

SERMON

"THE PERSONAL AND THE PLANETARY" Part 2

by Geoffrey R Usher

In his meditation "The Gathered Church", Leonard Mason wrote

Creative energy moves swiftly through space,
turns the cone of night to glorious morning,
t i l t s the season of the year to ripening.
Its power has poured upon our planet
t i l l rugged crust, toiling water and seething air
have brought life to stem and limb,
and uncertain thoughts flashing across the human
brain.

May we be instruments of that power
and shape the unfinished earth
into playgrounds of peace
and homes of quietness.

Two weeks ago, my sermon was based on the first half of the Lawrence Lecture on Religion and Society, given on 17 October 1980 at the first Unitarian Church of Berkeley, California, by Theodore Roszak, on the theme of "The Personal and the Planetary".

In that sermon, we considered the great transformation in moral identity which has occurred since the mid-seventeenth century: a 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.

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.

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 thrown off their subservient and guilt-ridden mentality and asserted their natural identity in the full pride of personhood. The ethos of self-discovery is the same quest for liberation pressed forward to its limit as a universal assertion of personal uniqueness.

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.

As I said two weeks ago, 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.

why should this need for self-discovery be one of the prominent cultural forces of our time?

The answer to that question, suggested by Theodore 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.

A hundred years ago, few people had heard the word "ecology", just as few people had heard terms like "human potentiality" or "self-actualisation". A hundred 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, said Roszak - it is not simply fortuitous that the dissenting temper of industrial society moves along these two fronts simultaneously - the personal and 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, he said, 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.

Often, the real culprit in the environmental emergency of our time is the world industrial economy as a whole as it races toward global integration. We have an economic style whose dynamism is too great, too fast, too reckless for the ecological systems that must absorb its impact. It overloads the planet.

Only now are people coming to see that the scale of things can be an independent problem of our social life, a factor that may distort even the best intentions of policy.

It has taken our unique modern experience with public and private bureaucracies, the mass market, state and corporate industrialism, to teach us this lesson. People have learned that human beings can create systems that do not understand human beings and that will not best serve the needs of human beings.

I remember a member of the Sydney Unitarian Church in the 1980s claiming that it was right and sensible for us to exploit the earth's natural resources in any way possible, because the resources were there, we had the ability to exploit them, and future generations would, no doubt, develop other and more sophisticated technologies to enable them not only to exploit the resources in other ways, but also to repair any environmental damage caused by us.

His reasoning seemed to me a perfect example of "Blow you, Jack! I'm all right!"

It is of course tempting to translate the person/planet connection into E F Schumacher's familiar slogan "Small is beautiful". Smallness clearly plays a central role in this transformation. But small must mean personal. Unless small means personal - unless small embraces the ethos of self-discovery - it will be no solution to our problem.

This is why the search for humanly scaled institutions cannot be construed as "turning back the clock". In the past, things may have been smaller, but they were rarely personal. Rather, the institutions that governed life were stubbornly, relentlessly grounded in enforced identities of class, sex, age, race, caste.

Remember: Small as they were, the city-states of the ancient world were slave societies, and fierce bastions of male, military supremacy. The sweat shops of early industrialism may have had small-scale, "appropriate" technology, but they were agencies of brutal

But if that marriage is built on assigned, enforced sexual identities, it is likely to become an ugly and oppressive relationship. Wherever personhood is not respected, Sartre's dictum holds true: "Hell is other people" - even in a small room and among only a few companions.

This, said Roszak: This is the missing dimension in E F Schumacher's economics. This is the main reason why Schumacher never worked out a calculus of "right size". He certainly perceived that small is necessary, but he seemed reluctant to admit that small may not be sufficient. Something more needs to be added, if we are to make proper use of the humanising opportunity that small-scale operations can give us.

That something more comes from beyond the realm of economic analysis. Small, de-centralised patterns of life need to be infused with the insights of humanistic psychology and personalist philosophy, with what we have learned from the art and the vision of the modern world.

Schumacher's economics can be best seen as the ethical middle term between the global ecological emergency and the crisis of the human personality - something he only began to touch upon in his later work. Perhaps he would eventually have worked towards a new, non-material criterion of growth:- towards something which can only be found in the cultivation of the person.

We need to remember that "appropriate" scale is not necessarily or ultimately a question of size or

Imagine the Earth as a sentient being. Imagine the Earth as a sentient being, capable in her own mysterious way of intelligent adaptation for the sake of defending her life-giving mission in the universe. You may want to take that model as no more than a metaphor, or a convenient hypothesis. Or you may want to take the image deeper than poetry, deeper than theoretical convenience.

You may want to take the image into what Roszak called "an intersection of the mind that blends science and myth, fact and feeling, objective accuracy and subjective conviction"; and what Liz Birtles, in the meditation with which I finished my sermon two weeks ago, described as "All that is contained in Is, and Was, and Shall Be".

Suppose, said Roszak, reflecting on that image:

Suppose, then, that we and the Earth who mothered us out of her inert substance are indeed bound together in a single organic pattern within which it has been our special human role to be the planet's risky experiment in self-conscious intelligence. Suppose the main purpose of that experiment has now been achieved: the creation of an interdependent global society that promises physical security for all and a world-cultural synthesis. Finally, suppose - as is all too apparent - that the planet's prime need is now to restrain our technological and organisational violence so that all her endangered children might live.

She digs deep into our unexplored nature to draw forth a passion for self-knowledge and personal recognition that has lain slumbering in us like an unfertilised seed. And so, quite suddenly, in the very heartland of urban-industrial society, a generation appears that instinctively yearns for a quality of life wholly incompatible with the giganticism of our economic and technological structures. And the cry of personal pain which that generation utters is the planet's own cry for rescue, her protest against the bigness of things becoming one with our own. So we begin to look for alternatives to that person-and-planet-crushing colossalism.

(Isn't that a powerful concept: "alternatives to that person-and-planet-crushing colossalism"?)

We search for ways to disintegrate the bigness - to disintegrate it creatively into humanly scaled, organically balanced communities and systems that free us from the deadly industrial compulsions of the past.

Roszak's "humanly scaled, organically balanced communities and systems" seem to me to have at their heart what my friend Robert Storer had in mind in a meditation he wrote some years ago, entitled "Laws":

Let us recall the laws that direct our society,
Rules that are essential for family living,
For living as citizens on our communities in this

Let us recall the spiritual laws that transcend all
written codes,

Laws that operate in the hearts of all human
beings,

Laws that speak to the human conscience in terms
of charity, kindness, sympathy, compassion.

Help us each day to be strengthened in ways that
will increase our acts of generosity and of
service.

Help us to continue to seek better ways of knowing,
and to be able to act on what we know for sure.

Thus may we honour all members of the human
race and ourselves.

I want to finish with the final paragraph of Theodore
Roszak's lecture, "The Personal and The Planetary":

After our long, strenuous industrial adventure, we are
being summoned back along new paths to a vital
reciprocity with the Earth who mothered us into our
strange human vocation. But she summons us now, not
by way of an external image or graphic symbol, but by
way of the deep self, out of the underworld of the

troubled psyche. And her name this time is *OUR* name ---
yours, mine, his, hers, all our names, and for each of
us the one name we have freely chosen for ourselves.
The needs of the planet are the needs of the
person.

The rights of the person are the rights of the
planet.

Amen.