



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Socks and Songs

Alix Geard © 19th February 2023

Sometimes you choose a theme for a service and then life throws you complications.

I had planned to take my text today from that most varied and human of sources, the microblogging site Tumblr. Every so often in my craft or philosophy groups some words turn up from the person known on Tumblr as higgsboshark:

The thing about knitting is it's much harder to fear the existential futility of all your actions while you're doing it.

Like ok, sure, sometimes it's hard to believe you've made any positive impact on the world. But it's pretty easy to believe you've made a sock. Look at it. There it is. Put it on, now your foot's warm.

Checkmate, nihilism.

From <<https://www.tumblr.com/higgsboshark/179475660451/the-thing-about-knitting-is-its-much-harder-to>>

There are several hashtags that follow this. My favourites are #the sock is not a metaphor for anything #it's just a sock #that's all it needs to be.

When this shows up it reliably makes me feel better... even though I am possibly among the world's slowest knitters of socks. Even though I'll totally use the sock as a metaphor as well as an actual sock.

So I had thought to talk about making and mending. About doing things to make the world seem better, even if they're small. About the way singing in community makes us feel more positive and more bonded. I had a pair of props and some singable songs in mind.

And then we had the last few weeks. We've had 2 storms of astonishing destructive power, bringing floods and landslides. People have died and others have had their lives turned upside down. The storms have damaged homes, infrastructure, businesses, and areas that would normally grow a good proportion of our country's fruit and vegetables.

Seeing all that, I have to ask: **is a sock enough?**

What do we know?

The seas are warmer, even though this is a La Nina year when they'd typically be

cooler. That warmth means more energy in our weather systems. That energy means *more*: more rain soaked into warmer air, more wind that in our girdle of the world can pull in both that warm, wet air and circle to draw in the colder air coming off the poles. The earlier models suggested it would bring more drought to our eastern areas.

What do we think about this?

There have been several polls, both international and national, about attitudes to climate change. It's Bernard Hickey's summary of several of those that most got to me this week, with its mix of sadness and anger - and frustration:

A poll taken after the January 27 storms in Auckland found less than half of voters in Auckland and elsewhere up and down the motu thought they and various Governments should do more to combat climate change. This is consistent with other polls taken in the last three years, which show New Zealanders are less likely than in most other countries to want actions that would change our carbon-and-methane-emitting lifestyles.

We call ourselves '100% Pure' and believe we're greener and cleaner than most, but we're actually less likely to vote for policies or take actual climate action ourselves than we think we would, and less than most others overseas.

[...]

In essence, New Zealanders generally, and Aucklanders in particular, believe we want more climate emissions reduction action, but not by us individually, not any time soon, and not in ways that would force them to either change their current life patterns or pay for others to do it. We have adopted the magical thinking promoted by politicians of both sides for at least the last 20 years that we can keep our current lifestyle and not have to either pay more taxes or charges, but still reduce emissions.

[Will this climate crisis event be wasted too? \(substack.com\)](http://substack.com)

I try to interpret this charitably. We can't yet see the new ways. Many of the systems that would support them aren't there yet. And so it's hard to let go of the old ways that we've come to rely on. But that difficulty isn't evenly distributed. For some of us it's pain in trying to house and feed your family in our current systems of work and housing and transport. For others it's discomfort with change or annoyance at making changes for a greater good.

Climate justice

About 2 weeks after the Christchurch earthquake in February 2011, Peter Hyde wrote an article for the Herald. He said that "*Christchurch is three cities right now, not one.*" He spoke of "*Rescue City*": the cordoned off area with the big dramatic events and the media attention, where almost no one lived. Then there was

“*Shower City*”, where people could take a hot shower because they had electricity, water and sewerage. He estimated that Shower City was about 65% of Christchurch at that time. Then there was “*Refugee City*”: the rest of Christchurch. In Refugee City only about half the people had power, and almost none had running water. By the time Peter wrote, their batteries had run down, gas had run out and other supplies were low or gone. Remarkably quickly, people had found themselves with “few resources, little information, and no ‘voice’”.

[Peter Hyde: Shattered city's forgotten victims - NZ Herald](#)

In our current disasters, let's be sensitive to these patterns. Many of us are currently living in Shower City - and I say this as someone whose area also had an earthquake this week, fortunately without much damage. We had the initial experience, and we're aware of the consequences around us, but we're relatively minimally affected. The big landslides and bridge outages are Disaster City. It's not that they're not important. But much of the suffering will happen over time, in Refugee City, where people had lives that depended on infrastructure that may take quite a while to re-establish.

There's a [thought experiment in political philosophy, called the “Veil of Ignorance” or the original position](#). It's usually associated with John Rawls, although like most thinking it was built in stages by people including William Vickrey and John Harsanyi. My un-nuanced description of it is that we should shape societies and the kinds of lives people are able to live in them, so that all the options are okay. The veil of ignorance is that the planners and deciders shouldn't know where they'll end up: they shouldn't have an assurance of a comfortable ever-after for people like them. Instead, they should be motivated to make societies where any position they could find themselves in would be acceptable. It's a way of using self-interest to check through all the work and care we do to hold our communities together.

I've been thinking about this as I've been noting that this time I'm in Shower City. What about next time? What about the times after that? What about most of us, at some time, needing help? This was behind the development of social welfare, and it's time we checked in with those ideas again. Will we all be refugees? What would we want that experience to be like? How will we shape things to affect that?

And for as long as we're the ones only lightly touched by disaster, how will we support others, and work for systems that are better suited to the times we find ourselves in? At the same time as people need somewhere to live, something to do, someone to love and something to look forward to, we should probably be taking stock of whether we should rebuild differently, and how. Our legal and social systems are not set up well to deal with this. We've only recently started practical discussions about relocating away from floodlands, and that's on the West Coast of the South Island.

Two more things before I finish.

[Greta Thunberg's “The Climate Book”](#) is out now. It's a collection of essays on topics

about climate change. This is a response to the questions Thunberg is often asked about what to do. She's typically said "Listen to the experts". This book gathers writings by those experts on a series of themes, starting with how climate works and ending with "Hope is something you have to earn". On the way it passes through structural and lifestyle changes, equity and climate reparations. I'm still reading my way through this, dipping into it. I think it's an important step.

Te Puea Herangi - taking your people to a new place

Second, we know we must give help and support to those who are suffering. We must also consider what we build next, and where, and for whom.

There's a story from this land, from our history, that I find myself turning to. [Te Puea Herangi](#) was an important leader of the Waikato Tainui. In the very hard times after World War 1, made worse by the imprisonment of her people who objected to conscription and by the influenza pandemic, her community at Mangatāwhiri was repeatedly flooded. There are photos of the flooding in the National Library's collections. They rebuilt, but the flooding was a pattern that did not seem likely to change. And Te Puea pulled together all her formidable skills - of vision, of maintaining morale, of what we'd now call PR and managing relationships including with people who were not inclined to think well of her - and made a plan to move her people to higher ground. That plan was hard. Its success was not guaranteed. And yet Te Puea led her community to see new things. Often she would describe them in terms of existing things or old and valued stories, to make them acceptable and understandable. And through adversity, that community built Tūrangawaewae.

I find myself hoping for more Te Pueas for our time. People who can reframe the old stories to show us possible futures. People who can show us communities where we can see places for ourselves. People who can foster our skills and keep up our spirits. I realise that I can't rely on others to take up this work, though. How can we identify and nourish the Te Pueas we need? Might we have to become them?

And yes, that does mean through learning and sharing our crafts, through making things for our communities that are beautiful, and through singing together.

Making a sock or singing a song is still an action against nihilism. For that let's embrace the sock - and all its metaphorical equivalents.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

How can we use our choices and our voices to ensure that the difficulties brought about by climate change are distributed equitably?