

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker  
at Essex Church, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2007

# Janusz Korczak: A Voice for the Child

**Story:** .... of Mulla Nasrudin and the Perfect Apple.

Nasrudin was throughout his life a teacher on the spiritual path and at some points in his long and varied and illustrious career he did give talks and lectures to people in the market place – if he was in London today he would be there at Speaker's Corner addressing the crowds. And in 11th century Persia wise preachers were given just as rough a ride as speakers in Hyde Park receive today. Listeners would shout back just like an audience listening to a stand up comedian.

And so it was that one day when Nasrudin had just completed a particularly wise discourse one of the scoffers in the crowd said to him 'Oi, Nazz Rudey Rudin – instead of spinning yet more of your fancy spiritual theories why don't you show us something practical instead.'

Poor Nasrudin was nonplussed. 'What kind of practical thing would you want me to show you?' he asked somewhat doubtfully.

Pleased that he had got the famous mulla on the run and that he was making an impression with the crowd, the scoffer said 'well for instance. Why don't you show us an apple from the garden of paradise.'

Nasrudin immediately picked up an apple that happened to be lying there discarded in the market place and handed it to the man.

'But this apple is bad on one side' said the man. 'Surely a heavenly apple would be perfect.'

'Well' said the mulla Nasrudin, 'a celestial apple would indeed be perfect but given your present faculties, this is as near to a heavenly apple as you will probably ever get'.

(now of course if we have the faculties to truly experience this apple as perfect then perfection is what will appear to us – or does it just depend what side of the apple you are looking at?)

**Reading:** George Bernard Shaw – "A Splendid Torch"

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

**Address:**

If ever you have a spare moment to fill, a good game is to imagine who you would like to invite to your perfect dinner party, or who would you choose to sit at the tea table with and have a chat, what person – living or dead, real or fictional would you invite. Have a think about it and perhaps add your chosen guest to the list out in the hall later. When I've played this game with friends, our chosen guests have fallen into certain categories – good looking film and pop stars tend to feature highly in such lists, relations from a family's past are often there – people you would like to meet and understand or hear more of their life story, comedians and larger than life fictional characters – those who would be entertaining, all these appear – but the biggest category nearly always seems to be 'people who inspire us'.

And the person that I'm talking about today comes for me from that inspirational category – Janusz Korczak: someone I only found about by chance when I bought this little book because its title caught my eye – 'A Voice For the Child', but whose life story touched my heart and made me wish for this to be a better world.

Our meditation earlier on spoke of inspiration - of breathing in, taking in something that makes us greater, letting go of anything that is no longer bringing out the best in us – and maybe that's what inspirational people do for us – they allow us to take in, breathe in something of them, something that can help us be something more than we usually are. It's rather like what happens to us when we are inspired by some project or scheme – listen to these words from Patanjali - teacher and writer – credited with establishing the tradition of meditation and writer of the Yoga Sutras still much read and spoken of today – words written over 2100 years ago:

*"When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bonds, your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands in every direction and you find yourself in a new, great and wonderful world. Dormant forces, faculties and talents become alive, and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you ever dreamed yourself to be."*

Words written by Patanjali

Maybe that is what sets inspiring people apart from most of us - they overcome the limitations of their humanity and align themselves with something far greater than simply themselves. And yet when you get to know more about seemingly great people two other factors often seem to emerge – they often have a quality of humility and when you delve a bit deeper they are often flawed. There are rarely perfect people in this world however inspirational they are, we are all – famous or ordinary – a bit like Nasrudin's celestial apple, picked up from the market floor. If we look closely at any of us we'll find some flaws.

Janusz Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit in Warsaw in 1879 into an educated Jewish family that had very much become part of Polish culture and society. His was a childhood that went from ease and plenty to considerable challenge, when his father, a successful lawyer, became mentally unwell and had to be institutionalised. The loss of income and the social stigma attached to mental breakdown had a profound effect on the family and young Henryk became the family's chief breadwinner when they moved to a poor quarter of Warsaw – studying during the day, giving private tuition to other students and writing short stories at night to sell to literary journals. It was when he entered and won a famous literary prize that he took on the pseudonym Korczak. He trained as a doctor and worked for many years as a paediatrician where he would charge well off families more so that he could subsidise the treatment of poor children.

He saw how Warsaw street-children struggled to survive and when he was forced to serve in the Army during several wars he wrote:

*"War is an abomination. Especially because no-one reports how many children are hungry, ill-treated and left without protection. Before a nation goes to war it should stop to think of the innocent children who will be injured, killed or orphaned. No cause, no war, is worth depriving children of their natural right to happiness. One must think first of the child before making revolutions."*

Words that could have been written today.

Back in Warsaw Korczak became a highly respected lecturer on both medicine and education. One of his students recalls a lecture he gave, entitled 'The Heart of a Child'.

*"We were all surprised by Korczak's instruction to gather in the X-ray lab. He arrived bringing a four year old boy from the orphanage. The X-ray machine was switched on and we saw the boy's heart beating wildly. He frightened – so many strange people, darkness in the room, the noise of the machine. Speaking very softly, so as not to add to the child's fears and deeply moved by what could be seen on the screen, Korczak told us 'Don't ever forget this sight. How wildly a child's heart beats when he is frightened and this it does even more so when reacting to an adult's anger with him, not to mention when he fears being punished.' The heading for the door with the boy's hand in his he added 'that is all for today!' We did not need to be told any more. Everybody will remember that lecture forever."*

And he eventually chose to concentrate on education when he became director of a new Jewish orphanage, designed and planned by Korczak himself and regarded as one of the most beautiful and advanced in Europe. From then until his death Korczak worked in that orphanage, lived in the attic and received no salary. The 1920s were a happy and hugely creative time for Korczak and for his staff and, indeed, for the children under their care. Another similar orphanage was set up for Catholic

children, he established a remarkably innovative children's newspaper and Korczak continued to write, primarily children's books and books about child care. He was very wise in his views on children. He respected them, consulted them, involved them in the running of the children's home, he understood that they needed freedom and that the generally restrictive child care of the time was stunting children's emotional and spiritual growth. He set up children's courts in the orphanages so that the children themselves were active in decision making and were given a voice, something that children lacked in the early 20th century. Nearly 100 years ago now Korczak famously listed 'The Rights of the Child' – his ideas were used as the basis for the United Nations' document finally passed in 1989 and known as the 'Convention of the Rights of the Child' – here are just a few of Korczak's principles –

The child has the right to optimal conditions in which to grow and develop  
The child has the right to make mistakes  
The child has the right to be appreciated for what she or he is  
The child has the right to education  
The child has the right to protest an injustice

We live in interesting times as the Chinese curse suggests – have you noticed that terms like human rights are suffering from some kind of backlash because controversial cases are now testing, and being tested in, our legal system. As religious liberals let's not be caught up thoughtlessly in all this, let's not forget what can happen in a society in which a government is allowed to ride rough shod over people's human rights. And as we are all too aware this is what happened when Poland was invaded by the Nazis in 1939. Just one year later the prestigious Jewish orphanage set up by Korczak was moved from its prime location into the Warsaw ghetto. And it was in that Ghetto that Korczak continued to run his orphanage with as much dignity and tranquillity as was humanly possible. As the Nazi stranglehold on the Jewish population ever tightened, the daily rations for children in the ghetto amounted to 185 calories. Korczak went out every day with a sack on his back and begged for food for the children.

This is an incredible story of one man's commitment – Korczak was many times offered the opportunity to leave the ghetto and to escape from Poland. He was known internationally, was highly regarded for his work, and in the tumult that was Europe at this time he chose to stay in the Warsaw ghetto, in the most terrible conditions. The ghetto was filled with fear, with rumours, with desperate people doing whatever they needed to do in order to ensure their own survival and the survival of their families, yet Korczak and people like him helped humanity itself to remain with the people there.

There is a famous Jewish teaching which asks, "what should a person do when everyone around is acting inhumanly?" and the answer is to "become more human". This is what people like Korczak did to the very end. And the end was coming. On the 6th August 1942 the order came to close the orphanage and to deport the 200 children to the death camp at Treblinka. Various accounts tell of how Korczak led the children to the railway sidings that day, how they were all well dressed, each carried a bottle of water and a toy or a book, how calm they were when all around them there was such fear and rage. Korczak was offered a further two chances that very day to escape from Poland – he was handed the necessary papers to leave but he chose to go with the children to meet their death.

Listen to this account from someone who watched Korczak and the children that day as they walked to the railway sidings:

*"I will never forget that sight to the end of my life. It was a silent but organised protest against the murderers, a march like which no human eye had ever seen before. The children went four by four. Korczak went first with his head held high holding a child in each hand. The second group was led by his assistant Stefa. They marched to their death with a look full of contempt for their assassins. 'Who is that man?' asked the German soldiers. I hid the flood of tears that ran down my cheeks with my hands. I sobbed and sobbed at our helplessness in the face of such murder".*

Today at Treblinka a memorial stands consisting of 17,000 rocks representing the lost Jewish communities. Only one is inscribed: it says simply "Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) and the children".

This world of ours can at times be a very cruel and frightening place. I give thanks for people of inspiration who through their example encourage the rest of us to move towards goodness, to be better and nobler than we might otherwise be, to allow the torches that we carry, be they large or small, to burn a little bit more brightly, shining love and inspiration back out to illuminate our world.

**Book referred to: A Voice for the Child edited by Sandra Joseph (1999)**