, the welfare system ... perhaps even the marriage and family that bind our deepest loyalty) - when all these come to seem crudely designed for everybody in general but for nobody *in person* - least of all us.

That's quite a challenging claim, isn't it?

Such thoughts may produce moments of anxiety and discontent; they may produce fleeting, private irritations. Nevertheless, they are signs that the great change of identity is at work in our lives, nourishing the thought that we have a right to be

We may speak of this longing for personal identity and recognition as "doing our own thing". We may decorate our desk or car bumper with the slogan: "I am a human 'being. Do not fold, mutilate or spindle."

Even with that sort of small gesture, we become part of an historical force that is eroding the institutional stability of industrial society. The recognition we want is more than the institutions of that society can give. The very private experience of having a personal identity to discover has become a subversive political force of major proportions.

In his book Person/Planet, Theodore Roszak spent a good deal of space illustrating the ways in which the personalist ethos expresses itself in our popular culture. His focus was mainly on home, school, and workplace, and on the development of what he called "a veritable subculture of specialised counsellors to deal with every least problem (or pseudo-problem) of life: family-marriage-divorce, disease-death-dying, sex and intimacy, parenting, careers and retirement, mid-life crises, stress management," and so on.

He claimed that this development is a response to the growing need for personal attention: our desire (even our demand) for someone who knows our face and our name, someone who will hold our hand, soothe the ache, listen to us sympathetically.

He wrote that if he had to name one sign of the times that comes closest to prefiguring a politics of the person, it would be the many "liberation" movements that have emerged in the leading industrial societies

In his book, he devoted several pages to cataloguing this great variety of what he called "situational networks".

He wrote:

It is a spectrum that shades off into some very subtle hues indeed: lesbian mothers, battered wives, impotent men, displaced homemakers, unwed fathers,. . . disabled transvestites, former cancer patients, even the terminally ill.

He made an interesting comment on these situational groupings, and what people find in them:

They find mutual aid and consolation perhaps a means of self-defence. But most immediately, they find confessional freedom, self-revelation, the healing affirmation of fellow victims. The situational group may be the one sanctuary in a big, busy, bullying world where people can come together to tell their tale, sing their song, and so find full personal recognition for all that they are as victims and (most importantly) for all that they are besides victims. In the situational networks, troubled and stigmatised souls help one another toward the self-knowledge that lies beyond shame, fear, failure, and the suffocating stereotypes of the world. The networks are a means of casting off assigned identities ... and of asserting oneself as a surprising and delightful event in the universe that happens only once and never again, a living concentration of unrepeatable history.

Think of that: Each one of us is a "living

In their celebration of diversity, they have helped to establish the powerful ethical principle that all people are born to be persons, and that persons come first before all collective fictions, even revolutionary ones.

Roszak warned that the identity he was describing - the identity of the person - could easily be mistaken for the sort of selfish, competitive individualism which dissolves all community between people and sets us against one another as rivals, as enemies fighting for scarce rewards: money, fame, status, power.

He wrote:

But that is the very identity which built this high industrial world - the identity of the robber baron, the bourgeois entrepreneur, the organisation man. And that is the world in which none of us can live as *persons*.

Personhood is *not* individualism; it is the antithesis and antidote to individualism. ... Both as a matter of psychological disposition and historical fact, personhood is an identity which has always reached out toward mutual aid - toward the intimate conviviality of the family circle, the neighbourhood, the Utopian experiment, the educational encounter, the monastic community, the ashram, the gathering of loyal companions who value and support one another's uniqueness.

Think of what has happened in recent decades, when black and coloured people, native peoples, gay people, women, handicapped/disabled people, senior citizens, mental patients, ethnic or religious minority groups, have

Those who have already achieved something of that freedom are teaching us that, when we look within, we discover, at the core of the personality, autonomous powers of growth, creativity and renewal.

It is an exciting quest. A society based on such an experience of self will be free of the kinds of psychic compulsions on which industrial discipline is founded. People who are whole and proud - people who have a clear sense of identity and worth - will not submit easily to the punishment or oppression of alienation.

They will demand too many rights in the world, to be kept subservient. Among the rights they will demand is the right to know themselves and to be themselves.

There is a question to be asked: Why?

Why should this be happening now? Why should we be part of this eager search for personal identity? Why should a need for self-discovery - a need that for so long belonged to an outcast and eccentric minority - why should this need for self-discovery be one of the prominent cultural forces of our time?

The answer to that question, suggested by Roszak, needs one more ingredient added to the social dissent of our time.

As our sense of personality deepens, our sense of ecological responsibility also increases. As we grow more acutely concerned for the sanctity of the person, so we grow more acutely concerned for the well-being of our planetary environment.

The rapidity with which this concern has taken hold is every bit as dramatic as the sudden unfolding of personal awareness in our popular culture.

Fifty years ago, few people had heard the word "ecology", just as few people had heard terms like "human potentiality" or "self-actualisation". Fifty years ago, how many national or state governments had ministers and departments for the environment? Today, we are accustomed to such departments, and to political programmes that at least profess to include the interests of wild things, the enveloping seas, the open spaces, the atmosphere.

It is not simply fortuitous that the dissenting temper of industrial society moves along these two fronts simultaneously - the personal and the planetary. There is a connection that unites the two movements. That connection becomes visible when we realise that **both** person and planet are threatened by the same enemy:- the *bigness of things*.

We, and our planet, are threatened by the bigness of things:

- the bigness of industrial structures;
- the bigness of world markets;
- the bigness of mass political organisation;
- the bigness of public institutions;
- the bigness of military establishments;
- the bigness of cities;
- the bigness of bureaucracies.

The inordinately large scale of industrial enterprise grinds people into statistical grist for the market place and the workforce. The same inordinately large scale of industrial enterprise damages our biosphere in a myriad ways.

To conclude for today, I want to read some words by Liz
Birtles which reflect this connection between the
personal and the planetary:

I am a part of the earth.
I am a part of the solid, unshakable,
Immutable rock
Of the mountain;
A part of the stark, rainwashed slabs of slate,
A part of the walls of wet and weathering gritstone,
A part of the crumbling granite of shining boulders.
I am part of what makes
The green rounded hill
With its splashes of laughing yellow gorse.

Through the earth I am aware
Of what I am:
All that is firmly fixed and endures forever,
All that is shifting imperceptibly,
Being gently folded and unfolded,
All that holds the possibility
Of shattering violence of eruption;
All that is contained in
Is, and Was, and Shall Be.

For such awareness, coming from the earth,
I give my thanks today
For the earth, and my part in it.

Amen.