



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Th' whole worl's in a terrible state o' chassis

Clay Nelson © 15 October 2017

As most of you know, Rachel and I took off for paradise last week to celebrate her birthday. We hoped to get off the grid on a 14-hectare island 45 minutes by boat from Nadi, Fiji. We weren't disappointed. We did find paradise. Temperatures in the low 30s. Gentle tropical breezes. Sea turtles to feed. Excellent food served by a friendly staff. Coral gardens and a flamboyant tapestry of diverse fish feeding from them, oblivious to their face-masked observers. Time to read books with no obvious use for a future sermon, on hammocks strapped to coconut palms, interrupted only by colourful parrots squawking overhead.

Yes, it was paradise but, sadly, I must report it is nearly lost. They have Wi-Fi. Paradise is officially on the grid. Rachel was still able to edit and send out our newsletter. I still had a few work emails that needed attention. Yes, we could have left our devices home but our boarding passes and travel documents were on them as well as books we were reading. Yes, we could have turned them off once on the island, but that would have taken more fortitude than either of us seemed to possess. We have been conditioned by technology to feel lost if we don't know what's happening everywhere in the world at our fingertips. This is true, even though I have never been a fan of horror movies. Yet, having so much access to serious problems around the world reveals that we live in frightening times. Certainly, the most frightening of my life time.

How frightening? Naomi Klein summarised the horror better than I could in a recent speech at the UK Labour Conference: "From heads of state tweeting threats of nuclear annihilation, to whole regions rocked by climate chaos, to thousands of migrants drowning off the coasts of Europe, to openly racist parties gaining ground: it feels like there are a lot of reasons to be pessimistic about our collective future.

"To take one example, the Caribbean and southern United States are in the midst of an unprecedented hurricane season, pounded by storm after storm. Puerto Rico – hit by Irma, then Maria – is entirely without power and could be for months, its water and communication systems severely compromised. But just as during Hurricane Katrina, the cavalry is missing in action. Donald Trump is too busy trying to get black athletes fired for daring to shine a spotlight on racist violence. A real federal aid package for Puerto Rico has not yet been announced. And the vultures are circling: the business press reports that the only way for Puerto Rico to get the lights back on is to sell off its electricity utility.

"This is a phenomenon I've called the Shock Doctrine: the exploitation of wrenching crises to smuggle through policies that devour the public sphere and further enrich a small elite. We've seen this dismal cycle repeated again and again: after the 2008 financial crash, and now in the UK with the Tories planning to exploit Brexit to push through disastrous pro-corporate trade deals without debate.

"Ours is an age when it is impossible to pry one crisis apart from all the others. They have all merged, reinforcing and deepening each other like one shambling, multi-headed beast. The

current US president can be thought of in much the same way. It's tough to adequately sum him up. You know that horrible thing currently clogging up the London sewers, the fatberg? Trump is the political equivalent of that. A merger of all that is noxious in the culture, economy and body politic, all glommed together in a self-adhesive mass. And we're finding it very hard to dislodge."

Naomi Klein spoke the first day of our holiday. If she had spoken a week later as we left paradise, she would have had to add the Las Vegas mass murder, one of the worst in US history not committed against Native Americans; the Spanish brutal crackdown on Catalonia's attempt at democracy, in a place where I have many friends from when I served a church in Barcelona; and the fires in and near Santa Rosa where I have friends and in-laws.

While sitting on a white sand beach, gazing at blue skies and crystal-clear waters gently stroking the shore, a line from a Sean O'Casey play came to mind as I contemplated with considerable despair the world beyond this idyllic setting, "Th' whole worl's in a terrible state o' chassis."

It is from his play *Juno and the Paycock* written in 1922 during the chaotic turbulence of the Irish Civil War. It has been about 50 years since I saw the play.

Act I takes place in the tenements of Dublin and revolves around the misfortunes of the dysfunctional Boyle family. The father, "Captain" Jack (so called because of his propensity for telling greatly exaggerated stories of his short career as a merchant sailor), is a loafer who claims to be unable to work because of pains in his legs, which mysteriously appear whenever someone mentions work to him. Despite his family's poverty, Jack spends all his time and money at the pub. He is the paycock or peacock in the play's title. The mother, Juno, is the only member of the family currently working, as their daughter Mary is on strike and son Johnny is disabled, having lost his arm in the War of Independence. Mary feels guilty about dumping her boyfriend and fellow striker, Jerry Devine. Meanwhile, Johnny agonises over his betrayal of his friend and former comrade in the IRA, who was subsequently murdered by Free State supporters. Near the end of the act, one of Jack's relatives dies, and a solicitor brings news that the Boyles have come into a large inheritance. Overjoyed with the news, Jack vows to Juno to change his ways.

In Act II, a mere two days after receiving news of the bequest, Jack has already begun flaunting his newfound wealth by purchasing luxuries on credit, in anticipation of receiving the inheritance. The Boyles throw a party during which the funeral procession of Johnny's friend passes the tenement, but the Boyles and their guests halt their carousing only when his grieving mother stops at their door. Juno goes out to offer support to the mother, who delivers a monologue mourning the loss of her son and praying for an end to the war, but Jack selfishly ignores her suffering.

The story resumes two months later with the final act. Mary is revealed to be carrying the solicitor's child out of wedlock. He has deserted her and left the country in shame. It turns out that the will has been bungled and the Boyles will receive nothing from the inheritance. The creditors swarm in reclaiming Captain Jack's luxuries. Johnny upbraids his father for embarrassing the family, Juno returns alone and delivers the news of Mary's pregnancy. As Juno pleads with Jack to use the leftover money from the inheritance to move the family to a different city, he angrily reveals that they will receive nothing. Unable to cope with the stress of the situation, Jack disowns Mary and retreats to the pub. Johnny persuades Juno to follow

Jack and beg him to come home. Mary returns, and Johnny disowns her as well. Jerry Devine shows up to patch things up with Mary, but he too renounces her when he learns of her pregnancy. As the last of Jack's fancy new furniture is being repossessed, several IRA men arrive and drag Johnny away; Juno later hears that a body resembling Johnny's has been found on a country road, riddled with bullets. Juno decides that Jack will never take on his responsibilities as a father and breadwinner, so she leaves to make a better life for herself and Mary. She sends Mary to live with a relative and, before going to the police station to identify Johnny's body, delivers a monologue that echoes her grieving friend's in Act II. Some time later, Jack stumbles home from the pub, extremely drunk and unaware that his son is dead or that his wife and daughter have left him. After a brief conversation with his drinking buddy, Jack accidentally drops his last sixpence on the floor; he drunkenly mourns that "the whole worl's in a terrible state o' chassis" before passing out.

Juno is clearly the hero of the story. She has much in common with her Roman goddess namesake. The Roman goddess is portrayed with peacocks that draw her chariot. The peacocks O'Casey's Juno lives with are her children and husband. She is the goddess of the hearth, presenting a positive role model for her family. She rejects the ideology of her children. Keeping her family fed is more important. Like the Goddess, she is flawed and make mistakes, but she learns from them and is transformed by them, unlike her husband. O'Casey portrays her as the genius of womanhood able to survive life's most difficult hardships. It is from her we are to learn how to cope during horrific times.

Certainly, O'Casey lived through harsh times in Irish history: The War of Independence, the Civil War, Easter Sunday and World War I. He grew up in Dublin's tenements, and his mother, upon whom Juno was based, kept the family together.

Unlike most of his contemporary playwrights, O'Casey did not focus so much on nationalism as on the suffering of the working class. This was not just an Irish problem. Between 1905 and 1925 there was a deep pessimism about the state of the world that evolved from society's already critical feeling of utter disaster and imminent catastrophe caused for example by the global economic crisis.

This pessimism was especially true in Germany, sparked by the reign of the last Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm II. Due to the arms race between European colonial powers, his rule had the relatively young German nation embrace the militaristic tradition of its strongest constituent, Prussia. This pushed German society into a strong belief in authority instead of humanity.

This rise of dehumanisation and depersonalisation was additionally furthered by industrialisation and its consequences. The increasingly fast development of technology, which enabled mass production, caused the majority of small farmers and their families in the vicinity of cities to lose their work, sink into poverty and often even starve to death. In search of new occupations, scores of needy farmers migrated into the newly formed metropolises such as Berlin. Yet, life in a bigger city was not necessarily more sustainable. Trying to earn a living by operating colossal machines with neither technical understanding nor training. Child workers were mutilated and simply replaced on a regular, cruel basis.

Sadly, the times O'Casey experienced and our own time share much in common. However, if it is going change we can't just get drunk, declare th' whole worl's in a terrible state of chassis and pass out. Like Juno we need to show a better way of responding, with Juno's

compassion and a fortitude that enabled her to survive her environment and the self-destructive tendencies of those close to her.

Naomi Klein may have a little Juno in her. In her Labour address, she went on to declare that the Shock Doctrine did not have to be the last word on our circumstances. Moments in crisis need not become opportunities for the obscenely wealthy to grab still more. They can be moments when we can find our best selves.

We all witnessed this in the aftermath in all the recent catastrophic events: the fire at Grenfell Tower, Houston, Puerto Rico, Las Vegas, Barcelona, Santa Rosa. When the people responsible were missing in action, the community came together, held one another in their care, organised donations and advocated for the living – and for the dead.

It's not only at the grassroots level: there is a long and proud history of crises sparking progressive transformation on a societal scale. Think of the victories won by working people for social housing in the wake of the first world war, or for the NHS after the horrors of the second world war. This should remind us that moments of great crisis and peril do not need to knock us backwards: they can also catapult us forward.

But these transformative victories are never won by simply resisting, or saying no to the latest outrage, or drowning ourselves in our sorrows bemoaning the world's terrible state of chassis. To win in a moment of true crisis, we also need a bold and forward-looking yes: a plan for how to rebuild and respond to the underlying causes. And that plan needs to be convincing, credible and, most of all, captivating. We have to help a weary and wary public to imagine itself into that better world.

Klein says “We can and must do more to connect the dots between economic injustice, racial injustice and gender injustice. We need to draw out the connections between the gig economy – which treats human beings like a raw resource from which to extract wealth and then discard – and the dig economy, in which extractive companies treat the Earth in precisely the same careless way.

“And let's show exactly how we can move from that gig and dig economy to a society based on principles of care – caring for the planet and for one another. A society where the work of our caregivers, and of our land and water protectors, is respected and valued. A world where no one and nowhere is thrown away – whether in firetrap housing estates, or on hurricane-ravaged islands.”

Unitarians have a long history of connecting dots. It has put us at the heart of making the world a little more humanitarian, a word formed in 1794 by combining humanism and Unitarian. Our contribution to that effort has never been more important if paradise is to be regained.