

WHAT AM I DOING UP HERE?

Unitarian Sermon delivered - Oct 23, 2011

By Tom Weisz

Good morning and hello.

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I think I'll try to answer the third question.

I am honoured and petrified to be here today. Truly, no-one is more surprised to see me up here than I am. First, other than in my professional capacity, I have no great comfort in public speaking. Second, I must ask myself, just in case you're not doing so, what the heck am I doing in some place that calls itself a church, presuming to speak? After all, I am an unrepentant cynic, who has over the years come to believe that while many individuals might well be fine and good as individuals, groups and organizations, especially when tied to a specified and common belief system, are uniformly a potential, and very commonly a literal, danger. So how to explain why, of all the options, has this one particular place become my choice to stand up before you all, doing something like this for the very first time?

First, please allow me to outline my convoluted journey to here and now - it is a considerable part of the answer.

Born in Hungary to survivors of the Holocaust, I came to Canada during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. We came to Canada, a land of refuge, as refugees.

I grew to adulthood in Montreal, in La Belle Province, cheering for Les Habitants, Nos Glorieux, Les Canadiens de Montreal, at a time when it was still the standard routine for the priests to preach at Easter time that it had been the Jews that had crucified Christ, and all that followed that belief. I learned that in the 1930s, after only Germany, Quebec had the largest Nazi party membership in the world. It was only in the 1960s that McGill University stopped having an openly quoted Jewish quota. Lest we get smug around here, I have also learned that Biggar, Saskatchewan was the Canadian center for the Ku Klux Klan, and that the Klan is presently active in Regina and Calgary, at the least.

I have seen Pulitzer Prize winning photographs of Hindus or Muslims bayoneting each other during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1972. I have watched over the years the rise of the Protestant Fundamentalist movement, when books entitled "God Wants You To Have An SUV", and other such were sold in the front lobbies of mega-churches, even as our planet's temperature rises through our actions.

I vaguely remember hearing about the deaths of First Nations people at Wounded Knee, and in June of this year read about a group of faithful First Nations Christians on a reserve in Northern Quebec who burned down a sweat lodge because it offended their beliefs, despite the sweat lodge being used to help their own people reduce their drinking and other harmful behaviours.

I have learned some of the sad history of the residential schools, created in the name of God to bring a new civilization to a people who already had one.

And I still see some Arab states and other organizations calling for the eradication of Israel and all the Jewish people, and increasingly overt examples of the old anti-Semitism all around the world, and the State of Israel still taking obviously unjust actions in the name of its very survival.

And let us not forget the most recent atrocity, the targeted massacre of those young adults in Norway, yet again because of the fear of and therefore loathing of those identified as “the others”. Even if we can agree that the immediate cause was the psychopathic nature of one individual, it was the expression of a commonly identified and openly expressed hatred that was his trigger.

This is an important point, because even crazy people are connected to their historical time and environment. I recall a psychotic young man I once worked with, who believed that the unknown “they” were speaking to him and giving him directions from outer space through the satellites, which they then channeled through the television sets to him, telling him what to do. Think about the specifics of this young man’s psychotic point of view - this particular expression of madness could not have existed a hundred years ago - there were no satellites or even TVs then (yes, children, it’s true. And no internet either - there were barely telephones and they were all on land-lines!).

These examples have ranged across many of the belief systems that we are all familiar with, and I don’t doubt that with a minimal effort we could find many more. The sad old joke used to be that only the Buddhists were truly good - if they became sufficiently upset at what someone was doing they **would** kill - but only themselves. And the Buddhists have their own issues of getting along.

All these evils I have just spoken of are based on the belief, held equally firmly by each one of those groups, that only they and their fellow believers have the singular specific answer to the question, “What is God”. All of these atrocities, stupidities and inanities are based on the concept of “The Other”, one who is not us, therefore to be feared, hated, judged and, if at all possible, eradicated.

So, I have come to rather firmly believe that I have earned my cynicism honestly. Sometimes I think that it can only be the blood of my father flowing in my veins, who despite his personal tragedies was the most cup-half-full individual I ever knew, that keeps me from forsaking even

the concept of the possibility of finding goodness, or at the least an absence of direct malevolence, in the world.

So, what exactly am I doing in some place that calls itself a church? And why here?

The first time Chris and I came here was to listen to a topic of interest to us both - to be honest, I no longer recall what it was. I came somewhat reluctantly - as I have said on many occasions, I'm not much of a joiner, but Chris was interested in the topic, as was I.

To my own vast surprise I felt comfortable and welcomed. Not simply by the individuals here, which I had no difficulty accepting, but also by an organization that had made a deliberate, conscious decision to specifically consider how to welcome those such as I. And I was welcomed not because I share a history or belief with all of the others here, but precisely because I don't. Here I have felt welcomed for what I have to bring, for good or ill. Here, to my vast surprise, the roots and cause of my cynicism have been understood, sometimes even shared, and more importantly, challenged. Here, the phrase "yes, I see what you're saying, but..." is welcomed. There appears to be no singular meaning of God held here - each individual's understanding is just as likely to be correct, or not, as anyone else's, and all the possibilities are equally deemed valid. Here, more than anywhere else that I have wandered, I have found that being "The Other" has made me welcomed, not shunned.

There are some quite specific reasons why I so celebrate this welcoming of those so often and easily defined as the "Others". As I had mentioned, I am a child of Holocaust survivors. The murder of the Jews, as well as of the Gypsies, homosexuals and anyone else not on the Nazi OK-for-this-week list, is an extreme, but historically hardly unusual use of otherness to justify atrocities. Yet in the case of the Jews, and so many of the others, what was it all about - just an unshared belief, a different way of life, a different faith, or a different amount of melanin in the skin. Faiths, religious or otherwise, can be so closely clung to that there are always those who are prepared to kill or to die to prove the worthiness of what is, after all, simply one out of the innumerable choices of particular sets of shared beliefs. And all of it unprovable, unknowable - the very definition of faith.

My father's faith in religious belief did not survive the Nazi work camp that he survived, but somehow his faith in humanity, in people, did. He had been raised in an Orthodox household in Tet, a small village in western Hungary. By the time the Hungarian Jews were being rounded up he had married and had a child, my father's daughter, my sister, and neither she nor her mother survived. It is a peculiar aspect of my own thinking that I have long realized that I owe my very existence to the death of my father's family.

My father spoke of his war experiences only once to me, long after I had already formed my own opinions. He told me then, that after what he had seen and experienced, it was impossible for him to accept or understand how, if the Jews were indeed the chosen people, much loved by God, they could have been so obviously abandoned by the aforementioned Almighty. He found the world had been too cruel, too haphazard, too arbitrary, to accept the idea of an all-

seeing, omnipotent, omnipresent supreme being. Some survivors found that their faith had been strengthened through their experiences, but my father was not among them.

Even so, somehow, in spite of all that had happened to him, my father remained one of the most “glass-half-full” individuals I have ever known. Perhaps it was his ability to find, recognize, and accept love and hope that nurtured his innate optimism-- for he remarried and went on to a long and deeply loving marriage. Not to mention, of course, the unmitigated joys of having my sister and me, who were, it goes without saying, exemplary children. At least I was, as I recall.

After my mother’s death, when my father was already 95 years old, he moved into a Jewish seniors’ residence in Montreal. He was a rarity - a male in good mental and physical health for his age. Often he would be called upon to help have a minyan, the formal requirement for 10 adult males to be present to be able to hold prayers. He never hesitated to go, despite his personal lack of faith. And I know why, and this might yet be the central secret of it all. He went for community. He went to support the people whose lives he now shared. He found it agreeable to be useful to others. It gave him, even so late in life, purpose and satisfaction. I hope that I might be echoing my father yet again - here, in this place that calls itself a church, I may have found a community where I am comfortable, where I can fit, and even though we don’t share a single, central God-belief, we do share many other beliefs and hopes.

When I was a young man I had taped to my bedroom door the two works we just heard. John Donne’s “No man is an island entire of himself...” serves to remind me that I do not live in isolation, I do not stand in isolation on my individual island. I need, am needed by and share a responsibility to a larger community, however I choose to define my community.

Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” reminds me that decisions have a price, yet freedom demands that decisions will always need to be made. And sometimes the price is discomfort with the unfamiliar, in getting out of our comfort zones.

So it was, that when Liz put out the call for volunteers to speak here, I didn’t manage to clamp down quickly enough on the voice inside my head that said --- put up or shut up.

And that, in brief, is how I have ended up [here](#).