

The Second Song

The Song of the Riddler and the riddle

“Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher. What gain have the workers from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” (1v2-3)

“For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under the heaven. A time to be born, a time to die.....”(3v1)

That year when the world was brought to an end was an opportunity to see things differently. We thought we could handle all life threw at us.

Whatever view we have of life, its puzzle- the apparent lack of discernible plot and how we navigate its twists and turns – has to be embraced in what we consider ultimate.

For Tom the Teacher, this strange assortment of sounds stood in subtle contrast to the glorious notes of wonder in the First Song. It was, however, a definite theme he couldn't help but pick up everywhere he turned a questing ear.

Uncertainty's peculiar puzzle

In the next town, Tom laid out the pieces of a very large floor puzzle.

He bade his audience come and try to put the puzzle together. Some succeeded but many failed for there was a piece missing. With what seemed to be a picture all but complete, Tom came and scattered the pieces.

“Uncertainty”, declaimed Tom the Teacher sonorously: “uncertainty”.

“At this time, uncertainty lies thick on the floor. Our customary habitat is to be in control of our lives. It is the story we tell our children: ‘plan for the future’ for then we can look out over the order we create and say that it is good. The merits of planning are what are instilled into us in the workplace. Then comes the unknown unknowns. How will we fare and prepare in the day of the scattering?”

“Surely, the scattering will find us out”, said Tom with sadness in his voice.

“When all our safe certainties and confident knowledge about the navigation of life can be torn asunder in a single day, what then shall we do?”

First catch the wind

“Nothing’ said Tom, ‘nothing is done that hasn’t been done before. Not a single thing that will happen to us this very day hasn’t been tried”. It is vapour; it is but smoke and wind.”

It was a puzzle to him to have stood back and just watched. He had watched sun, wind and rivers- fulfilling their wonderful task but with nothing to show for their constant motion. Day after day he had pursued the sun across the time of day – only to find it had crept round while all was wrapt in darkness to catch him again the next morning. Time to repeat it again.

The more things had changed for him, the more they felt the same. The old ways resumed. He was anxious that all our fine resolves for fine new beginnings would curve back. “You whose appetites are unbounded”, urged Tom the Teacher, “do not consult the skulls in the graveyard. Create a hunger for something better!”

Money, pleasure, knowledge – it had all been tried; many, many times. Tom had sought repeatedly to bring satisfaction into his life. But in much wisdom there had been but vexation. He had chased satisfaction. ‘There it was, there it was!’ but as soon as he had caught up with it to encircle with hands and heart, it had been but virtual reality. For many years he had invested in his work, trying to find something significant. But that too eluded him. When would he ever find a good return on his investment? What did he have to show?

So take things at ground level. Look at everything under the sun and only from an earth-bound life. Where then shall we find a vantage point and larger perspective? What a curious contradiction he found. The people he felt most for during the crazy year were the young. Older people had learned to cultivate greater resilience. A minute enemy smaller than a dust particle affected the minds of young people; living in a universe that’s already out of their control. The certainties counted on to give the world order had been blown to bits. How do you navigate life? The toll on the equilibrium needed to sustain life and learning was colossal. We will be picking up the price tab for many years.

“Well-organised ones: rejoice in your self-sufficiency – but only for a while”. Re-mixed millennials were finding no coherent account of meaning and purpose. Disillusioned with the tradition of their parent’s and alienated from the hard limits on personal desire.

“For now, yet attracted to certainty and totalising truth, long live individual and intuitional freedom for it must not be questioned.. You have not lost your faith: you just don’t think it’s important to worry for.

“Until recently, so, so, recently, you no longer feared to secure the basic necessities of life. Health, travel, education was as safe and reliable as daily bread, give or take a few vagaries. But now vagaries have come to roost. So what is the rooster’s riddle? It is to chase the sun.

“The impermanence is sent to mock us. And then comes the reckoning. ‘Then I considered all that my hands had done’. There are no values and nothing permanent if we are not there to value.

“Life is not a detective book to read and keep reading until we get to the end and the end of the puzzle as if getting to the end of life and finding you have never truly lived. It is not

death you fear so much as that peril! What we think will make us happy leaves us longing for more. So keep struggling with the problems of life and existence for that is the journey.”

If the First Song was a theme that called him to soar with wonder and leave the restrictions of the mundane world; the Second Song was trying to decipher the jingle-jangle of a trick; a puzzle of a song that made you wonder what on earth? Try as he might he couldn't put the notes together; solve or resolve life's inconsistencies. Tom the Teacher knew that one day he would be a distant image on someone's occasional screen, an archive reference in cyberspace or a name on a grave two or three generations later forgot to visit.

“Self – exploration? You are on your own now? Where's the map to put our world together”, he cried. The people couldn't deny that at a level deeper than the life of the mind, they had responded –or not as the case maybe – to life in a certain way.

“We're tired of a sardonic rationalism and the props being the centre of the stage. We're tired of the materialism that's blighted our life and of being entertained to death and. The constant stream of visual images and endless stream of sound comes our way, twenty four hours times seven. Still we are not satisfied. There has to be something less fleeting”.

“It's spiritual thirst,” said Tom the Teacher. “The ordinary stuff doesn't work anymore. We need more and more, like sailors who drank salt water and died with a raging thirst. What we really need is fresh water. We are like those who keep coming back to the party thinking that is where we must have left our coat. It must be here somewhere!”

The Riddler and the Riddle

It was the end of an April day, the kind of day that makes you feel summer has arrived. With the sun low in the sky, a crowd of people had gathered. "The world is full of riddles", Tom proclaimed. And he proceeded to tell a few riddles and do a few tricks. Nothing complicated. Just quickness – of – the – hand deceives-the - eye - tricks.

"But I show you," he said, "the greatest puzzle of all.”

Slowly at first but gathering pace like wind brewing, he drew out a puppet, walking round and talking as he went. The puppet wore a female face that stared uncomprehending at the people.

"What is a creature that struts and frets its way on the stage, leaving a litter of wounding words, wounded relationships and warring nations? Who is this mystery, so alive in consciousness, so aware of himself, the millionaire and the vagabond of the planet?"

"There is a being that cannot come to terms with itself. Yearning to express itself but not wanting to be what it is. Concealed behind a thousand ideals. Harboured innumerable contradictions in its inner being; unsure where to go to be free from them or to untie the knot. Who or what is he?"

Some of the crowd stared at him. Others opened a door in their mind.

"And who is this who asks the question? Who is it, so conscious of wonder, so tortured with the lonely questions of existence? Who is this who even dares to pit himself against the vastness and claim significance?"

"I show you 'the riddle and poser of riddles.'"

"See this curious little creature: a citizen of two countries. Embedded in this world but relating upwards, seeking the other country from which she sprang; to which she will return. A little creature, forever seeking to find herself; forever fleeing from herself; forever drawn upwards, forever trying to release herself from the lure of the light, forever aware of inner contradiction, forever denying it".

The puppet put its hands over its appealing little eyes.

"But can we shut out the questions inside our head by blinding ourselves? Tormented by the unrest of continuing questioning, we are tugged by the immediacy of a connected life, haunted by the Eden-search for simplicity. Who will explain the mystery of why we are here or who we are or why we deceive ourselves into thinking we have worth? Who will solve the riddle of the being of value and maker of tools?"

"But why is she a little creature? It is because she has been reduced in size".

The puppet looked doleful.

“Human encounters have lopped several metres off her stature. But still she carries with her, in the teeth of indifference, acts of mental defiance that sing out a song of Protest”

“Now look more closely. She does not have a name. She is one of the nameless ones who inhabit our globe, a blue and white world where the personal and impersonal fight out a Manichean struggle with every passing day.”

At this, to the horror of the audience, Tom the Teacher paused and proceeded to peel off the face of the puppet. All that could be seen was a blob of fluff where a face used to be. The audience gasped at such poignant audacity. And Tom told a tragic story of nameless people who were looking for their faces. Tom playfully pushed it around with his foot. Would the puppet succeed in recovery of its face?

Tom the Teacher took up a lament for the Faceless. It was the face of ordinary people v faceless elites who control things. We are not now shaped by honour and dishonour (losing face), right and wrong (a marred face) but voice and choice (a bid for the recovery of face). Recognition through being seen and heard again lies before us. Response to ‘faceless’ forces , the globalists, the administrators or bureaucrats, was of a piece with ‘faceless’ robotics stealing people’s jobs or immigrants who cover their face. It drove things. The very facelessness of the ‘shouter’ gave permission for unprecedented abuse.

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The Producer’s tale

The life of the Producers came to a screeching halt one day. Their labour had begun to be extended to more and more types of work. Everywhere, the demand was for more, more in ever increasing varieties, shapes and sizes. The Producers cracked the whip, demanding ever increasing output, output, output. Scientific management became fashionable. Workers were given smaller and smaller bits of the machine to work with. For many, this was the chance to earn. For most it was tedious drudgery softened by a monthly pay packet and the camaraderie of the canteen. Workers became extensions of the machines.

Workers fought the conditions in which they were expected to work. Men and women bolted to the factory floor for so long, de-humanised were rising up in indignant protest. Something about the way human beings are made had been ignored. To keep up, companies were obliged to make the wheels spin faster and faster. Its workers on the treadmill had to run just to keep up. Then assembly lines were dismantled.

As time went by, the Producers had tried to ensure that every enterprise pursued vigorous value for money. Multiplying status was to become the elixir of life to generations of professionals, anxious to achieve recognition. The world of health and education began to be affected by the tireless demand for output, output, output measured by performance and results. No area of human expertise, welfare and work was left untouched. The cosmos was run by Accountants, aiming at the markets, selling units; always units, more units.

But the Consumers were reacting too. Being treated by impersonal forces did not suit them any more than the workers. Were the Producers still in charge? Or were Consumers now calling the tune and paying the piper? To entice people to buy the products of their ingenuity that flooded the markets, the Producers enlisted the help of the Persuaders. The Persuaders formed a group of three Marketeers: swashbucklers all amidst heroic scenes of print, film and electronic media. And so advertisements acquired sophistication amidst the flickering images of television.

Consumers reacted against a lack of faces and names they encountered amongst Producers of administration. The Producers were by no means one group. Fiercely competitive amongst themselves, they had to sink or swim in a larger pool. Everywhere, local Producers were faced with the tidal wave of global markets.

But in the melee, something had happened to the Consumers. Locked in this dance on a spiral staircase and calling the tune, impersonal forces had subtly invaded. Acquiring objects and multiplying things and images within the boundaries of themselves, they had become enlarged and subtly altered. Their faces had changed.

In the shopping malls where people walked to worship, the multiplication of things moulded us in the image of god. Insatiable desire for money, fame and power; our envious and obsessive need to win in the high-stakes game called life converted us into anxious human cash machines. When acquiring objects had become the business of life, when our sense of

self was heavily invested in objects, objects had been taken in and become part of us. A monetary scale became the Judge of life. Children were shaped in a culture of material competitiveness. Other people were productive if they had use - value. Efficiency rules the world! It was an attitude woven from the same cloth worn by both Producers and Consumers in their mutual dance.

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Chasing the wind

Tom searched for an antidote to the craziness of a world that persists in eroding the value of its people. "Can we ever understand what goes on in our own heads?" he wondered.

He became bemused by the arms race. A lady began to tell him about the impressive things she was doing. So impressive was it he felt unclothed. He became aware of the drive to tell her about all the life-changing things he was doing – and then he pulled himself up short.

Wasn't this how the script usually went? We are moulded by a persistent urge to go compare (ourselves). For there were at least two of us. We fake ourselves, adapting the results until we have a self we like rather more.

"Persona, non grata", Tom exclaimed. "Which persona would you like to have?"

'Define success', Tom urged. Of all short-lived products, success seemed the most fleeting. After all, if the office dies, how will young people get on in life?! Tom took the ancient manuscript and read of its challenge to the sons and daughters of the earth-bound life.

"I enlarged my works. I built myself houses and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I built reservoirs to water my groves of flourishing trees. I accumulated for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.....Anything my eyes desired, I did not deny myself. I refused my heart no pleasure. For my heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour. Yet when I considered all the works that my hands had accomplished and what I had toiled to achieve, I found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind; there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

This was, Tom argued, wrapped around with being heroically masculine. On paper men were a success. Yet so many were unhappy when they had nailed life's goals. Why the obsession with being successful? 'Stop the madness', Tom implored. 'Stop the madness'! Vanity and futility! The obsession with exam grades. The ephemeral lure of material success – it is chasing the wind. Men defined it for men.

And so saying Tom read again from the ancient manuscript. It was his story and that of many of his hearers that windy day.

"So I set my mind to know wisdom and madness and folly; I learned that this, too, is a pursuit of the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow, and as knowledge grows, grief increases."

'When will the education dawn?' Success is subjective.

"Have you not yet learned? The joy you seek lies in the searching, not the finding. And then it is gone. Such is the wind. And such is the rain."

'Look at the rain!' Tom urged. 'There is no new creation of water. The waters emptied themselves on a thirsty soil and flowed into the sea before being sucked up again. Of the water of happiness, no new springs are discovered.' Evaporation! all was evaporation.

It was the question that had haunted him since sitting in that tree all those years ago, watching the late-night dance of the stars. "Is there anything out there that corresponds to what's in here?"

Could there be any kind of an answer to the puzzle?

6

How do you spell 'life'?

"What do we get from all our toil?" asked Tom. "The extra degree of wealth does not yield the extra joy".

“He who loves money is never satisfied by money, and he who loves wealth is never satisfied by income. This too is futile..... As a man came from his mother’s womb, so he will depart again: naked as he arrived. He takes nothing for his labour to carry in his hands.”

“When will our hearts cease from vexation?’ they asked. “What is the terminus of restlessness?”

“The needle will not cease from flickering”, said Tom. “Not now, not soon. Too many certainties have been thrown into confusion for us to settle on that for which to rest”.

“We seek and we find. Then we toil again for we are nowhere near the prize”.

Tom told the people of an ancient play that had stood the test of time and was still doing the rounds. Despite the original script not being followed, the actors went on, oblivious and unaware. Generation after generation, the drama had been acted out, in every society and every continent. Every village, town and city had its own version, coloured with local flavour and costumed with the clothing of the day. But the actors rarely looked at one another to ask 'is this supposed to be in the script? ..should we be saying this?'

“And I saw that wisdom exceeds folly, just as light exceeds darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I also came to realize that one fate overcomes them both. So I said to myself, ‘The fate of the fool will also befall me. What then have I gained by being wise?’ And I said to myself that this too is futile.”

"There is" said Tom, "a cry at the heart of things, a sob of anguish wrenched and torn from human life. A planet is in pain like a jagged peak rising with unbowed contrast amidst gentle hills, an abrasive surface where to rub the hands brings sharpness and discomfort".

"We live in a land of such contrasts, where gentleness and jagged roughness live side by side and where beauty and pain are intertwined. For the world is abrasive to the human spirit and to rub against others is to reel with the discovery of an unexpected sharpness. Amidst the good and the kind, how did the blue and white planet become an arduous place, a world carved out of an inhospitable wilderness, so friendly to human life, so unfriendly to itself?"

"We begin with a cry; we leave with a sigh. The entrance is a door of immense struggle and difficulty to be born, before bells joyfully proclaim the end of the ordeal. The exit is a lonely

soul dying in discomfort, attended by raw, hurting people. Between entrance and the exit comes the land of contrasts, the land of ashes and delight, of joy and mourning, litter and flowers, of grime and colour".

And so saying, Tom read from the Book of the Creator's wisdom. "Those that come to me shall never be hungry; those that come to me shall never thirst".

But now he produced a giant scrabble board. The letters tumbled out of a sack that was rusty brown. Tom invited someone to make up a four-letter word puzzle.

"So how do you spell 'life' probed Tom the Teacher?

"Many of you spell 'IF'?"

"Ah yes the perplexity of living in a conditional tense. The 'if only' comes back to haunt. If only I had taken a different pathway. If only my older self could communicate with that self. If only I had not embarked on that relationship or taken that job, had that tattoo – how different things would have turned out."

Tom the Teacher read from the ancient manuscript.

"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun, and have found them all to be futile, a pursuit of the wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted."

"Or try this one" exclaimed a passer-by. She had spelt 'LIE'. The sadness in her tone and face spoke of lies that had all but broken her years before.

"I think" said a young professional, "I prefer to spell it 'FILE' for so many messages steam-roller their way into my in-box and texts. So many demands on me with insistent call."

"You need to handle the gift of time", said Tom the Teacher. "How you navigate life relies on wise use of that precious endowment, given to us moment by moment and day by day".

Tell the time!

"Find what is urgent. If you desire that work will give you purpose then to know task from task is the pathway of the wise."

Tom reminded them that they were made for 24 hours to a day, seven days to a week. 'Busy' was a badge of belonging; the incessant hamster-wheel response of the feverish. Where had all the hours gone every day? Why so many seemingly washed down a drain?

"Have a day of rest. You can't do everything. Sort out priorities. As the Book says, 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it well'. But be sure to include time for reflection and prayer. Step off the pedal. Be more laid back. Take regular exercise. Take time for people. Neglect of relationships is a sign of burn-out. Make space for music or for reading to nurture your weary soul. Find somewhere, anywhere, those times when you can slow right down in protest against a world that speeds up rather than filling your days with accomplishments."

"Learn to tell the time" urged Tom. "Be attuned to THE moment and not multiplicity of moments. Find when the tide comes in and the river swells."

And he read again from the ancient book.

"For what does someone get for all the labour and endeavours at which he toils under the sun? Indeed, all his days are filled with grief, and his task is sorrowful; even at night, his mind does not rest. This too is futile."

"For what have been our moments and our days? What is the meaning of life in lockdown or the Big Interruption that holds a mirror up to this strange flow of days we have lived at this time? When it is time to stop or when we are forced to by health or Government: what is life for? Whatever you were planning to do with the rest of your life, make cautious plans."

That struck home to his hearers, unmoored and bobbing about on a restless sea. Many felt powerless; in the inevitable grip of circumstances their control.

"You had felt you had life sorted out" said Tom with compassion. "You had found the skill of living but not for strange times. You thought you knew how to attend to your labours; how to arrange a holiday. But what do you do when the strong wind blows from an unexpected direction and the earthquake comes to shake the whole world that is now falling apart?"

And he read for that last time that day from the ancient book. It was a text everyone seemed to know.

*To everything there is a season,
and a time for every purpose under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to break down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to count as lost,
a time to keep and a time to discard,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.*

These were opposites that took in the sweep of their curious existence: birth and death, the weeping and the laughing and all the emotions that lay in between. Both halves together told a truth of existence. They knew of the time for such things. They knew of the time to take a job and a time to retire; a time for reflection and a time for action. They knew of a time to gather and a time to scatter. They knew of the day of their birth and the other date, known only to God, when they would leave the confines of body, of earth and of all time.

But Tom read on.

What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden that God has laid on men to occupy them. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom the work God has done from beginning to end.

“Seek reality in what lies beyond the reach of time and change”, urged Tom. “Find and hold brilliant moments for they may be signposts to the full picture.”

And so saying, he held up the back of a woven picture that made little sense by itself. For the reflections and the actions were not only what the people did, they were what God did. They were of things unpredictable; beyond our restless hands to control. Our real masters were the events that pitched us from one activity to another leaving us unfulfilled. Many there felt a map of meaning had been held up to them. But it spoke only of a Second Song.