

THE FOURTH SONG

THE SONG OF THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

“I observed all the oppression taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, and they had no comforter; the power lay in the hands of their oppressors, and there was no comforter. So I admired the dead, who had already died, above the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet existed, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.” – Ecclesiastes 4v1-2

Who has spoiled the beauty of the world?

However we see the world, it has either to embrace, or refrain from embracing, the Song of the Hunter and the Hunted, of Lament. Does our take on life include a clear idea of human sinfulness?

"What have we done to the world?" Tom the Teacher wondered. Every day the lament grew louder.

"Be gripped by the Trinity!" he said in the next town.

That clearly did not elicit much excitement.

"Not the Trinity you have heard of", continued Tom the Teacher, "but.....I give you, the unholy Trinity. In the fragmented domains of personal life, money, sex and power drive and shape human interests. But I do not speak of this today; rather the unholy Trinity that is wreaking havoc in all places where it leaves its deadly trail. Racism, inequality and environmental damage are weighing so heavily upon the world it is fit to break."

"Our ways of doing things are not up to it", Tom lamented, "the bed is not long enough to lie on".

"On my journey already", said Tom, "I have heard of shifting Arctic ice, raging wildfires and signs of a million forms of life under threat. One in four plants is being uprooted.

"Sing a sad song for our weather, our water, our food – the very way we live and move and feed ourselves is in peril with our incessant demand from the daughter of the horseleech."

"Sing a sad song for the self-serving mind that protects against protecting the future with dramatic interventions. Truly, Tom said, "we are the asteroid that is causing extinction to nature's munificent bounty."

"Sing a sad song", Tom continued, "for the fish that are eating plastic and for the beaches littered with plastic bottles. Soon there will be more plastic than fish! Sing a sad song of the beached whale that had 30 plastic bags in its stomach."

"What have we done to the world? Every day the lament grows louder. Amidst wonder, there are many ominous, darker signs that littered the blue and white world. On our journey, some roads have only occasionally been interrupted by meadows. Out of town shopping centres, petrol stations and restaurants have sprouted everywhere, occupying territory that once infiltrated was lost forever. The soil was no longer teeming with life."

We were haunted by the shadows of forests or the ghosts of living things lost and gone forever. Ravaged forests could no longer protect the water, stabilise soil and climate if they were no more. As the sun rose over the trees at the dawn of the old century, half the primeval forest was intact. By sunset, less than a fifth of the forest was still standing. Country after country had sawn through their inheritance. Protecting rain forests had become a symbol for saving a planet from a degraded environment. And a quarter of European trees were sick and losing their leaves, dying from dirty air or acid rain, casualties of exhausts and heavy industry.

In the broken world, countless species of animals had been sacrificed for land and illegal trade. One eighth of the world's birds were about to fly into extinction. Elephants prized for their tusks, rhinoceros horn and tiger bone lusted after as aphrodisiacs had driven those great animals to the verge of extinction. Thousands of species were becoming only a memory or a photograph. Biodiversity was shrinking. Instead of caring for the planet, human beings had corrupted it with greed and violence.

“We were haunted by the ghosts of living things lost and gone forever. Country after country had sawn through their inheritance. Countless species of animals had been sacrificed for land and illegal trade. The birds were flying into extinction. Thousands of species were becoming but a memory or photograph, a reminder of an enchanted world that begged to be re-introduced to the inhabitants of the blue and white world. Our connection with all that is around us has been seriously affected.

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“We had done violence to nature, as if a separate realm. “Yours to exploit!” Maybe extending value to fellow humans was woven from the same cloth as valuing the Earth which was part of us and we of it. Unless we learned to value more than just ourselves, it was clear we stood to lose even that.

A curious contradiction

As Tom continued his journey in those days after the pandemic, he observed a curious contradiction. Those who said morality is a private affair nevertheless had strong beliefs about things that were absolutely good and things that were absolutely wrong.

"We know we ought to behave in a definite way. But there is not one amongst us who has not done something he knows will hurt another life. Always we have to mind the gap, always there's a contradiction. A contradiction. We are caught in its jaws" he said in one city. "Haunted by ideals of behaviour we ought to practice, there has been a yawning gap. Everyone knows we come short and so does everyone else".

He spoke of the legacy of two contrasting figures who had perished in the pandemic. One was corrupt; the other uncorrupted "Why" he said "do we instinctively cheer the good but hate the evil? Where did this cheer come from?"

"You don't have to be religious to be kind or just" they argued. He could agree with that. Most people still wanted to be kind and honest and to respond to need. But increasingly, the generation of the Third Decade found it difficult to give a reason why anyone should be good. The fact that some things were widely held to be wrong pointed to a higher law beyond individuals. The logic of being a good person implied a suite of values rooted in how things are and therefore ought to be, a standard beyond ourselves.

"Tell me" he asked, "why everyone routinely appeals to laws and rules as if they were both universal and obvious. 'You shouldn't hurt others...That was wrong of you'. Ten times a day, we are making a statement that it is better to live one kind of a way than another. Is this based on anything external?"

He told them a story.

"There was once a Satanist. Though devoted to the dark side, three things happened to him within three days. On the first day, he saw a sunset such as he had not seen before. The dance of the purple clouds entranced his soul with strong magic and a little light entered the darkened room of his soul. On the second day, he became upset when his teenage son lied

to him about stealing change out of his mother's handbag. 'Son' he said, 'you have stolen from your mother and you are now grounded for three weeks', His son tried to protest that he was only following his father's commitment to the dark side. But it was to no avail. The excuse fell limp.

Now on the third day, a neighbour died. The Satanist was ready to agree with the general sentiment that his neighbour had been a good man. Then he stopped in his tracks for he realised he prized beauty, truth and goodness. Against his beliefs, he had been complicit in an unwitting statement that it is better to live in a world where such qualities prevail".

Tom sighed. "When it affects them, even robbers expect to be treated fairly. We tear up agreements and treaties but expect contracts to be kept in return. If we do not subscribe to fair and kind behaviour, why expect it from others?"

"What are you accusing us of" they said. "Spell it out".

"No. The Book indicts us all. We see the right but we do not follow it or even live up to the tattered and unarticulated ideals we have".

To their growing consternation, he added, "though uncompromising about excuses, we excuse ourselves with a thousand rationalisations. Why not let the scales fall from our eyes and ask why good impulses need to be constantly cultivated but wrong impulses grow unaided. Think of the difficult soil in growing unselfishness, courtesy and regard for other people? How shall we view the litter of lies, mixed motivation, distorted truth and the crowd of wrong acts in every life? If people are so good, why are societies cancerous?"

"Only the Book can make sense of how we should we live our lives".

And so saying, he read from its wisdom. *"I reared children and brought them up but they rebelled against me... your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted"*

3

Take Up a Lament for a Broken world

As if carrying stones, it weighed on him. Tom the Teacher felt the oppression under the sun like one more stone upon another.

The inequality between those that have power, money and security and those that do not seemed to be increasing by the day.

"Take up a lament, sing a sad song for a broken world" he cried with pathos in his voice and the Book of the Creator's wisdom open in his hand. *"We have sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind"*.

The wandering armies of the poor haunted him. Many millions of reluctant migrants were being forced off the land that was now unsustainable. There were too many mouths to feed. Across the borders of the world, people were on the move, surging into fortunate nations.

Tom saw the spectre of famine--a third of the world starving and a third of the world under-fed while the rest were busy dieting. Chronic food shortages would overshadow the future unless people could sow crops for the next harvest. Who could measure the untold anguish of an anguished nation?

Seven billion people now stood on planet Earth. Global famine had been kept at bay. But for how long could food keep pace with 80 million mouths to feed every year when the world was fast running out of land? The problems seemed insurmountable. Urbanisation stole land for housing, shopping, golf courses and parking spaces. Genetically--resistant crops were killing beneficial insects on which birds depended. Fertilisers dried out the soil.

"I tell you," said Tom, "everything is joined up: all parts are needed for the system to function. Sing a sad song for the insects for they form the food chain for all else. Sing a sad song for the ways we encroach further into natural habitats to stir up pandemic possibility."

The same strategy game of domination and exploitation that had distorted relationships between ethnic groups, between genders or classes had disfigured the natural world. Disconnected from the natural world, we felt the absence of responsibility toward it. We exploited the natural world without restoration, protection and conservation. Yet we are part of the ecosystem, not outside of it. We are not separate from this" Tom said sadly.

"Open our eyes", said Tom. "Look around and see how destructive is our way of being in the world. This", he lamented, "is our legacy of the oppression under the sun: instead of putting the flourishing of nature and people first in how we organise our economies and societies."

Tom cried in outrage against the despoiling. We were treating the soil like dirt. Within 60 years, the world's topsoil could go, trampled under our feet. The powerful, muddy silence of healthy soil has been an amazing seedbed for plants and people.

“Embedded!” he cried out in the next town. “We are embedded!” “How can we go on in our old exploiting, raping and plundering ways as if we stood against nature? Think. Think, Think! It is not a resource to be plundered but a loving home where we are nurtured, in which we live and move and have our being!”

“We throw! Tom exclaimed. “we throw the harmonies of nature out of joint. What expert shot-put wreckers we are!”

We had stained the oceans, a life--support system for the planet. We had destroyed coral reefs; rain forests of the sea. Food chains were slipping down into a marine junkyard dominated by plankton. The sea was becoming laced with acid. Rivers and streams were disgorged with effluent from manufacturing plants and untreated sewage. Rivers and lakes were dead. The water was sick. How could water be both bringer of life and death?

“Sing a sad song for the way that the warming of the world will cause drinking water to degrade and cause so many to live in unbearable heat so their thirst will need quenching.”

Tom anticipated a day when there would be a pure river of water of life flowing through the city of destiny where the leaves of the trees were for the healing of nations.

4

How much longer?

Wars, disasters and bad government impoverished nations. The rich no longer ground the faces of the poor in the West. The contrast was now between rich and poor nations.

During the last half millennium, more than 100 major wars had been fought in Europe alone. The pattern of war continued into the day before yesterday. What were men fighting for, what causes claimed the destruction of life? Was it worth it?

When his journey took him to Paris, Tom the Teacher stood at the tomb of Napoleon. Confronted by defeat, the Emperor of the French had said, 'a man like me cares little for the lives of a million men. I may lose the throne but I shall bury the whole world in its ruin'. Two million were killed in Napoleon's battles. But that was nothing by comparison to what was looming on the horizon. The First Great War cost nine million lives. The war that followed reaped a terrible harvest of 50 million people destroyed. And still it went on. And on. Until the final battle when *"He make wars to cease to the ends of the earth; He breaks the bow and shatters the spear"*.

The sights and sounds of more recent wars came alive to him. Nuclear terrorism had grown nearer. Like an enormous mushroom cloud, the shadow of nuclear weapons still hung with gaunt shame over the world.

Images of a world in conflict exploded in his face. What was wrong with us? How did it happen that fifty times more was spent on arms and armaments than by developing countries on health and education?

The 20th century had stood mute and helpless as the most unimaginable evil was perpetrated, naively unable to comprehend that human wickedness was possible. Several generations had trapped themselves in rational optimism while the world was in the grip of evil. *"Better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun,"* argued the Book of the Creator's wisdom.

"How long, O Lord, how long?"

Must he live in a world scarred by war and violence? The mark of Cain was strong, rude and clear. Red scenes of war and addiction to violence stained a blue and white planet. The scent of blood was strong.

Very early on, people began to kill each other. *"Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' I don't know' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The Lord said, 'What have you done?' Listen. Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground' "*

Tom the Teacher had anguish in his heart. "The whole earth is burdened down and set to break with the weight of our violence. On my journey, I have seen what we have done to others. The Book forces us to confront a dark inner secret under the surface and can paint the unleashing of the primeval darkness. Without its dark illumination, we are crippled by astonished shock and numbed by disappointment".

War had not been all diabolical, of the devil. War had evoked the noble and the heroic, self-sacrifice, extraordinary acts of courage, organising ability, tactical cleverness, strategic insight, loyalty, comradeship. But though conflict was often a lesser of evils, its causes of conflict were those familiar in everyday life; the conquest, greed, cruelty, pride and the envy projected onto a larger canvas. To understand any crime, we had only to look inside.

On the battlefields of man, Tom had stared at the dead faces of those who stared straight back to haunt him forever. He had heard the muted voices of women, now silent but who had clung to their children and screamed at the soldiers to spare them.

Everywhere he heard strident whispers of the terrible sound of men marching to war or witnessed a hundred ways and weapons for destroying people, grisly in their silent presence. He took up a lament for the unwilling civilians. And he rejoiced that the end of warfare was certain one day.

"They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore".

"What is it about us that we will stop at nothing to enforce our causes?" asked Tom.

"Fighting the external foe, we are betrayed by the enemy within. It is time to face the causes as well as the consequences of the mess".

For some there that day, the red mark of Cain erupted in the serious business of 'beat-em-up' video games where self-esteem and competence were vitally at stake. Fighting evil foreigners submission, female kidnapping; it was another fix. Who had created a virtual world pervaded by images of violence that distorted minds and cunningly disguised the outcome of their actions?

So how," they asked him, "how we have come to live amidst those addicted to violence?"

The colour of your money (and skin)

Tom stood up and began to walk up and down in agitation, watched by the old woman who gazed at him with consternation. An anguished Tom threw his hands up in a bewilderment all the more curious because familiar. He continued.

“I could not comprehend the dark spectre of another evil under the sun; the source of oppression so deadly it has slain its millions.”

“How has so much misery has been played out on the surface of human beings? If the configuration of genitals and gender has evoked so much agitation, how come it has been the colour of skin, and not just the colour of money that has so sharply divided the human consciousness? Who was responsible for this? If the answer is, ‘we did it’, then who are the ‘we’ who subjected our fellow men and women to such unimaginable cruelty and abuse? Why would we do it?”

“And who determined that skin should witness such mortal combat? Who set the pattern that the darker the skin the greater the inferior status? Racism has been so deadly because it combines the sharp divides of history into lethal challenge.”

“I cannot speak of the Fourth Song without a sense of impending doom and abrasive sadness. How to comprehend this blaring, difficult chorus in the music of the world is something I will struggle with until the end comes”.

For here were not sweet, dulcit tones of harmony or beauty but notes of crashing thunder; harsh, discordant, ill at ease. The First Song, the song of wonder had invested everything with glad leaping voice. The Second Song, the song of the Riddle and the Riddler was the music of intrigue and mysterious notes that found an answering echo within his own being.

Sometimes suppressed but finding expression in a 100,000 choruses, the Third Song was of the threefold cord whereby humankind sought close ties that bind and inextricable connection to each other. It was a song that could become the music of the night, black billowing smoke rather than a pure living flame. Or it was a song of bright sunshine.

But then came the Fourth Song. The music had changed into strident, jarring notes of violence and destruction, of laws being trampled on and relationships shattered. It was a

deeply disturbing sound, of greed and pride, the sound of selfishness and of people marching to war; depressing litany of broken people and broken dreams in a broken world.

We were caught in a trap, enmeshed in what we do to others and what had been done to us. All other songs seemed to him to have been incomplete; baffled by the radical evil that men do. He lived in a broken world, in a world of gaps, the wealthy from the starving, of ideals and utopias from their realisation. It was the song of the hunter and the hunted.

"These sounds have always been with us and we have come to accept them unquestioningly though also with naive surprise", he said. "But the burden that visited itself upon me was terrible. Why had they had not realised the extent of the diagnosis and the need for cure? Though by degrees we had grown accustomed to it, this was not how things should be".

"I knew a sick man", the old woman said, "oblivious to his condition yet convinced that all was well, that he had never been healthier. Yet the flush of his illness was plain to see on his face and on his body. Though adamant, 'there is nothing wrong with me', the delusion was obvious to all. Cancer had spread with virile embrace. If treatment had been sought, things might have been different. A few of his friends had tried to reason with him. They remembered when he cut a fine figure and how he was before the glory had departed. 'You are not well', they asserted with unwearying concern. 'See the doctor!' There would come a moment's hesitation. Then, resolute in irresolution, the sick man would waver. Denial had set in once more, old instincts too strong, the old habit unbroken".

"I too have spoken in this way" said Tom the Teacher, not for the first time marvelling at uncanny ability of the old woman to hit a target.

"My journey has shown up with stark illumination the mess we have made on the Earth. But we do not always grasp the dilemma at the heart of things. Believing that the sins of the world are only what others have done to us, we are condemned to limited vision. It is what we do to others that perpetuates the human litter.

"For we are hunters and not just the hunted, aggressor and not just victim. The mess lies within us all. It is our lust, pride and greed writ large".

Something is wrong

In the next town, Tom told of a flawed product, misshaped almost from the beginning.

"There had been no flaw in original design. The prototype was satisfactory. But they had begun to go wrong. Someone had thrown a spanner into the works. As the factory continued to turn out its products, the flaw was now built--in. The products rolling off the assembly line seemed normal; everything in place, everything functioning. Except they were flawed. Though people guessed there was something wrong, they had nothing to compare it with and knew no different. 'Presumably, this is how they make them', they thought."

Deep in the heart of the world, something had been broken. Steadily, it was borne upon Tom what the fundamental distortion was at the very centre of things. More than a piece missing, there was a warp drive taking the occupants in wrong directions, always pushing boundaries where no man had gone before. The effects could be seen everywhere but the cause lay hidden.

"Take up a lament for the broken dreams, the forlorn hopes of individual happiness, soft dreams and pillowed utopias" Tom the Teacher said in the next town.

The end of the experiment had come upon humanity. For decades, the story had been told and the assumptions made. The only hindrances were external and destructive patterns, or so it was said. Pursuing personal freedom and self--realisation, utopia will be arriving by the next train. But despite countless manifestos, why were we not happier, more at peace and more content? What was holding up the train? It must arrive soon! Everything had been tried and found wanting. The far side of hope was dark; very dark. Every ideal was stained in blood. It was the end of broken dreams.

And he read from the Book of the Creator's wisdom. "*The bed is too short to stretch out on, the blanket too narrow to wrap around*".

In the next town, two young student friends protested strongly at the lament he was taking up for the broken dreams and a broken world.

"I can see plenty that's wrong with the world", said one of them. "Can it be right there's any amount of jobs need doing to cleanse and restore the environment and care for the hurting whilst millions out of work are paid to do nothing? But to go from there to some dark secret at the heart of the human race is quite a step."

"She's right" protested her boy-friend. "There's so much in this world that stinks like a rubbish dump; the stench of racism, torture, genocide, unemployment, experiments on animals, war, the way we rape the planet and destroy the ozone layer. Our generation isn't optimistic. We're tired of worn utopian dreams. But those are social evils. It's the world system we should condemn. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with me".

"Think", said Tom with fondness for these two young people who had already experienced a bumpy ride. "Look below the surface of things. You speak of the obvious ways that evil leaves its calling card. They're the fruit. But ask yourself--what is the root?"

"But why do you talk to us in this way?" they asked him. "We have a few faults. But our condition is reasonably healthy, some blemishes; not drastic and by no means terminal. We are less than we should be. We make wrong choices but we pay later".

Tom searched for a reply. The pendulum had swung from blaming individuals back to social conditions being responsible for the mess. Nature? Nurture? Nature and nurture? Much in the cycle of human violence that could be laid at the door of destructive relationships and previous experiences that had warped people's outlook on life and other people. But such a diagnosis was not radical enough. The heart of the matter was the matter of the heart.

"The distinction between the good the bad and the ugly is not realistic. Someone who is apparently good can be choked full of a self-centredness that grows like a cancer. The struggle between good and evil simply cannot be reduced to a caricature. In the left-hand corner, our enemies and on my right the forces of truth and justice. It seems obvious to label our own family, our way of life or our country and its institutions as good and those of our enemy as evil. But as was well said, if we were to divide good from evil, the line would go clear through our own heart".

The Ten Laws

Three times they had come. Three times they asked him the same question.

"Tell us how can we learn to live our lives responsibly and peaceably?"

His first reply was enigmatic. "Without a ruler, how can you measure?"

The second was a riddle. "Without a pilot, how can you fly?"

On being asked the question the third time, Tom replied, "How do you separate the stream from its source?"

"But how do we set priorities. And tell us about worship? Is every opinion as valid as another?" So he told them about the First and Second Laws.

"Tell us," they said "about blasphemy. Is that wrong?"

He spoke to them of the Creator's Third Law.

"Tell us about the workplace", they said. "Has the Creator said anything about work being all--encompassing or of respite from the daily grind?"

It was the Fourth Law.

"And what of obligations towards those who have cared for us and respect for experience?" they asked him. He told them of the Creator's Fifth Law.

"Tell us about the way we use our tongues to make threats?" So he spoke to them of that which hurts and destroys and the law to preserve spirit and body.

"Tell us about the strange creature inside us that is either an obedient pet or a mad dog". And he spoke of the Creator's wisdom about sexuality and the seventh Law.

"Tell us how we can re--instate respect for property and the owner of property". That, he said, was covered in the Creator's Eighth Law.

"How highly should we prize truth against the lie?"

And he spoke to them of the Ninth Law.

"Has the Creator said anything about lifestyle, about money and leisure, of materialism and the things we want?"

"The Tenth Law speaks of desire and its raw power", said Tom, "a power that blindsides and has its in its grip. It will light a candle to your path and give you a vision of how you should live," Tom said. "But, listen to my words. What no law can do is impart power to fulfil that vision. And from every disturbing act and from every crime, payment must be made or the victim's cry goes unnoticed. Bills must be settled and the invoices re-addressed. "

Someone must pay. Someone had.