

26 July 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

When a curled-up cat rises from sleep, its first move is a big stretch. Mine is too when I waken from a 'cat nap'. Like the frond of a fiddlehead unfurling, a good stretch extends our bodies in space. It says, "I'm awake now. I'm happy to be alive. I will fill the space I need to live. I belong here."

A long stretch feels good. Our whole being expands, not just physically, but mentally and spiritually. We need this.

'The Room of Little Ease'

There's an old torture chamber in the Tower of London. Its occupants were locked into a space too small to stand up or recline in. They could crouch on their haunches, but they could never stretch out their bodies. That's what made it torture. They called it 'The Room of Little Ease'.

It has its modern variants, both physical and spiritual. Many people find themselves squeezed into a cubicle all day long, or locked in a car for a long, slow commute, or tethered to a monitor in a hospital bed, or trapped in a windowless waiting room while FOX News trumpets its damned falsehoods. Their bodies cry out, "Let me stretch!" Their souls shout, "Give me the space I need to live! (Or at least turn off FOX news, would you?)"

Grinning evangelists of the gospel of technology say 'virtual space' is the better place to be. "Haven't bodies jammed into physical space *always* been the problem? 'Virtual' space is the solution. Forget about the body. That's so 20th century. On-line life is Manifest Destiny! 'Zoom' saves us from having to pack all our bodies into one place. Virtual presence is better than *real* presence. We can 'Zoom' all day from the cottage. No need to get together!"

But I've suffered those counterfeit 'get togethers' in 'virtual' space. A meeting of minds absent physical bodies gives me spiritual claustrophobia. Also, a headache. There's no room to stretch. 'Zoom' is a 'Room of Little Ease'.

Thanks a lot, Covid.

Puritan Fears

Not to be outdone by this secular faith in new technology, an unworldly kind of religion would also lock us into a 'Room of Little Ease.' It, too, frowns on

the body. It denigrates its pleasures, the 'long stretches' that feel so good. *Too good*, it says. It would amputate those bits of worldly life that refuse to fit its 'Procrustean Bed' (Google it).

This kind of religion is 'one size fits all', but only in the sense that *we* must shrink our lives to fit *its* one-dimensionality, rather as we must warp our interactions to greet each other in the cramped dimensions of 'virtual space'.

"Only *spiritual* feelings are holy," it says. "Physical things are profane, including this body and the pleasures of 'stretching' it."

Like technological dreamers, this kind of religion would rather we didn't have bodies at all. "They decay and wear out. Their demands are as chaotic as undisciplined children. Salvation is the soul's escape from its bodily confinement into an immaterial realm; or maybe uploaded to 'the cloud' if you prefer a virtual afterlife. Life-in-the-body was never meant to be happy anyway."

Puritanism flirts with this kind of religion. The American satirist, H.L. Mencken, defined it this way: "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

Christianity knows this is a foolish heresy, even though it sometimes falls for it. But Christianity can never wish away the body. It remembers God's Word becoming 'flesh' at Christmas and proclaims a 'resurrection of the body' at Easter. They're moments of supreme joy.

Who is Jesus Christ, after all, but the divine life inhabiting a human body, stretching it to its full expanse and glory, making the space *we* need to stretch and live in? No, 'spiritual' and 'physical' can never be separated, any more than minds can think without bodies, or bodies move without minds.

Doesn't every celebration of a sacrament – and 'celebration' connotes joy – show this to be true? A sacrament, according to an ancient definition, is "an outward physical sign of an inward spiritual grace." A physical sign is something 'outward', just as our bodies orient themselves outward. But a spiritual grace feels 'inward', as our minds and souls feel inward too. Stretch the body and the soul feels its pleasure. Feed the soul and the body is pleased.

The 'good life' happens, surely, when bodies and minds, 'flesh and spirit', outer life and inner, cease their perpetual warfare and recognise their need for each other. Then we have room to stretch and expand our being. Maybe this accounts for yoga's popularity, and Tai Chi too.

Our hidden selves ask to be stretched and seen; our best inner thoughts clamour like a dog at the door, begging to be let out. There's an 'I' inside our

bodies, an engine of potential wound up as tightly as a spring. It wants to unwind, to 'play itself out' in the living of our lives.

Shouldn't a good religion aim at *that*? Gerard Manley Hopkins said as much in one of his poems:

"Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*"

In other words, we belong here. And we have a duty to be ourselves and not someone else, to deal out our 'indoor being'. There may even be joy in it! But for that, we need room to stretch.

"Summertime, and the living is easy"

'Indoor being' makes me think of Canadian winters. (Stay with me. This is a segue.) Long ago, winter was a time to hibernate indoors. People huddled by the fire while furious blizzards raged without. The harvest was safely gathered in, the fields asleep under snowdrifts, the lake's surface frozen solid. Frost made intricate tracery on the windows.

Introverts are 'winter people'. They're not necessarily shy or socially awkward. They're just able to close the door on the world and draw near to the flame that lies within each of us. They're not afraid to spend time there. They know how to be alone with themselves. They return there often to rewind their inner spring. 'Indoor being' is a way of being with our selves, to dream, imagine, and think. Winter is a gift that way.

Extraverts defrost the windows with hot breath, the better to see outside. They flip the calendar's pages, as if to hasten summer's advent. For with the expansion of our 'indoor being' in winter, our outdoor lives contract. If summer never came, our intramural life would shrink to the size of a 'Room of Little Ease'. Extraverts are the first to feel this. They're anxious to awaken from winter's long sleep, to stretch, release their inner spring, and 'deal out' their indoor being, like a fly fisherman casting his lure.

Isn't this why Canadians take to the 'great outdoors' every summer? Even in this summer of Covid? Which, despite my introversion, is just what I'm about to do.

This will be my last pastoral letter for a while. Like a proper Canadian, I'll be away in August, heeding summer's call to the extramural life. I'll paddle my

father's canoe in northern waters again, walk in the woods, read some books in the shade of an Eastern Hemlock tree, observe chipmunks quarrel and play, swat flies, listen to loons at sundown, lift my eyes to the stars at night, watch our cat stretch when she awakens, and probably stretch myself. Then yawn.

I know. It sounds pretty introverted after all.

In pre-pandemic days, there would have been a guest minister in the pulpit each Sunday. But that can't happen this year. Still, it's a minister's first duty to provide the means for public worship each Sunday and Holy Day. I am busy right now preparing material for *Common Worship at Home* during August. I will pass it along to Juel Howse-McLean. She has kindly offered to ensure that it lands with a resounding 'thud' in your email inbox on Saturday evenings.

The earliest day we can hope to be back in the sanctuary of Elmwood is Sunday, 13 September 2020. But that is not certain. The Session will have to decide when the day approaches, based on the latest data, best medical advice, and our own preparedness.

I'm anxious to hear Angus Sinclair at the organ. And we must still celebrate Lorraine Clark's retirement and thank her from the bottom of our hearts for her years as Elmwood's accomplished organist and choir director. When we do return to our sanctuary, whenever that may be, we won't be allowed to sing right away. But we will pray and hear scripture in the *real* presence of each other, and of God, and be glad.

Keep Al McLean and Bill Booth in your prayers. And each other. I will too. If you need a minister while I'm away, let the Church Office know. The Inimitable and Reverend Keith McKee, of St George's Church, will be on hand in my stead.

And Now for Something Completely Different

Haven't I wandered widely today? This missive is light on stories too. I know not everyone likes this heavy theological talk as much as I do. But my mention of Canadian winter made me remember a story, so I'll tell it now.

When I lived in England, I had a good friend from Africa. We would go on long walks in the countryside and talk about study and reading and writing and work, and what the heck was Lash banging on about last Friday? Sometimes we stopped by a rural graveyard to pay homage to Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century.

In Africa, my friend had polished his English by listening to the BBC's World Service. He spoke well, with a delightful, heavy accent. He could quote from memory portions of the Complete Works of Karl Marx, which he owned, translated into English, running to many volumes, and published in Moscow. Upon hearing *him* say it out loud, I too wanted "The Workers of the World to Unite!" We also visited Marx, or what was left of him, on a trip to Highgate Cemetery in London.

Before coming to England, my friend had been an activist for a banned political party, back when Zimbabwe was still Rhodesia. He got himself imprisoned. Would Her Majesty's Border Guard allow him into the U.K. today? Not likely. My point is this: he'd already packed much more living than I had into the short span of our youthful lives.

But he knew nothing of winter. He'd never seen snow. He had no idea how cold 'cold' could be. One day, on one of our walks, it began to snow. Suddenly homesick, I told him about toques, scarves, parkas, woolen mittens, mukluks, and skating outdoors.

"Skating on ice? Like ice cubes?" he asked. "I have heard of this. How does one make the ice for this skating?"

"We don't *make* it," I said. "We just shovel the snow off a lake or pond, and there it is. The water is frozen all winter."

"What? No..." He laughed. "That is not possible! How cold is it?"

"Well," I said, "You have a little fridge in your flat, yes?"

"Yes! You have helped yourself to drinks from it!"

"And your fridge has a freezer in it, where you get the ice for your gin and tonic, yes?"

"I have furnished *your* drink with ice from there too!"

"Well, go home, open the little freezer and stick your head in it. *That's* how cold it is, all the time, for at least four months of the year, my activist, African friend!"

For a slender moment, he was bemused. Then he threw back his head and howled with loud laughter.

"Hah! You almost had me there!" he said. "You and your Canadian nonsense stories!"

Yours in the faith,
Andrew