

## Another Year to Help End

There is a book by Hannah Arendt called Men in Dark Times. If you overlook the sexism in the title you may find the book in a small way enlightening.

The book deals with the lives of those few extraordinary women and men who have made the twentieth century a not-altogether-dark era in which to live. As such, the book is of some considerable interest.

But it is the book's cover, not its contents, that interests me here. The cover designer could have made it a large Van Gogh sun shining brightly into the corners of darkness. S/he could have, in other ways, indicated the power of love in its battles with the love of power. But no, the designer indicated an understanding of the frailty of truth and kindness and the battle to just keep the darkness from snuffing out entirely what few specks of illumination there are.

This recognition of the odds against peace prevailing in a world of violence has been painfully beaten into me this year--perhaps into you as well. I have been forced to view social change and voluntary kindness as far harder and far more rare than I had previously thought.

You see, I had believed in the power of truth to challenge the power of privilege and might. I had believed that in such a contest, truth would, in the long run, have a good chance of emerging triumphant. I believed that those who HAVE could be helped to realize the moral rightness of sharing radically with those who HAVE NAUGHT. I believed that nonviolence could disarm those who live by the sword and the nuke.

I still believe that such sword-into-plowshare hope is possible. I just feel the chances of it happening are far smaller than I had ever foreseen.

Unrequired kindness, deep-felt and unselfish, is a rarity. Lives of sacrifice for those who suffer are few and far between. Heroes often turn out to be less than we thought.

But worse--it is very hard to affect another person's heart in a positive way, to awaken a concern for the poor and wounded, to make alive an understanding of our connection to the planet and all its inhabitants.

We try, some of us, and that is perhaps the best that can be said of us. That we tried, and failed mostly. That we succeeded, but rarely.

But perhaps something more can be said of us. Perhaps we can be said to have failed well. Yes, I said perhaps it is a virtue worth learning, to fail well. Perhaps worldmending is a profession available only to those who are able to fail, and fail, and fail again. And yet, in a torn world that continues to tear in so many places, to continue to remember the importance of healing. Perhaps we are little more than people who carry with us the memory of a better place, a place where children are not starved and poets are not tortured and people who care not shunted aside as irrelevant.

In Fahrenheit 451, a future is portrayed in which books are burned and small, marginal groups try to keep the books alive by memorizing them. Perhaps it is our socially irrelevant task to keep alive some ideas in this dark time--ideas of equality, justice, kindness and peace.

If the message for those of us who cared in the sixties was to be "relevant", then the message for those of us who care in the seventies is to be irrelevant. Irrelevant to advertisement executives, stock brokers, school principals. Perhaps it is a time to not fit in, a time to refuse to be embarrassed by our ragged clothes in a world of correct fashions, a time to stand up for all those foolish things that have no use (no potential for personal financial profit), things like feeding the hungry and healing the sick and freeing the captive. In a world where money speaks, perhaps it is time to learn again the virtues of silence and voluntary poverty.

Some friends in Detroit have set up a Catholic Worker house there to feed and house the poor. Their newspaper is called "On The Edge", a phrase taken from a talk by Thomas Merton about the role of the monk in modern society. Surely an activist is a kind of monk today. According to Merton a monk is a marginal person in today's world, someone who doesn't fit in, someone irrelevant. In short, such a person is on the edge. And sitting on the edge can be painful.

The Uruguayan military police use a form of torture called the sawhorse in which a political prisoner is forced to sit, naked and hooded, on an edged bar, with the feet hanging a few inches from the ground, the bar cutting into the groin. Surely being an activist or person with social conscience and open heart in the United States today is much less painful; but just as surely, the edge leaves its mark.

Perhaps it is the difficulty of living with a wound constantly being reopened by being on the margin of society that has left so few on that edge. And that solitariness for the remaining few no doubt cuts deeper yet.

So one takes off a while from the rigors of confronting horrors; we heal ourselves by the hearth of friendship and nature; we engage in quiet contemplation to find again the footpath that has been overgrown since last we ventured into that peaceful place. And then we return to try worldmending again, and we fail again, and again and again, and sometimes some small greenings take place, barely noticeable at first, but important and even vital, hidden beneath the winter snow.

I have doubted some this winter of a year (perhaps you too), and have been wounded some this year, and have yearned for freedom from conscience some this year. But in the end--well, I guess I still believe it is possible for people to not go hungry, for nations to not go to war and for classes not to exploit. I still believe, it seems (perhaps you too), that the world can be made more gentle, and that at least we must try to help that peace along.

Peace, and other responsibilities,

Dan Hirsch

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