

14 February 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

How goes the battle with your New Year's Resolutions? Have lassitude and listlessness defeated your inner resolve? So far, my Firm Resolution not to have a List of Resolutions is holding up rather well. I got ahead of my 'inner listlessness', you see, by having no list in the first place, so it had nothing to attack. Sometimes it's best to admit defeat before the battle begins, rather as Oscar Wilde said the best way to get rid of a temptation is to give in to it.

Fitter, Happier

But we're on the cusp of Lent now, that forty-day slog through the cold, empty desert of self-denial (minus the Sundays) until we arrive at Easter's festivity, rejoice in our Lord's Resurrection, gorge on Cadbury's Cream Eggs – and bask in warmer weather too, one wants to hope.

Some like to reboot their New Year Resolutions when Lent arrives. Others make new rules for themselves. They're all about Giving Up Things That Are Bad For You, not just Cadbury's Cream Eggs but Using Unnecessary Capital Letters. At the very least, Lent is a chance to pull the unwanted weeds that have lately sprung up in our souls.

Sometimes, though, we can't tell which ones are weeds. That's why those magazine articles and self-improvement books with garish titles like, "Seven Steps to a Better You", or "Five Financial Problems and How to Avoid Them", or "Ten Miracle Foods You Need to Start Eating Now" are so popular. They claim to know the problem *and* its solution, and isn't that what we need to live a better life?

Maybe. Maybe not. My late friend, Chris Vais, once gave me an album by English British band that calls itself 'Radiohead'. (If you're over sixty and under forty, you may never have heard of them and may never want to.) "Listen to this," he said with a crooked grin. I did.

I remember a song from that album whenever Lent rolls around, though to say it's a 'song' is to stretch that word's definition. It's nothing you could sing or dance to, but it can get into your head like an 'ear worm'.

It's called 'Fitter, Happier', and it makes mordant fun of those magazine articles and book titles that promise to tell us everything that's wrong with us

and how to fix it. While a piano plays notes singly and idly, without any discernible tune, a synthesised voice, sounding much like the late Stephen Hawking's 'computer' voice, reads a long list of Rules And Things To Improve Upon.

It begins this way: "Fitter, happier, more productive, comfortable, not drinking too much, regular exercise at the gym, three days a week, getting on better with your associate employee contemporaries, at ease, eating well, no more microwave dinners and saturated fats, a patient, better driver..." And so on. It ends with these more disturbing words: "Calm, fitter, healthier and more productive, a pig in a cage on antibiotics."

Don't those last words suggest we may be mistreating ourselves the way we mistreat the animals we slaughter and eat? What dark and troubling vision lies behind our self-improvement schemes, our self-help lists of rules, our resolutions to be "fitter, happier, more productive"?

They all envision the 'game of life' as a series of tasks and tests, a set of problems in search of solutions. To play the game well is to solve as many of these problems as you can. To win the game is to solve every last one of them, consecutively, and land with the flair of a gymnast's gold-medal routine.

"Be born, be schooled, get a job, get a better one, get a spouse, get a house, have a child, have another one, get a bigger house, get a pet, get a cottage, get a hobby, collect stuff, travel, be liked, be admired, amass wealth, make a will, retire, die at home, be celebrated, now tally up the scorecard."

A perfect ten!

But isn't there an aspect of life, a depth and richness of meaning we're capable of, that can never be written in words on a list, never be won like a game, and never be fixed like a problem? Perhaps the 'good' life is not like a gymnast's difficult routine after all, nor a series of problems in search of solutions.

What then?

Problems and Mysteries

The French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, made an important distinction between 'problems' and 'mysteries'. They're not the same.

Puzzles and riddles are problems. So are mathematical proofs, crossword puzzles, and how to get the red wine stain out of the white tablecloth. A car mechanic furrowing his brow to diagnose the strange rattle in an engine is solving a problem; so is an engineer calculating the lengths of steel required for a

new bridge, a child figuring out a riddle, an economist arriving at an optimum level of taxation, and a surgeon excising someone's cancer with a scalpel.

Many problems excite our interest. Others not so much. That's just as it should be, given our varying talents and evolving interests. I never paid much attention to crossword puzzles and thought they were only for 'boring people'. Then, a few years ago, I discovered the fun of 'solving' them – or trying to. (Wait a minute. I haven't become a boring person, have I? Don't answer that!)

But an already-filled-in crossword puzzle in a dentist's waiting room attracts no one's interest. Once it's solved, the problem itself dissolves like sugar in a hot cup of tea. It's gone, and that's that. With nothing left to puzzle over, the pleasure is gone too. Our interaction and 'dialogue' with the problems a crossword puzzle contains ("If 7-across is 'quiescent', could 7-down be 'quincunx'?") dissolve with the puzzle's complete solution. So does our interest.

In a similar way, a 'whodunnit' movie is never as fun to watch if you already know 'whodunnit'. So, rather than watch it again, we wait for 'Whodunnit 2' to come out. For problems, once they're solved, bore us. We need fresh ones to replace their pleasure. Advertisers know this.

But some things never tire us out and their pleasures never wane. Many of these are truly *mysteries*. Mysteries maintain their fascination. The fascination may even grow in intensity and engage us more deeply, getting more interesting over time. Mysteries can *never* be 'solved'. If they could, they wouldn't be mysteries. They'd be problems. The experience they enable feels endless, their meaning bottomless. Like the 'spring of living water' Jesus promised the Samaritan Woman at the Well, their wells never run dry.

Many people feel this way about art and music, books and plays, aspects of the natural world, and long unscripted conversations with close friends. We're drawn to the mystery that comes through them. We love them more and more.

Their poorer examples may bore us sooner or later, that's true. Perhaps they're deficient in creativity, or they depend too much on a tired-out formula. Or maybe *our* capacity to receive them isn't up to the task. A snide proverb says, "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, but poor minds just gossip." Like a weak radio signal carrying a tinny sound, the 'poorer ones' offer a feeble experience of the 'mystery of being'.

I have a friend who collects original paintings. It's impossible to find a bare patch of wall in his house; they're all covered in art. I can't make sense of it all, but he can – or claims he can. I can't be sure, for these kinds of experiences can

scarcely be put into words, and I'm the feeble one. "A good painting is like a good conversation," he once told me. "I can look at it again and again and again, and it keeps on telling me something new, and showing me something I hadn't seen before."

But this is what people say about good *music*, too, and good stories and poems, and people they love. They don't behave like problems asking to be solved so they can be set aside for good. The 'better' they are – that is, the more they partake of those eternal values theologians used to call 'truth, beauty, and goodness' – the more they have to tell us. They call us to a deeper dialogue with them. For 'mystery' meets us there; it is an aspect of the 'mystery of being' itself.

We must say this about people, too. Each of us, finally, is not a 'problem' to be 'solved' but an inexhaustible mystery to be cherished and witnessed. That is a religious insight. Sorry, Secularism; though you live off its legacy, you can't claim it as yours. This religious insight predates, by many millennia, every 'Declaration of Human Rights' passed by any government on earth, and it's the unacknowledged source of those declarations.

We can be problems to each other. Sometimes we solve them. We often 'use' each other as solutions to our problems, as the means to some other end. But the nourishment we need and owe each other is deeper and more enduring than any of that.

This is why some friendships endure. "Love never ends," St Paul claimed, as he tried to fathom love's mystery. Such love is 'an end in itself', and self-renewing. For friendship's purpose is the pleasure of friendship itself, nothing more. Conversation may wax and wane, and friends may 'fall out' with each other, yes, but the only terminus many friendships will ever know is the event of death itself.

Giving up on Being a Problem

Problems are solved with knowledge and technique, but mysteries endure. They can never be solved, so they can never truly end. They can only be experienced and contemplated.

Perhaps, when Lent arrives on Ash Wednesday this week, we could try an experiment for forty days (*plus* the Sundays). Rather than looking upon our lives as Problems to be Solved with Stern Rules and Improving Resolutions, by trying harder to be "Fitter, Happier", or by Giving Up Things That Are Bad For Us, we

could instead give up on seeing our lives *only* as a series of problems to be solved.

Are we not more than that? Beneath every passing problem we experience there lives an enduring mystery, whose source is the mystery who alone endures, aka 'God'.

If we were really (which is impossible) 'to solve all our problems', what would there be left to do? But let's shift the question slightly. If we were, truly, to be 'saved' by God, what would *God* have left to do? More to the point, what would *we* do to keep ourselves busy, walking around all 'saved' and such? Or would we even do that? If we're nothing but 'problems', and if problems 'disappear' once they're solved, wouldn't we disappear too?

Perhaps the Church was never meant to be a way for people to solve all their problems. It's pretty clumsy at that anyway. Perhaps the Church was always and only meant to acquaint us with an experience of the mystery that each of us is, to make us aware of its presence in each other, and to acknowledge its source in God.

Annual Report

Along with the Common Worship service for this Sunday, I'm also attaching a copy of the Annual Report for 2020. A big thank you to everyone who had a report to prepare and contribute, and also to Karen Russo, who assembled it all. We're not able to meet and adopt the report this year. You know why. But next year, we pray, we will.

If you would like a printed copy of the Annual Report, or if you know someone who does, please let your Elder know. He or she will request one from the Church Office and make sure it lands in your hands.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew