

Spirit of Life Fellowship

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Opening Words

The light early this morning backlit the gray dome of our earth
Looking out of a relatively small window
From a relatively small house,
with locks and weather proofing,
I could see the old Jacaranda tree that stands in the middle of
A small patch of green and has stood there
For longer than I have been alive.
I found myself saying, teach us how to be reverent.
It knows nothing of convenience or inconvenience,
Nothing of regret or ambition,
Nothing of ruined weekend plans because of rain,
Or foiled aspirations.
It stands in its place – at home.
Cousins rain and cloud, wind and dew visit
Sun and soil abide.
It revels in the playfulness of blossoming
and observes the seasons.
It plays host to choirs of birds that come and go,
some dressed in flamboyant rosella and some in crow black.
Teach us to be at home with the open sky,
With the stars in their velvet darkness;
To commune, to pray not from fear and desire,
From guilt.
Teach us to pray as if there was no roof over our head
And home still.
To take the free air and the abundant life deep into our being
And be one with it – secure in our place, whoever we are,
Secure in this strong and supportive family of things
Only some of which we see with our eyes.
The rest of which we commune with in our souls
Teach us to be grateful.

Daniel Jantos, Austinmer

Reflection

According to the official Vatican record, the 1431 trial and subsequent execution of Joan of Arc was an unfortunate mistake. It was perpetuated by local officials blinded by secular political considerations without the benefit of the wisdom of the Roman curia. A series of investigations, launched in 1455, led to a formal appeal conducted by the Inquisitor-General. 25 years after being burned alive, tied to a stake, Joan was declared innocent. The Inquisitor's summary of evidence describes her not as a heretic...but a martyr. In 1920 she would be made a saint.

What could motivate the desire to vindicate an outspoken, protestant, cross-dressing woman? Barely a teenager, calling the political leaders of her time “cowards” and religious leaders “hypocrites,” she was initially found guilty primarily of two offences. The heresy: she listened to the voices of evil spirits and she dressed like a man?

The two crimes were very much related in ways much more revealing than just the non-conformity of it. The offensiveness in those two intermingled “heresies” is full of paradoxes that deserve to be explored and that have garnered renewed interest in Joan’s case and her story. But what imperative, from a central church perspective, created a need for vindication?

Throughout her short life and her notoriety, Joan claimed to be intimately informed by three heavenly personages. Two of these were women – saints - who, in Joan’s association with them, became “evil spirits” at her trial: Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret. It’s notable for an illiterate peasant farming maid and shepherd girl in northern France to be drawn to these two particular female saints, one from Alexandria, Egypt and the other from Antioch in today’s Turkey. And to be so bold as to suggest that God is talking to her and giving her advice through the agency of these kindred spirits.

Is it likely that Joan would have known all we know today, in the age of google, about Catherine of Alexandria? She was clearly drawn to her in a strong way. What might she have known about Catherine? Well, she likely thought that Catherine was martyred. There was a great deal made of the fact that both Catherine and Margaret were “virgin martyrs”. This was seen as making them more perfect intercessory with God – especially for unmarried women.

The legend/narrative she might have known about (could she have known?) was that the emperor Maximinus in the year 320 had ordered a very bright, self-taught, scholarly young Christian woman to become his mistress. When she refused he had her tortured and imprisoned. Still not vanquished, (in prison her wounds were said to be tended to by angels, she was fed by a dove and visited by Jesus as well as hundreds of people who revered her) Catherine was finally sentenced to be “broken” on the torture wheel and then beheaded. The shrine to St. Catherine exists today, where her body was buried in the desert near Mt. Sinai.

What Joan probably may not have known was that the myth or legend of Saint Catherine was actually more likely based on the life of Hypatia with the roles of Pagan and Christian reversed. Hypatia, as you may likely know, was a Greek mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, who lived around the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th. Hypatia’s contributions to geometry and astronomy are still recognized today as milestones in science.

She was murdered by a Christian mob who suspected her of not being sympathetic enough to the new (and controversial) Bishop of Alexandria. She is said to have had an impeccable reputation in Alexandria for integrity and learning. She therefore had significant influence on Orestes, the Roman prefect, her student and close friend. When he asked her for her advice in dealing with the bishop’s growing brutality and intolerance, she counseled caution. The bishop had just banished all the Jewish people from Alexandria and shut down all synagogues among other intolerances. The Christian community, jealous of her influence and suspicious of her scientific approach to things, and her pagan leanings, caught her travelling in the city and pulled her from her carriage and literally tore her apart – dumping the remains of her body outside the city.

ST. MARGARET of Antioch, on the other hand, was disowned by her father at an early age and adopted by her nurse. They lived independently and together, in the countryside, contentedly keeping sheep and sustaining themselves. Olybrius, Governor of the Roman Diocese of the East, having met her once, asked to marry her, but with the demand that she renounce her Christianity. Upon her refusal she was cruelly tortured, during which, the legend goes, various miraculous things happened.

One can’t quite ignore the affinities in these narratives. And, of course, the highly and powerfully gendered aspects of these narratives. The writers of

those times are all men, most of whom are writing from within an institutional framework that offers a very narrow perspective on what is going on. But Joan's interest in them invites some other perspectives.

Joan may not have known all these facts about Margaret and Hypatia, but, it seems at least quite clear that the young woman was looking for something. Her attention was drawn to these women's lives....felt an identification that informed her actions and words and her courage. In the tradition of that mythology, they were known as virgins but that likely, for Joan, didn't mean what some might customarily assume. There are suggestions that Joan herself may have suffered from her own trauma with regards to sexuality, maybe with the brutal English raids of her home town, and it was part of what informed her insistence on wearing pants rather than dresses and explicitly preferring to be burned alive rather than be sent to prison. The reference to virginity ought to be taken as representing something broader from within an array of possibilities, all of which have something to do with the fact that these were women who were not attracted to men. As Joan said in her trial "I will never marry, I will never be any man's wife."

Who was Joan of Arc? What does she represent to the renewed contemporary interest in her life and story? And how was it that the Roman church was so eager to vindicate her and even, in time, make her a saint? Was she speaking theologically from within the protestant reformation in which an individual can have a direct relationship to the Divine, bypassing the authority of the church and speaking with one's own authority on the basis of one's own known experience and insights? She claimed to be a spokesperson for God.

Or was she advocating nationalism and patriotic fervor for France? Or was she making a stand for womanhood in a time in which the English invaders, (Henry V's "We band of brothers" at Agincourt) were taking advantage of internal divisiveness, looting and plundering the countryside of northern France in scorched earth raids, that included Joan's own village of Domremy and the Champaign region?

And what about the leadership entrusted with serving and protecting? Charles VI, the king, was known to be suffering from extended bouts of insanity. The nobles, each one for themselves, were taking advantage of the chaos to consolidate their own feudal hold on power, local resources and land. The black death had decimated the population over the past half century. We can only imagine the suffering and grief. The church, with three competing popes,

was waging alliances with whoever, local or foreign, would enrich and empower them most favorably.

In the absence of any regard for the wellbeing of the people and any demonstrable interest in the welfare of the common and the susceptibility to the chaos that comes from cynically vested self-interest – a chaos often intentionally fashioned for its profit potential and the spoils of violence and war – a girl on the cusp of womanhood becomes the spokesperson for sanity, for collective and communal interests. She is the champion of the welfare of the farmers, the artisans, the musicians, those who hang out the laundry and plant the next crop, those who teach the children and fix the broken fences and rebuild the abode.

George Bernard Shaw, in 1921, one year after Joan's canonization, in the wake of the insanity of the first world war, was drawn to the story of Joan. He wrote the play on the basis of the records of her trial. He was rewarded with the Nobel prize for literature in 1925. Was it because his play, *Saint Joan*, was such a masterpiece of writing? Or was it that we count on, and recognize, that kind of clarification from our best writers and playwrights – today our film-makers and cartoonists? We count on our academics to frame things with greater perspective and from a broader viewpoint.

What was the clarification that Shaw provided with his play?

- how very wrong the powers that be can get it sometimes.
- How incredibly chaotic things become in certain periods and how much on the wrong side of history the establishment can be.
- And how very interesting it is to note from where the prophetic and courageous voices emerge in such times of disintegration.

It is, in that Shavian sort of way, interesting to highlight for contrast in this context, the ridiculousness, (and that's perhaps saying it kindly) of the words in the letter to Timothy, in Paul's writing in 1st Timothy chapter 2: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; Women must be silent" (1 Timothy 2, 12).

Our millennial goals, are very much focused on the merit of empowering women and suggest the exact opposite. In so many of the 17 areas of initiative the stress is on educating women, channeling funding to places where women will have control of them because when they do, the research suggests, the funding stays in the local community and benefits local needs.

Last week, you may have seen the Q&A episode dedicated the “*The Future*”. The last question had to do with what has been right about what we have accomplished; are there good things that have emerged that we can be proud of?

“Let’s not go backwards from here” Chloe Spackman, Australian futures project, responded (I am paraphrasing here). “There are so many areas of significant progress.” And Julian Cribbe, writer and futurist said:

“Women are the natural leaders in our world for the 21st century. They have to lead in every single sphere, in politics, religion, business, women have to be at the top, men have been great at making war, at cutting down forests, at poisoning things. If you want leadership you have to have someone who thinks about the welfare of children and the local community. We have to put women in charge and if we do, we are far more likely to have a more sustainable civilization.”

It is interesting to go back to the other end of our story today and note the fact that we think of the protestant reformation as beginning with the proclamation of Martin Luther’s 95 thesis in 1517. But the protestant reformation was well on its way a hundred years before that. John Hus, the Bohemian preacher, was burned alive, tied to the stake, in 1415, 16 years before Joan. “One pays for confession, for mass, for the sacrament,” he wrote, “for indulgences, for churching a woman, for a blessing, for burials, for funeral services and prayers. The very last penny which an old woman has hidden in her bundle for fear of thieves or robbery will not be saved. The villainous priest will grab it.”

Something else among his writings: “Women were made in the image of god. They should fear no man.” He allowed women to preach in Bohemian churches and encouraged them to serve in battle, if they believed in the cause. After his death, women played a critical role in fighting in the Hussite wars of 1419-1434. Could Joan have known about this?

Could it have served as a model, not only permission to take up the cause, but also a clarification on the entrenched corruption and abuse that begs to be addressed.

And importantly if we place Joan of Arc squarely in the intellectual and social heritage of the protestant reformation than we can see how the “me too” movement has a theological and social heritage as well. Perhaps the male

historians of the past may not have felt the need to capture that but these connections are important. These are women who should not be silent and who express the deep injustice that corrupt systems of domination and greed take as their entitlement. They speak of larger issues and of shared concerns and of the need to speak out.

I was curious to notice that all the speakers and all the musicians in the Climate Strike in Sydney a few weeks ago were young women. There were plenty of us men and boys out there with them. But it was interesting and inspiring to see the change. For me, young Greta Thunberg is a contemporary embodiment of Joan. I honor her this morning for her courage and the hope that it has brought in its wake. Many religious and political powers may not see her advocacy and her voice as something they must respond to and support but, we the people, will listen and may even in time, we will have our own ways of recognizing what saintliness.

Over the past few weeks, after having proposed this topic for the newsletter, it has been interesting to ask a number of young women around the campus, what they think of this, what their own experience has been. So many of them have said something like: "it's still not condoned that young women should have their own opinion." Or, as one young woman said: "outspokenness in young women is still seen as being unattractive. It's like the expectation is that young women should focus mostly on being attractive." And, of course, there are many young women that want to be attractive. Do they really have to make a choice between those two options as an either/or dichotomy? "And now", one young woman I spoke with said, "many of us are concerned about the welfare of the boys being left behind. And it can feel like it's our fault...that people resent our aspirations, that our ambitions are ruining things."

Last Friday, the leader of the opposition, invited religious leaders to offer him and his party insight into an appropriate response to the anti-discrimination legislation that is so urgently sought from religious entities around Australia. A friend and Buddhist nun who was invited to the conversation, came to visit after it was over, just because she needed somewhere to vent in complete frustration at the embedded interests sitting around the table in, what she called "smug self-confidence". Entities who seem not to see any need for urgency on issues like climate change even in spite of the drought, and fires, and the reefs but for whom strict adherence to some ambiguous line or two about same sex relationships in the Bible constitutes the deepest spring of

fervent belief. Is that an embodiment of the spirit of the trial of Joan of Arc – filled with jealousies, self-interest and denial?

For hundreds of years and even still to some extent today, sainthood was a matter of popular affirmation or what has been called “spontaneous local attribution.” It wasn’t until the end of the 16th century the process of canonization was centralized. The local people made Joan a saint long before the central church recognized her. Her innocence was clear to them all along. The Polish people made John Paul II, Karol Wojtyla, a saint. The central church would not dare to contest it. They have too much to gain from making him a saint. Having come back from Poland this past July, it is obvious how much that sainthood has renewed, empowered and filled churches in Poland.

Shaw liked to speak about something called the life force: an evolutionary appetite for betterment which uses individuals to effect social change. I wonder if we might be seeing something like that happen today, in the light of the insanity or carelessness of those in places of traditional power. We are hearing the voices of people whom we might not have expected to. We are hearing new sources of courage and vision. Stay tuned and let's in every way we can support those prophetic voices and those saints-to-be of our own time, who may yet change the trajectory towards progress and peace and sustainability.

Closing Words

From Isaiah 58

Lift up thy voice like a trumpet and say unto the people. You long for strife and debate, to smite with the fist of wickedness.

Is this the fast that I have chosen: that you pick a day and afflict your soul upon it? Is it to bow down your head and spread sackcloth and ashes upon yourself? Is this what you will call the acceptable day of the Lord?

Let me tell you what is the fast that I have chosen: to loosen the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free. To break every yoke of oppression. Is not the fast that I have chosen, to deal thy bread to the hungry and bring the poor that are cast out, to you home? When thou seest the naked to clothe them.

Then shall thy light spread forth like the morning and your health shall spring forth speedily. Then you shall call and the Lord shall answer, 'I am here.' Take away the yoke from amidst yourselves, the pointing finger of accusation, the speaking of vanity. Rather, show compassion to the hungry and bring comfort to the afflicted soul. Then you shall be as a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Then you shall build the old waste places and be called the repairer of breaches, the restorer of paths to dwell in.

So be it.