

# THE SEVEN SONGS (TALES OF TOM THE TEACHER)

*post-pandemic probing into what is ultimate?*

**How do you put life together? Does an ancient manuscript resonate with the big spiritual themes playing in our world and restore the lost symphony?**

*"So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly" - Ecclesiastes 7v25*

His name was Tom and everything in his diary was cancelled.

Shut down, lock down, people down, systems down, countries down – and all in a fragile day. A familiar world was consigned to history. Present lives were swiftly transported into past lives. Nothing like this had been seen in our world. Of experience to offer shutting the globe down like this, there was not even a hint. There would be no way back to before the world changed. Vaunted power to control things were to him as pretence and arrogance.

A cloud hung over the planet, like the threatened mushroom cloud of yesteryear. This was not missiles but microbes. The blue and white world was shrouded in courageous despondency, fighting blindfolded a deadly enemy you couldn't see but which nevertheless debilitated millions, slaying its thousands and hundreds of thousands in mocking disregard.

Humankind had become aware of disquieting vulnerability. Viruses were a process; only alive in cells it shares life with. They outnumbered us by a million times a million and more besides stretching towards infinity. And now one was alive inside us, restlessly reproducing.

So how were its unsuspecting human hosts faring with a challenge so profound? A long-lasting heightened sense of unease among the public would be a scarring experience affected them always. A generation would lose a year of schooling. The young would expect to earn less in the future than they might have done. Told to stay inside, older ones worked from their kitchens or just hid. A route map through the world lay now in tatters at our feet.

To try to hold ourselves together, we wanted to recapture what was lost.

Since he was five years of age and gone to school, Tom had heard that there were things to do. Hurry up, hurry up, fill up, catch up: such had been the only life he knew. We were locked into success and dominated by exam results. Through school and the years of toil, a steady drumbeat had pervaded his core and drowned out all before it in a victory parade. It began earlier than ever. 'He who dies with the most toys wins'. But now there were no toys to win and no laurels of victory to be gained. The restless urge to produce had come face to face with a brick wall. Tom was unmoored. Fixed points there were few; habits were broken.

He had been deeply immersed in a way of life that was a speed and noise culture for millions. The wheels had been turning with dizzying acceleration. So fast it was that if there had been no e-mail reply within 24 hours, he wondered what was wrong; for texts, compression of time and expansion of expectation was yet more pronounced. Produce,

produce, produce – it was a restless imperative, a defence against both void and destitution. The wheels suddenly stopped; now the bitter- sweet ingathering of memories.

Memories of a world he had left behind left him strangely orphaned. Those times were fast receding into the distance: times of party and playing many parts; times of journeying, venturing, travelling as if into the sunset of dreams; times when one client had gone and the next was here. He had always been a joyful man, fizzing with freshness. But for now there were no parties, no journeys to be made; no clients to come.

He rejoiced in the candles of celebration that everywhere lit up the darkness. In those days, we cared, we cooked, we created and we clapped. Covid thrust us apart; love drew us back.

Yet despite the strained horizons of lockdown time, there was something radically missing. We had come to live inside a bubble with those around us. A bubble; an ephemeral sign of transience: the pandemic had found us out and pricked our bubbles.

How to bear calmly the things that happen to us – ah, that was the question. How to use the unclaimed hours was a puzzle; a puzzle to be solved. Cultural nourishment there was plenty; contact with family, friends and those he had laboured with in toils of time – that was at first a blur of virtual activity. One day he would sing with the Song Thrush – but not this day, for that was but a dream of the night. Films, music and books reminded him of a world that had been eclipsed but to which he would one day return.

There was one particular book that began to draw him and then to draw him in. It was a book that, though laden with the feel of an old scroll, lay dormant with life on the shelves despite being unread for half a lifetime. One day, he took it down. He was in it (so too was everyman, every woman and the child of our times).

*"So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly."*

For a while, the mystified man pondered what these words could mean. He read on. He read back. They said that the sum of human knowledge could be placed on one disc. What would happen, he mused, if you played the disc and sought to discern plot and pattern? Would anything make sense? Maybe this ancient scroll had the clue to the strange tale of existence.

Gradually, mysteriously, Tom sought to find out more. He was drawn in through the tunnel of an old book you could brush aside unread into a cavern of height and depth that took his

breath away once the meaning was given to him. Tom began to be profoundly moved by unsuspecting impetus to share with the people the jig-saw map wisdom of the Creator.

How do you put life together? That was the question. What did the people say was ultimate in a world where safe certainties were ripped in sunder in a single afternoon and the whole world was unmoored?

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We had come to the third decade of the third millennium.

On the threshold, humanity had celebrated with parties to end all parties. The wine flowed, congratulations flowed, well-wishers endowed their fellows with smiles while fireworks, hugs and bells hailed in the new time. There were scenes in abundance, set to dismiss anxieties and, amidst public rejoicing, eat drink and be merry. But the full quote was left unquoted, many songs were unsung and the mood of festivity could not completely mask the inner trembling that crept out at the dawn.

Dark clouds of human-doing warming and shrouding the planet in a hot burden of eco-concern- this was not how things were meant to be!

For it was not merely with some sense of tension that humanity came to the new millennium; it was rather with fragmentation and a longing. What people were longing for, few seemed to know. Dismissed as a nostalgia, caricatured as a fantasy of childhood, something needed to be re--captured.

Pieces of a jig saw begging to be arranged lay scattered for lack of a big picture to consult. And for want of a map of meaning, travellers stumbled on their journey. Everything was dissolved into compartments but there was nothing to say what they were compartments of. The world lay broken into seared fragments of a tapestry but no one could remember the lost tapestry or how to restore it. A vacuum yawned.

Old and trusted maps of meaning were yielding to the disorder of a fragmented world. In politics, in culture, in the economy, technology and in the shifting sands of human identities, nothing could be relied upon, nothing was certain. TV image production dominated air we breathed. Arts were experimenting with radical new designs. A revolution had taken place in sexual mores and gender relationships. Intimate bonds assumed shapes and patterns that were always moving, rarely at rest.

The modern programme had left the human spirit bereft, like an un-adopted orphan. Human concerns and ideals of love, truth and honesty were split away from the real world. The world of science and the world of mind, spirit and experience lay sundered in the dust. For 300 years, the modern programme had played endless variations on hopeful themes such as belief in progress and an optimism that rational, civilised thinking would straighten out a world rid of superstition. But now the old narratives lay under a cloud of suspicion as power-plays in disguise. They still used the terms 'left' and 'right' but these were hackneyed and old-fashioned; fluid, badges of convenience rather than banners to rally round. The old symphony of science, technology and triumphant progress was still playing but much of the packed gallery had gone off in search of another concert.

In the concert next door, everything became an item for consumption. Spiritual fulfilment drove the agenda. The map had changed. Fewer people were in church. Religion seemed to bind people into doctrine, institutions and rituals while spirituality connected them to a journey of faith. Far more pursued a vagabond relationship with the stars. Beliefs and truths must now be re-constructed by the individual using new tools of imagination and intuition. Hard and fast statements had been replaced by story and symbol. Purpose had been ousted by play; cold reason by warmth of emotion and spirit. A new consciousness was emerging where ambiguity and feeling were strangely at home with high-speed technology. In a post-ideological era, politics was dominated by personality and debates about method. Old answers were relegated to yesterday's news read by yesterday's men.

Survivors looked out on a landscape that had changed. Everything was uncertain except for the certainty that uncertainty would prevail. Having jettisoned the old confident world, the loss was bewildering. Between new and old lay a great gulf over which played the sound of a lonely requiem. The distinction between this and that was washed away. Old male--dominated hierarchies had lost automatic authority. Markers between fact and fiction, image and reality, past and present had been eroded. You had to construct your own reality; make your own choices. Morality was what you felt you should do in a particular situation. Distinction between subject and object had dissolved. There was no longer an external world to observe. Absolutes were over. The relatives had come to stay.

And though locked down for now, Tom felt he was on a journey, a journey that traversed the many contours and landscapes of his life. In his hand was a Book, the Book of the Creator's

wisdom. Wherever he went, he would open the Book and speak of the message he found within its pages to the unmoored people of his time.

But he would not only speak but listen; listen with ears attuned to the background music, the large themes that play in every life and in the life of the world. As he did so, he felt that the music of the world resonated with the themes of the Book, the songs that the people were singing or that they yearned to sing. The Seven Songs were answers to seven ultimate questions that had formed in his mind that he was tuned into amidst blaring cacophony.

As he posed these questions and heard the songs of fragmented, wistful human experience it came to him that he was hearing the news behind the news, the underlying aspiration of things and the oppression under the sun. He would venture out awash with impressions vying for attention and for supremacy.

Was there anything that could respond to his questions and bring the Seven Songs together? And two answers became clear to him in a moment of profound clarity. The Book in his hand resonated deeply with the music of our times. And only the Book could re-create an overarching vision of life and harmonise the Seven Songs he had heard creating from their themes a mesmerising new world symphony.

Or was that the right question to ponder? He would go and seek resonance with the people but he was now attuned to the dissonance; the jarring jaggedness, the police-siren grating that shouted that something was wrong. Having heard the cry and sigh, he knew he would work not merely to address uncorrected injustices but try to end the injustices themselves.

It was time to go. Tom was filled with compulsion and compassion. Nothing would be the same for him, or indeed anyone who lived in those strange times when time and the wheels of the world suddenly stopped. He knew now he need not fear the void. And when the globe began once more to spin, what made sense now? What was needed in the post- pandemic world was a convincing framework that took in the stars, exhilarating array of clear skies, nature under a cloud; of uncertainty, unimaginable complexity and all human experience.

For now, what had he learnt? What was his vision of the world? Is there a supreme power guaranteeing a unity in things and a direction to events; a single story making sense of the impotence and vulnerability of existence? All this he would ponder deeply.