



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

A failure of nerve

Clay Nelson © 20 March 2022

The world is stuck. There is lots of evidence. This premise is supported by recent events in Aotearoa New Zealand. The once admired Prime Minister has been stripped of her beatification, not by anything she has done or failed to do, but by our anxiety displayed on Parliament's lawn. The pandemic is still taking a toll, never mind to a much lesser degree thanks to her government's decision to put people's well-being ahead of the GNP. Russia has declared war in Ukraine and threatens the world with nuclear weapons. Certainly nothing Jacinda has done. Thanks to that war, petrol costs are skyrocketing. Again, not Jacinda's doing. Due to the pandemic interrupting supply lines, petrol costs, labour shortages due to illness, supporting vulnerable people and businesses, inflation is the monster under the bed everyone thinks Jacinda should scare away. Out of our anxiety we want certainty. That desire gets expressed as a demand for a quick fix, when no such thing exists.

In *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, Gilbert Murray suggested that after Socrates had "dis-illuminated" his society, Greek civilization was around the corner from the Renaissance. But, he said, they seemed to panic at the prospect and, instead, he wrote: "The great thing to remember is that the mind of [human kind] cannot be enlightened permanently by merely teaching [ourselves] to reject some particular set of superstitions. There is an infinite supply of other superstitions always at hand; and the mind that desires such things, that is, the mind that has not trained itself to the hard discipline of reasonableness and honesty, will, as soon as its devils are cast out, proceed to fill itself with their relations."

A "failure of nerve" affecting civilization today is when anxiety reaches certain thresholds, "reasonableness and honesty" no longer defend against illusion, and then even the most learned ideas can begin to function as superstitions.

In my short time on this planet I have seen a lot of changes technologically speaking but, time and again, I have watched our anxieties knock our leaders off their pedestals and do everything possible to sabotage their leadership by

numerous devils. As a result, new possibilities are never discovered or even looked for.

But let's take a much longer view to see how we can get past this predilection.

The *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493 describes Europe as depressed. Published in one of medieval Germany's most important centres of learning and innovation, the *Chronicle* epitomizes its era. On the one hand, pioneering with the new, innovative hardware of movable type, it faithfully reproduces engraved portraits of the major cities of Europe and the Holy Land. On the other hand, it describes a civilisation with little vision or hope. Referring to what they call "the calamity of our time," the publishers actually leave several pages blank so that readers can record "the rest of the events until the end of the world."

Contributing to the general malaise is a combination of political, social, economic, and theological "downers." Late fifteenth-century Europe, despite its glorious cathedrals, emerging artists, and developing network of universities, is a society living in the wake of the plagues, the breakdown of the feudal order, and the increasing inability of an often hypocritical and corrupt church's capacity to ring true. In addition, the Moorish encirclement has proved invulnerable to centuries of crusades and now severely limits Europe's access to the riches and delights of the Far East. There has not been a major scientific discovery for a thousand years. Then, as if suddenly, Europe is all agog. The depression lifts like a morning mist, novelty begins to shine everywhere, and the seeds of the Renaissance that have been germinating here and there for two hundred years sprout vigorously. The imaginative gridlock that has largely beclouded Europe's inventiveness for more than a millennium dissolves forever. Over the next half-century, more radical change occurs in every field of human endeavour than has ever happened before.

So, what happened? Someone decided to go a different direction. Columbus was the first.

While Columbus' voyage would not have been possible without some of the accumulated learning that preceded him, European history after 1493 does not logically follow from all the knowledge or creative imagination that had been gathering in the previous three centuries. The quantum leap that occurs around 1500 is a direct result of a complete reorientation to reality initiated by Columbus's discoveries and the subsequent exploration of geography.

The catalyst for those other imaginative breakthroughs is the “nerve” of the great navigators who lead the way. Europe’s imaginative capacity is unleashed not by the discovery of learning, as those with a vested interest in learning would have it, but by the discovery of the New World. The enormous awakening of European civilisation’s inventiveness is a direct result of the effect those new horizons have on an Old World. Even as Columbus is returning from his fourth voyage (1504), Michelangelo is sculpting his David and Leonardo has completed the Mona Lisa; half a century later, by the time Drake has reached San Francisco (1570), Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, and El Greco are rising to the top. Opera has its beginnings. Kepler, Galileo, and Harvey are beginning to set the stage for the next hundred years, which Alfred North Whitehead calls the century of genius. All after a thousand years of almost complete darkness, illuminated almost solely by the great cathedrals.

Columbus’s voyage is a hinge of time. It swings open a door barely ajar, and for the next hundred years after 1493, no significant cathedral, unless previously planned, is begun. The effect of America’s discovery on the European imagination is as though God has been hiding a piece of land bigger than the known world since the dawn of creation.

The great lesson of this turnaround is that when any relationship system is imaginatively gridlocked, it cannot get free simply through more thinking about the problem. Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur, that spirit of adventure which optimizes serendipity and which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first. This is equally true regarding families, institutions, whole nations, and entire civilisations. But for that type of change to occur, the system in turn must produce leaders who can both take the first step and maintain the stamina to follow through in the face of predictable resistance and sabotage. Any renaissance, anywhere, whether in a marriage or a business, depends primarily not only on new data and techniques, but on the capacity of leaders to separate themselves from the surrounding emotional climate so that they can break through the barriers that are keeping everyone from “going the other way.” My hope is that Jacinda has the nerve to stay the course, free from the anxiety swirling around her.

At university I took a music appreciation class. One of the questions on the final exam was, what would have been the reactions of Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven to Dave Brubeck’s 1959 “off-beat” composition “Take Five,”

which revolutionised tempos and time signatures in the world of jazz? Would they have been mystified, aghast, or just said, “Wow, what I could have done with that freedom!”?

One of the reasons my spiritual journey has brought me to Unitarianism, is it offers my imagination freedom and the courage to go where religion has not traditionally gone. Whenever it seems that I will succumb to a failure of nerve it lifts me up, calling me to unfurl the sails and leave safe harbour.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

Are you a tree or an animal?

Do you seek stability or the possibilities of opportunity?