

THE THIRD SONG

THE SONG OF THE THREEFOLD CORD

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour. For if one falls down, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to help him up! Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one may be overpowered, two can resist. Moreover, a cord of three strands is not quickly broken” – Ecclesiastes 4v9-12

Wanted: a re-discovery of social solidarity and connection. In politics, can we ever get beyond the angry polarisation that divides into the mutually uncomprehending and disconnected bitterness?

Strangers previously invisible began working together to provide help for the elderly or those not on-line. It happened virtually overnight. The experience of many was that they had never felt more connected to their community. Previously they might not have known their neighbours very well. It became common to share resources and information. There was widespread recognition that many would be lonely and virtually incarcerated, unable to get out and talk to the person at the check-out.

It is the close relationships people have that determine the strength of society. Where human relationships and social bonds are weak, society is weak. Every capitalist society in the West probably creates millions of people who are affected by the modern issue of loneliness and isolation. Whatever view we have of what is ultimate has to include the cry of the human heart.

Getting beyond polarisation

In his continuing quest for the larger story that can give meaning to life, Tom was becoming baffled. Looking for answers was one thing. But why were people so angry with each other?

“Tell me bubble-dwellers”, he wondered out-loud “if our political persuasions reflect how we see the world, who taught us to see things so differently and with such angry contrast?”

“It isn’t us”, he was told. “It’s the other side. We are the straight-seers. We tell it like it is”.

“There is no such thing”, Tom argued. “Where you stand is shaped by where you sit. It is your experiences and the media you imbibe for breakfast, lunch and dinner that reinforce how you were carefully taught. Safe in your bubble, you find other bubbles of those who think the same way. And so we are kept from dangerous education of different thinkers.”

He asked the same question in many towns and cities. “Why so negative about other views? Can we be content to allocate a role of knave or fool to those who see differently?”

For it had struck him in dramas of the day how those roles were assigned so sharply. In the great bifurcation, the other side was a tool of evil. We were unable to see any virtue in the other side and so we contrasted our righteous sanity with purveyors of ridiculous argument.

“You say you are logic possessors but do not see that you think with emotion”, Tom argued.

“Yes but we really do have right and reason on our side” he was told repeatedly.

“But that only shows the lens you use,” Tom insisted. “It does not mean you see straight.”

Palpable political anger was there to stay. What the people said disclosed their identity. What the people said showed who they thought they were in their secure tribe.

“When will healing come? How do we move beyond deep-seated resentment”, probed Tom. “We are stuck behind walls and dare not venture beyond the impregnable. The risk is too great. We cannot find why the people over the wall think the way they do. Let the walls continue!” he said. “Then at least we shall be safe though the world remains cemented.”

“And your alternative?” they asked him?

“Is to discover that solid speaks of solidarity and not just fixity”, said Tom. “To realise we are part of a larger tribe; to reach past walls within which we retreat and from which we speak.”

“It is the counsel of idealism” most scoffed. Others were not so sure when healing would ever come in that generation or for generations yet unborn.

“How will we ever move beyond the embittering polarisation if we do not try?” they said.

The Seven Glasses of Wine and the Seven Awakenings

It was his final message in one town before he moved on.

"We yearn to find a vision we can hold on to carry us forward," he said. "But now voices can be heard. This time we want to listen to those voices and The Voice".

"There are seven cups and seven awakenings," said Tom the Teacher. "Life offers us seven glasses of wine. Without the last, experiences leave us dry and thirsty as if we drank from water bottled from the sea. "

"Tell us ", they said, "about the seven cups and the seven awakenings."

"The First Cup is the awakening to life. We find ourselves alive, a mystery to ourselves, adrift on an open sea. Everywhere extends the house we call self. Mothers, fathers, primitive comfort, primeval security, things, objects, the world- all blend and where the boundaries begin and end we learn in our first education.

"And the Second Cup?" they asked him.

"The Second Cup brings an awakening to the world of other people- brothers, sisters, school, college, clubs, friends. All break walls of the central citadel of self, forcing us to act, react, interpret, interact. To live is a course in unstitching a self-oriented life."

"The Third Cup brings an awakening to development and education, to realisation of who we are, of our potential, of our gifts."

"And the Fourth Cup? " they asked him.

"The Fourth Cup brings an awakening to the mysterious incarnations we call the opposite, as Adam stood before Eve and learnt to speak a new language. It is the cup of human loving, its highs and lows, its tragedies and its triumphs. Few have not tasted of this cup, its untrammelled bliss and its despairing depths and sweet surrender."

"And the fifth?" they asked." Tell us about the Fifth Cup."

"The Fifth Cup is the awakening to career, to work, to the significance of significance and be someone, someone who counts, who is needed and who can contribute gifts. Without the awakening that comes with this cup, many lives are a song unsung. And those expelled from significance find that the dregs of this cup can be bitter indeed".

"The Sixth is the cup of reflection. The awakening to beauty and making room for the things of the spirit and of creativity. A cup of parenthood and grandparenthood, of making something that will be more important than we are, that will outlive us."

"So what is the Seventh Cup and the seventh awakening?"

"The Seventh Cup is the cup of life-giving water offered to all who acknowledge their thirst. It is awakening to the source of our value, the essence of our worth and where it is lodged. Drink of it further and the assurance deepens."

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Despite public health restrictions, in the next town the pub was filling up. A growing crowd of people were pushing their way through to the bar. The air was cloudy. Tom the Teacher saw a generation looking without pause for love in an unyielding world, who longed for real relationships and to re-create the intimacy and community that was a fading memory. Acres of E-mails flashed across the virtual face of the deep. But the human voices were growing silent. The lonely exodus from meaning and relationships had taken its toll. Yet in this place, lovers and friends, young and old, were paring, matching and bonding as they always had.

Here was a couple allowing fingers and hands to move against each other with gentle brush-strokes. Even the least tactile of people were searching for re--assurance, a hand on the arm or eye contact that made a connection like electrical circuits. Around a table in front of him, a group of young people collapsed in laughter. Pursuing relationships, they were engrossed in the circle of their friends. It was good to have friends with that special ingredient of picking up where you last left off without finding your way through the maze of a superficial relationship. Yet they were endangering each other.

"How many friends are we allowed?" wondered Tom the Teacher.

The urge to belong went to the source of what made us human, he reflected. At the dawn of the third decade of the third millennium, the people were as swayed as they ever were by the desire to maintain relationships and build community with other people: at work, in voluntary organisations, military regiments, in villages, in towns, in cities and in regions and in classes. They had belonged to the club, to the sports team, the fan clubs, the firm, trade unions or a church. Relationships filled the human story, a song implanted by the Creator, the search for intimacy that leapt in response.

"I know what you're all looking for", he said to the people. "Step forward and tell me why we are made with an ache to love and be delighted in. What is it about us that we have yearned for a completed life, to be enmeshed in a web of belonging, to build communities and a city that will live forever? It was for belonging that we are created in order that we might flourish and do our best work or we shall experience a dried up and withered spirit".

"Tell us?" they asked him. "Why do we need others to receive the gift of being ourselves? If we have the ability to give value or to strip it away, are we then thieves and robbers and only rarely bearers of gifts?"

"The Creator made us with community engraved into our being", Tom observed. "There are families and friendships where intimacy is a skill to be acquired. And there are communities with a task, with which we fill our days as we trade and exchange with those across our world. But to experience purpose without community is barren food for the spirit".

"Reflect on this", Tom urged. "The individualistic order of things to which we have become accustomed could not get us through something major like Covid. We needed each other."

And to the fragmented, isolated generation, Tom spoke about the recovery of depth. "Go and create community. In its pain and pressure, the crisis will help open things up. How much that was needed," he lamented. "Be fragmented no more!"

"Find", he said, "sources of hope that stockpile for the spirit."

Amidst the multiplicity of noises and the voices, Tom heard the Third Song play, a song for those born to relate but whose inability to form relationships left them stranded as when a tide goes out.

Tom looked with love at many experiments in love evident in that place; some heart-warming, some clearly laden with sadness. In a sophisticated culture the explosive wonderful power of falling in love would never die, the highs the lows, the ecstasy and the despairing, the triumph and the yielding. It was (nearly) the most memorable of all human experiences to stumble on the secret of what opens and what closes, what had gone deep in a way that touched the soul profoundly.

“Consider”, said Tom, “why are we fashioned us like this? For whether tired and worn, old or renewed, none can take the love-fire to themselves without being singed in its incandescent flame. We melt into one another; snatched moments of eternity that transcends ordinary existence and propel us forward. The mystery of human loving haunts and taunts us, bound sometimes for glory, sometimes for shame.”

“What means this mystery, that a strange force seizes us and extends our bodies in surrender? What complexity of fraught and blessed emotions, awkward tangle of bodies and communication, exchange of vulnerability that strips us and mocks our pretensions? What strange democracy of bonding, this aristocracy of pleasure offered to our common humanity, joining and merging that are a part of the entrancing magic of permanent love?

For the great majority of Tom’s compatriots, the answer to life’s riddle lay in fulfilling relationships with those who will be an oasis, not a mirage.

“This”, he said, “is surely where meaning and fulfilment are to be found. Where this works, it is indeed a wonderful glass of wine that matures and endures beyond the sip of the day. Happy are you with numerous beatitudes if, seekers in the maelstrom, you find lasting love. Blessed are you when children return to call you blessed.”

Many in that audience nodded strongly; others shrugged. So Tom the Teacher continued.

“But consider the hole. You don’t go looking for the hole for it will look for you. Your smiling partner, your well-balanced children, your phone book of loyal friends – there is a hole. Build strong families and friends who will be frank companions for the journey of life- and there will be something missing.”

But even as he asked the question "why are we fashioned us like this? Tom heard another melody play amidst the love songs that permeated the hubbub. It was the Third Song. Like a startling comet across the sky, it was an insight moment from another world. He resolved to become a soul--friend to many and teach people to give to others their God-given value.

To Tom the Teacher, the woman was one more soul awaiting redemption. "Tell me?" asked the woman, her emotions bleeding from soul-emptiness, "if we are born to communicate, what ultimate mysteries lie behind the many misunderstandings that dog our lives. If sharing thoughts and feeling is the royal road to the depth we were born for, why dig so long and hard to find it?"

Tom was stirred. A great sadness crept upon him stealthily.

"We must learn to understand someone else, the mystery of a different soul that enriches us, the otherness of another. Learning to communicate makes or break the tattered spirit".

"How I wish the cry of the lonely across all ages and generations could have been lessened in its anguished intensity. The heartache of the broken is itself broken when someone listens. I need depth like I need water", she cried with pathos.

"We were made for community and without it we die", Tom said. "If we are committed to depth in relationship, we must take the road necessary to find it, even if it means learning a different language".

"But how true this is" he added after a while "to interaction between all people, between the man and the woman; to parents with their children, to people with neighbours, to diverse races and nations. We must penetrate the mystery of a different soul that enriches us, the otherness of another. Learning to communicate makes or breaks the tattered spirit. "If we be committed to depth, we must take the road necessary to find it, though it means learning a different language".

"What a gift to give to another when we listen to them; as if some food we had deemed luxury is after all our everyday bread. Without it, our desolation cannot die."

"I have learned that trust is built up slowly as a sand--castle", the lady lamented. "But the tide destroys it with one destructive moment. We were made for community and without it we die. "Fearing vulnerability," she observed, "we are lonely inside our castle defences; fearing commitments we long for intimacy".

"You were made for closeness," replied Tom. "Real intimacy would awaken you and light a fire to thaw out your coldness. But there is a key that opens the door of cold, old castles. The ancient manuscript will explain why we are hungry for depth", he went on.

"It is a need inside us that thrilled to be alive at the first flush of the dawn of the world. But what was sweet turned sour. The soft molten centre became a hardened core. Instead of being healing and soothing places, for many relationships were war zones where destructive forces raged violently. But it was not meant to be. We were made for community. And we must not cease from creating it".

"For there is a three-fold cord that cannot be broken," said Tom. "There is me, there is you, and there is the cord between: the strength of relationship, the God-filled love that binds."

"Where we have become unglued, the One who made can mend", he added.

"The Creator made us for community" said Tom, "and it is for us to go and create it. The alternative is a dried up and withered spirit".

"But is there any echo? Does the universe respond to my cry to count, to be conscious, to be loved and valued? Or is all our humanity met with a cruel mocking laugh, like the laugh of an empty horizon?"

"It is a reflection of the Creator who is community". Tom the Teacher paused for a moment and then exclaimed, "here is the greatest of all mysteries!"

"How can the spirit keep intact in a place where everything is evaporated as the dew of morning? And what is it about us that we even ask such questions?" Tom added. "You, me, those people over there," he said, indicating a couple strolling past hands clasped, "we're all born with a gap. In our search for satisfaction and meaning, we realise there's a hole. It needs explaining. Even more, it needs filling."

The family was still the most fundamental and universal of all forms of community. Nearly every short story, novel, film and play wove its plot around romantic love. TV, magazines and papers, humour and gossip played endless variations of family relations. And it added an instantly recognisable poignancy, like a toothache in the night, when refugee crises or war tore families apart. A chronic lack of communication hung over the world like a mushroom cloud. Tom lived within its shadow. It oppressed him.

"Why, why" he lamented "do more people not know of the wide ground that lies between silent, sullen withdrawal or rumbling, angry warfare?"

Tom the Teacher saw people thrown together in the unchosen community of the family, knowing little of the skill of constant negotiation such close ties demanded. He was a witness to families imploding, marriages exploding and children yearning to create the community that had been denied them. He felt a compulsion to speak about the special community designed to bring gifts and an education.

"The family was designed to bring a gift of shelter that protects and nurtures. And to be a bearer of the gift of identity, a setting that locates and defines us. In one family we are born, the other we form. We are somebody's child; we are somebody's parent".

"And the family was intended to be a school for living, a sheltered place of education. Here we were meant to learn about role models; about conflict and how to resolve it; about feelings and how to express them; about relationships and how they work; about trust and how that can be built but so easily destroyed. This education was intended to impart structure, to initiate us into the boundaries between genders and generations. Above all, we were meant to learn the skills to build relationships for ourselves and sustain the depth that is an echo of another world".

"Let this be the third strand of the rope", he urged. "For there is the cord between us; the relationship itself taking a persona. Here too I hear the search for intimacy. Rejecting the once central sun, human relationships were dimming. Everyone looks for love but separate themselves from the source of love and the source of meaning. It is the Third Song."

Masked people

“Greetings, strangers!” said Tom as he arrived to speak in a city one day. Because of Covid, everyone wore a face mask.

“Strangers to each other, we are strangers to ourselves. “There are those here who have never felt an insider. Always the outsider, your eyes have peered into the gilded cage and your eyes have learned, your heart has yearned.”

“We seek so much not to wear any masks. Soon you may cast them off and be authentic. You cannot confess to your vulnerabilities because everyone else seems to have life sorted out, and no one else will own up. In this city it is hard to make friends. Its drive for success is unrelenting. Behold sacred cows of career, money and relationship. When things go wrong, you cannot talk about what has gone wrong: until now - for sacred cows are being slain.”

“Our bonds have weakened,” said Tom with sadness. We have not the strength to look out for each other, to engage in concerns of neighbourhood or take responsibility for others.”

“Whatever happened to the old places where neighbours knew each other? Loneliness is but one manifestation as people get on with their own lives. Desire has replaced community as we look out for number one and engage in the privatisation of life. The social order of shopping has created a disposable world inhospitable to the stranger.

“The void must be covered over, compensated for by acts that disguise the true extent of what has faced us. We had to cover up, for we are naked underneath. We curled in on ourselves; we were non-people. Interaction is the stuff of life and of validation.”

“You have been parcelled your connections into two – everyone else and then there’s me. I am separate, cut off from connections with meaningful others with no one to share.

“I tell you”, lamented Tom, “aleness is the stuff from which existence is wrought. Naked and alone we came into the world: we leave it one soul at a time. It is intrinsic to our nature to be separate yet longing for union. The fear of aleness is that we will disappear. We teeter over a perilous precipice Out of sight and out of mind, loneliness threatens to suck us in. The void will claim us. So let us hear the Third Song- within ourselves and in each other.”

The prisoner

"Once" he said to his listeners, "there was a prisoner in solitary confinement. He was so desperate for community, he responded to his enforced isolation by making imaginary friends. With them, he would take turns to play, talk, fight and respond. But there was a problem. The responses of his companions were always based on his own previous experiences. Surprise, novelty and challenge were always lacking. 'A decent conversation with oneself is after all impossible', the prisoner concluded before he hung himself. I tell you, those who have a poetic conception of solitude couldn't stand complete isolation, not even for a whole day".

Faces and response showed that the message was sinking in.

"On my journey" he continued, "I've heard seen tattered remnants of broken community and felt the pain. Every town and city echoes with the anguish of isolation. The pang of friendless anonymity in a city, a student joining a college or university where they didn't know anyone, a child in a new school, an army wife moving to live in new barracks, retirement from the firm, the rude uprooting of being laid off, the desolation that follows divorce. Isolation is unhealthy to the spirit".

Everywhere now, he was hearing the big themes play, the song of the threefold cord, responding to an inner law to form community. Humanity's restless urge to belong had spawned community of many sizes, from the village to the city, from towns to nations. Civilisation meant urbanisation. The city was a way of thinking and acting. Living in towns and cities had transformed humanity. Urban society and the traditional way of life in the country were far apart from when the first cities were built.

"Cain was then building a city and he named it after his son Enoch"

"Tell us" they asked him one day "about the city" (for sensitivity to nature had increased and many rejected the city).

"The world was not intended to remain one large countryside", said Tom. "The Creator envisaged that the gifts He gave us- gifts of craftsmanship and technology, gifts of

architecture and the arts would be expressed most fully within a large community. The city was to be a centre of trade and influence, a market--place where the wealth of the Earth could be brought and shared and culture developed.

"Think of it!" he continued. "Flawed humanity made cities to become ugly, dark blots over the world, places where social evils have multiplied and people have been oppressed. We were intended for great work that adds the value we find within ourselves, to form communities working together for the good of all and the glory of the Creator. But things went wrong. Cities and community ruptured. Cities became monsters of humankind rather than monuments to the Creator."

Most cities had a mountain of problems: too many cars, too little water, too much pollution, social collapse, family breakdown, unemployment, addiction, rising crime.

The Book of the Creator's wisdom recorded an attempt to reach to the skies and build a defiant city. "*Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth*". It was an enterprise doomed to frustration.

"But the Book is not a rural story for rural folk with an idealised view of the countryside" he said to them. "Does it not proclaim the city of destiny, the final community that is the centre of trade in a new world?"

"The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives its light and the Lamb is its light. The nations of the earth will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it".

In this city, the Third Song would reach its culmination. The three-fold cord would bind us together.

The quest for the three-fold cord meant a search for the common wealth; an understanding of what creates a good society. For we are, said Tom, not consumers only but contributors. "On my journey", he observed, "I have found many places where nature does not exist. For nature is all there is. And so it is for many for whom community is vivid. It is all there is."

But it was still only the Third Song.