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Neighbourliness and Samaritans in a Topsy-Turvy World

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I was taught moral philosophy by a very gifted academic, who went on to become the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. His lectures were vibrant and witty, discursive, slightly eccentric, and utterly brilliant. He wore skinny black jeans and black jumpers, and with his ‘hairstyle’ – I used that word with caution – could have done a passable impression of Max Wall. He often smoked his own roll-ups throughout lecturing. You could in those days. He was a loyal dissenter of Roman Catholicism, had professed Marxist sympathies, but was otherwise liberal. You could in those days.

Why am I telling you this? Well, because in 1982 he persuaded me to read Christopher Hill’s remarkable book, The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution (1972). My philosophy tutor was keen on engaging with Gerard Winstanley, a largely self-taught theologian who was a mid-sixteenth century “Leveller”.

The Levellers were radicals, to be sure. They wanted to turn the world upside down, and their source of inspiration came from their radical readings of the scriptures. They held that equality and community were fundamental for humanity, and held that all hierarchies were a by-product of the Fall. So Winstanley wrote in his lengthy tract, A Watch-Word to the City of London (1649) that “true freedom lies in the community in spirit and community in the earthly treasury, and this is Christ, the true man-child spread abroad in the creation, restoring all things unto himself”.

Whatever you might think of Winstanley’s proto-Christian-Marxism, and his radical advocacy of a kind of ‘Cosmic Christ’ now to be known in true (earthly) community spirit, his writings maintain their prescience. The English Revolution (usually known, wrongly in my view, as a ‘Civil War’), was an era of clashing ideologies and veritable melting pot of new ideas.

All of this was born out of crisis. The old order was either gone, or going. What would come to replace it? What was the new order going to look like?

We already know that crisis and opportunity are linked. For some, the opportunities in a crisis are simply ones that are ruthlessly exploited, and at the expense of others. But for many people, a crisis brings the best out of us, and it brings lasting change.

For example, were it not for the existential social, pastoral and religious crisis of a young Church of England curate by the name of Chad Varah, there would be no Samaritans to call up when you – or those nearest and dearest to you, or more likely unknown to you – ring them in the small hours and pour out their sense of despair and isolation. (Their ‘phones are busy right now, and set to get busier). Varah’s crisis was a trigger for something creative.

What of now? I am not a big fan of movies that dwell on dystopias and apocalyptic scenarios that have been caused by some global cataclysm. Whether that is World War Three, an invasion by malicious aliens, a climatological catastrophe, the dead (aka “zombies”) wandering around (always rather slowly it seems to me – they don’t look very well?), Triffids
(aka revenge of the neglected pot plants), spiders and other insects (!), or just your ordinary class-generational-ethnic-nationalist-tribal-out-of-control-world competing for ever-sparser resources (see *The Hunger Games*; although *Logan’s Run* is much better in my view).

The premise that lies behind the dominant trope in this genre of movies is this: that faced with calamity things will only get worse. Civilisation will collapse; society unravel; community disintegrates and we turn away from each other into “every man/woman for themselves”. However, that is not what we are seeing in this global pandemic.

We are witnessing what I would term as a profound “supposition switch” and some serious “theory turnaround”. The evidence for this is all around us. Take social distancing and self-isolation. One friend wrote to me the other day to say that they had never felt less alone right now, despite not seeing people. In the ‘community’ to which they usually belong – itself often marginalised and isolated by the (so-called) ‘mainstream’ – she reports that people were in touch every day, and checking in on her. It has confounded her; but in a good way.

All over the world at the moment, communities have mobilised, and have acted where the state cannot function well, if at all. Aid packages, food parcels, spare and vacant flats for healthcare workers are part of this. Community drivers, babysitting networks for the children of key workers, new ways of teaching, playing and relaxing are all being born. In Bristol, a “Mums on the Run” group now jogs to fetch medicines for those isolated at home. Without a hint of irony, they have re-christened themselves as the “Drug Runners”.

We have already begun to learn some new ways of living as a result of this pandemic. A truly charitable heart and a giving attitude is powerful and unstoppable when it is hitched up to serious social intelligence.

Yet there is a crucial question within this observation: are you a *claimer* or a *giver* of opportunities? Most people think that life is all about “taking your opportunities”. This is our conventional wisdom. But we live in unconventional times right now: the world is turned upside down. The new question is this: what opportunities can I now give to others? Including the ‘others’ I don’t know. Yes, to paraphrase John McCain, the ones I know I don’t know; but what about the ones I don’t know I don’t know?

Whatever way the world is turned – upside down, right way up – we are, as people, social animals. We were made for company. We need to develop a more cultivated wisdom now, that takes the veneer off our old conventional wisdom. Why do we say “people live on benefits” when we all know we mean basic necessities? Even innocent terms such as “Social Security” can be deceptive. Social Security usually only refers to a system of economic safety nets. It seldom does much to secure a person’s value and sense of belonging in a community.

Our true social security lies with each other. This might be what Gerard Winstanley had in mind. Put another way, the state does not replace the essential and fundamental need for community. Our communities are grass roots; the *ground* to which we belong, but also the space we share with neighbours, known and unknown.
Our term ‘topsy-turvy’ comes from the medieval verb, *tirve* – meaning ‘to turn or to topple over’. *Topsy* was flipping the top soil over, putting it deeper beneath the earth so it could nourish and replenish the ground above.

Deep nourishment in our communities? Yes. Community spirit connects us in ways that no state can ever compete with. Time then, to work out what and where our community is. And not to take our opportunities, but to work out how to give them away to others, so that all may participate, share in and be transformed by what each of us can do for one another. Christ beckons us to do no less for our neighbours (Luke 10: 25-37). Simply put, be Samaritan.