

Summer Lens

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah

August 30, 2009

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"In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt as injustice."

These words come from Charles Dickens' novel, "Great Expectations." Dickens, a Unitarian by the way and who had grown up under extremely harsh economic circumstances, had his own mission as a writer. He wanted the learned upper crust and privileged of society to notice people...to see those kinds of people so radically different from themselves. Although the non-privileged and marginalized population was always right there before their eyes, they never seemed to see them. The unjust world of poverty seemed invisible, and yet children, Dickens maintained, are so perceptive.

We'll get back to Dickens. For now, I must explain to those who are new to the church, it has been a tradition over the past several years for me to begin the new church year by issuing the latest installment from my ventures in Bolinas California where Mary and I spend several weeks each summer. This most unusual town is situated an hour north of San Francisco, hugs the coast in West Marin, and time has stopped there in 1968. Bolinas was the epicenter for beat poets, the Jefferson Airplane had a house just down the road, and entering Bolinas is like jumping into a time warp. Beat poetry has long lost its place in American letters, but the town still carries the vibe as though Allen Ginsberg might drop in and deliver the word on our spiritual nakedness, or surely Jack Kerouac might pull up in his car at any time looking for adventure.

The hippy socialist and poetic instincts of the 60's remain. It's great to be in an environment where NOBODY is afraid of socialized medicine.

If I were asked how to get to our house I would have to give the following directions: Driving north on route 1, make a left at the end of the lagoon. Head on down until you come to an unattended farm stand that is open 24 hours. Beautiful fruits and vegetables as well as fresh bouquets of flowers for \$5 are available day and night. Just place your money here after weighing your produce there. Mary and I paid the money, still not feeling quite up to the level of the locals who mostly leave IOU's.

Make a left at the farm stand and drive down until you see a sign that says Peace on Earth and then hang a right. Drive up the hill and we'll be watching for you. There is no house number.

When we arrived in Bolinas we immediately buy the Point Reyes Light, a weekly rag that includes all the sheriff reports in Bolinas. This is our way of catching up on the latest gossip in town. The published Bolinas Police Records are always mind-blowing to a former New Yorker. We discovered that on "On July 11th at 8:14p.m. a

54 year old man was experiencing pain above his belly button." That was too bad. And the sheriff reported that on July 12th, at 7:14 a.m. a neighbor complained that a woman had been yelling on Wharf Road and now appeared to be going to the library. That kind of sums up the danger we could anticipate.

We did pass two guys sitting curbside whose conversation signaled potential conflict. We heard one guy turn to the other and say: "My life is more meaningful than yours." Curious where this might lead we slowed down long enough to hear the other man respond: "Oh yeah. I've levitated in front of thousands of people." The first guy was so impressed that any altercation was avoided. He simply said "wow." Did I mention that there used to be a lot of drugs in Bolinas and some folks have not quite regained their equilibrium...from the 60's.

Speaking of drugs, the headline in the SF Chronicle when we first arrived was: "Oakland May Tax Marijuana." It just didn't feel like Utah. In California you can smoke weed for medicinal reasons, a very humane exception to the law. But the odd thing was that literally every person we met, from SF north to Ukiah, had a card giving them their medicinal privilege...a marijuana card was as common as a driver's license.

What really endears us to Bolinas is its finely tuned perception of justice. Bolinas takes care of their people. A homeless woman who runs about town in corn stalk shoes and corn stalks in her hair, need only walk into the Coast Café and receive a meal. Across the street at Smiley's Tavern, she might play piano as the bartender says, "Jane, just for a short while, okay?"

In the large patio area next to the organic food store is the Bolinas Free Box where the privileged many offer fine clothing and toys and thises and that's simply for the taking for anyone who needs a hand. The Free Box is always open; just help your self. Annually, there's the Bolinas Free Box Fashion Show, a huge fundraiser where some of the townspeople model the clothing contributed to the Free Box. You pay good money for this extravaganza. The most popular fashion model is a woman named Breath. The locals all have names like that.

We made it to San Francisco only once this year, primarily to visit the SF Museum of Modern Art, an annual venture. Although the main exhibit featured Georgia O'Keefe's paintings juxtaposed with her friend Ansel Adams' photography, an interesting study of their like-mindedness in capturing the beauty of the west and southwest, the real grabber for us, on another floor entirely, was the photography of a Jewish Swiss Immigrant named Robert Frank.

At the entrance to his works hangs a quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupery: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." And so Robert Frank's exhibit entailed a supreme effort to capture on camera the essentials he actually saw with his heart. It would have pleased Charles Dickens very much.

A little background to the exhibit called *The Americans*, photos taken by Frank of America's south and urban areas from 1957-58. On November 7, 1955 in McGehee, AK, Frank was arrested by state police because he was a shabbily dressed foreigner with New York license plates. In a letter to his dear friend, Walker Evans, Frank wrote that he was finger printed, forced to sign his name under the word "criminal," and threatened with violence. After being questioned for more than 12 hours, he was released without charge from (what he described as) "his most humiliating experience ever encountered."

Robert Frank's photos portray a frightening America of two classes: The haves and havenots; a segregated America and an America where injustice is etched into the faces of the oppressed. On the surface, all the photos depict common everyday scenes, nothing extraordinary or spectacular. For example there is a photo of a trolley car in New Orleans with the passengers sitting inside the trolley gazing out through the windows into the camera. Nothing really compelling, at first blush. But if you looked carefully, not with your eyes but let your heart see the picture, you would notice the first three-quarters of the trolley filled exclusively with smiling white people, while the back of the trolley was packed with tired black faces staring at you expressionless.

The exhibit focused on the subtleties of injustice, not always quickly apparent to the naked eye. I wondered what a photographer might capture while doing a show on America, summer of 2009. What would this summer's lens capture, and how would we view the photos? Imagine focusing a camera on the Sonia Sotomayor hearings this summer. There would be photos of southern senators firing questions at the supreme court nominee, but wouldn't we also be able to perceive, if fully scrutinized, the inherent injustice of an Hispanic woman portrayed by the senators as "The Other;" someone not familiar with how things are done in America. She is portrayed by right wing senators as an overemotional biased ideologue who displays empathy in her wishes to protect minorities from the vigor's of real American justice.

What a startling picture this summer as Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma joked to Sotomayor that she would have lots of "splaining to do," an echo of Ricky Ricardo speaking to Lucille Ball on the I Love Lucy show. Questioning by Lindsey Graham, and Jeff Sessions (known for his unsuccessful prosecution of civil rights activists), implied that Judge Sotomayor had a temperament problem and advised her that "maybe these hearings are a time for self-reflection."

Didn't the snapshot of Sotomayor's hearing really distil the conservative right clinging to their last vestiges of power, who in the words of Frank Rich, "were blissfully oblivious to the new America that was crashing down on their heads." What a photo of an emerging new America.

Our summer lens in 2009 could not help but catch the embarrassing charade of American democracy during the many (loud) town meetings held throughout the country. What was that about, really? Angry faces, temples bulging, eyes fired with hate, voices straining to interrupt. Rehearsed lines that public options in health care would kill the elderly and that extending healthcare to the poor was a Nazi technique, revealed people desperately afraid to learn that America's healthcare might not be the best in the world. But America has to be the best in the world because we are Americans. Their blank expressions while shouting sound bites should be exhibited together with photos of the unemployed and uninsured in Flint, Michigan. The marginalized standing right before our eyes but seldom seen.

I believe the oddest snapshot this summer, precipitated by the nation's continuous struggle with race, showed an Irish policeman and an African-American Harvard professor sipping beer with the president and vice president on the White House lawn. (Was that surreal or what?) In an effort to get the picture right, Obama wanted his choice of beer to reflect typical American taste, thereby selecting Bud Light. But since Budweiser has been taken over by a Belgium company, it lacked the true American grit. If I had been asked, I would have recommended that the president drink from a tall frosty bottle of Polygamy Porter. Now that's American. And even Biblical to an extent.

A hot topic this summer pertained to the parenting styles of Barack and Michelle Obama. It was quite a summer for the girls. Before settling in at Martha's Vineyard for the close of the school vacation period, Malia and Sasha toured the Eiffel Tower, swooned over the Jonas Brothers, made gelato in Rome, visited with the Pope, President Sarkozy, Beyonce, and took in a tour of the Kremlin. Not your typical kid summer fare. But here's where they depart from the bubble of privilege. Unlike the Buddha who had to physically escape his protected lifestyle of riches to comprehend the world of suffering, the Obamas are intentionally teaching their girls to see the complexities of the world with their hearts.

Their summer ventures included some lessons in suffering as they visited the slave port in Ghana, a departure point for black slaves shipped to America. Michelle, a direct descendent of slaves as are her daughters, placed red roses in the slave dungeons and used the time for reflection for the people who were imprisoned there.

The president expressly stated that he wanted his daughters to fully understand that there are people willing to degrade others simply because they appeared differently. He tried to get his daughters to engage in the imaginative act of what it would be like if they were snatched away from Mom and Dad and sent to some place they had never seen before. And in what many people might interpret as subversive, the president said he wanted his daughters to learn as they grew older, how the United States has a moral obligation to think about other people.

Obama said: "I want the girls to see the world and then report back to Michelle and me on what they were seeing." This goal reminds me of Robert Frank's exhibit in the MOMA, where he set out to see the world, in this case America in 1957, and then reported back what he saw. There are such subtleties in the world, and it is only with the heart that we begin to see rightly.

As the summer draws to a close, our camera lens points now to the Utah legislature and our new governor. Apparently neither Utah House Speaker, Dave Clark, nor Governor Gary Herbert, had a parent counsel them in their youth that there are actually people in this world willing to deliberately degrade others because they appeared different. Who in the legislature has ever considered the moral obligation to think about other people?

Thus the legislature and the governor are prepared to erase any ordinance which makes it illegal to fire a person from the job or evict a person from the home solely for being gay or lesbian or transgendered. They feel this constitutes a "protected class." And this could lead, the governor explained incredulously, to blue-eyed blond people seeking class protection. Where would this ever end? The governor is absolutely right. If blue-eyed blond Utahns were allowed to be fired and evicted from their homes because of the color of their eyes and hair, we all would seek to restore their basic human and civil rights. But the governor and house speaker, as white male blue-eyed Mormons, supposedly straight, refuse to see the injustice imposed on people who appear to be different.

This summer Mary and I were delighted to host our church's high school kids for dinner after their return from their mission trip. It's the fourth year and has become a favorite tradition of ours. This year the kids worked in New Orleans mostly in the 9th ward, devastated and ravaged by Hurricane Katrina. They reported what they saw in the new world they experienced. They were enraged by the obvious injustice. Four years since the hurricane they remarked, and it's still humiliating for people to live in the 9th ward. What are the priorities of our government, they asked. Why is the French Quarter in fine repair while minority people still live in squalor in the 9th ward? I did not have an answer, but I was proud that they saw the situation with their hearts and had evolved into young people dumbfounded by a world that actually seeks to degrade others because they appear to be different.

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