

Significant Encounters

When Howard asked me for the title of my piece, sermon is too grand a word, he put me on the spot somewhat. Titles mean you know where you're going before you've said what you have to say, and it's good advice which I've given to my students for umpteen years. I did wonder whether I should be relevant, it being the New Year and all that, you sort of feel obliged to talk of the old year giving way to the new, looking back and forward, that sort of thing. But I'm not sure I believe in significant moments.

Passing from 49 to 50 was no big deal. The morning after was much like the day before, apart from a slight hangover.. To me, all moments are part of a continuum, all special if you like. Of course you can whip things up into something out of the ordinary, tea at the Ritz, a table at the Ivy, a box at the opera, but in the end, as my old Polish friend, Jan, would have said: "You go out, you come back, so what's changed?" I once asked him why he didn't take advantage of a bargain offer to visit his homeland after years of exile. "Bah," he replied, "you pay out good money, you go all that way, and you end up back here where you started, but without your money."

Of course Jan was something of a cynic and very careful with his money. What can you expect, he'd say, I'm Polish. Couldn't see the point of a theatre visit but would spend hours studying Einstein's theory of Relativity. Jan was a great thinker, a very good Catholic and hugely generous with his time for those in need. If you like, he could be counted a significant encounter in my life. I had known his wife for some time before meeting Jan. She was lively, sociable and very easy to get on with. Jan was the complete opposite and was eclipsed by his vivacious wife, until she died and then we got to know each other. Jan had been transported along with his mother to Siberia when the Russians began carving up Poland. They lost everything. Eventually Jan had a chance to join the Polish Free Army and joined General Anders, ending up fighting in Italy to stop the German advance. He never saw his mother again. Afraid of reprisals, he came to England after the war whereas his mother returned to Poland. He carried that double exile with him for the rest of his life and was only latterly reunited with his mother and his native soil when I had the great honour to take his ashes to his mother's grave and his birthplace this last autumn.

Well, you've probably guessed that Jan came to mean a great deal to me. Imagine, a man who lost everything, home, family, country but who with great determination established himself in a foreign land, survived and prospered with his honour and dignity intact. So I do believe in significant encounters which help shape the way you see the world, people who open your eyes to a different reality to your own. That is of course if you are prepared to see and learning to see the world from other viewpoints is not easy. We are shaped by others as much as ourselves and are who we are not simply because of what we were born with but because of who we meet. And that shaping never stops, we are forever in the process of becoming, in a state of flux. Opinions change, attitudes alter. So if that is the case, I wonder if we can we ever really know ourselves? Is there an essence of me, something God-given, am I merely what others make of me, can I remake myself?

Well of course the answer is all that and lots more besides. People are important, that goes without saying. I can remember the first time someone made a comment about my personality. They said how funny I was - they meant it kindly - I was genuinely surprised at what they said and it made me think hard about what it was that made up me. I think we grow into ourselves as we grow up - and situations, people, bring out the best and sometimes the worst in us.

Books too have helped shape me. I studied French and Spanish at University and literature was a real eye-opener, but oddly enough books taught me, on reflection, as much about who I was as about the world about me. One book that had a big effect on me at the time was *Le Grand Meaulnes* Written by Alain Fournier early last century, it tells the tale of an adventurous boy who comes across a strange engagement party in the middle of an unfamiliar landscape, of a girl he falls for, loses and is later reunited with. It opens with a description of the school house the narrator and his parents lived in... "I say our house although we no longer own it. We've been gone from the area for nigh on 15 yrs and we will almost certainly never return there." Those few lines had the most extraordinary effect on me. I was plunged into a deep well of nostalgia for what had been irrevocably lost... and that of course is exactly what the book is about. The lost innocence of childhood, unfulfilled dreams and so on. The book struck a chord in me that remains potent to this day. But the odd thing is that at the time I didn't pay my feelings that much attention. Great literature, I thought, was about more than my sentimental apprehension of the world of literature. Lost dreams were not the stuff of fiction. How wrong could I have been. But the grip of nostalgia can be a dangerous one. The good old days were never that good. We must leave the past where it belongs, the future can not be known, we can only deal with the here and now.

Well this is here and this is now. So what about it. Has he got a message, you're asking? What are the fruits of my labours? OK, I would say... first ...the pursuit of happiness is not the goal but the by-product of a process and that happiness may be nearer to hand than you had imagined it. That comes from my reading of Le Grand Meaulnes. Second, that we can learn to live with our limitations but not be surprised if something unexpected sends us in a new direction on a new path of discovery. Third, we should try to be at ease with ourselves. When Edith Evans, the actress, was interviewed quite late on in life she observed that as she got older she became more prone to falling over. To her surprise, landing on the ground lent an entirely new perspective to her life. I don't fight it, she said, I take my time, look around and see what I can learn from my new vantage point. When asked what was the secret of great acting, she replied, learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture. Last but not one, but by no means least I would say value your friendships. And finally, and this isn't an original thought, it comes from the French writer, Albert Camus, try to do as little harm as you can in the world and maybe, if you're lucky, occasionally, a little good will come of it. And if all else fails, remember that pithy little maxim from that other French writer, La Rochefoucauld. You're never as wretched or as happy as you think you are!

(An address given by Harold Lorenzelli at the Kensington Unitarian Church on 11th January 2004, as part of a service entitled 'Influences and Meaning')