

Developing Peace: TAZ, Empathy and the Radical Nature of Listening

- Northern Ireland - remember wanting to organize a sweep of the whole country... just walk through and root out every IRA member and round them up. Purify the country.
 - But this would require huge violence. Attempts to bring peace and utopia by purging a place require it. You can't fight a war on terror.
 - So want to explore some ideas about how we might work for peace without resorting to utopian ideals, and without violence
- If you've read the book, you'll know I talk a bit about the Middle East, about Palestine and Israel.
 - You HAVE to go. If you are a Christian, you simply HAVE to go. I can't emphasise enough how much your perspective on your faith, your politics, your cultural stereotypes - all of these will be radically changed. And I mean that if you are pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli.
 - What changed between my 1st and 2nd visits is the wall. It is HUGE. And it is archetypal symbol of this failed mode of making peace:
 - Keep violence out. You can only do this with violence.
 - Peace is not about keeping violence out. That's security. Peace is about dissolving violence, making it melt away.
- You may have seen some of that in Northern Ireland. It wasn't the fortified barracks that brought peace, nor the killings or bombs. In the end it was tough decisions to meet, and talk and compromise.
 - In the end, peace was about seeing the humanity in 'the other.' You can't see that through a 10 metre concrete wall.
 - It was also about taking on some pain, rather than giving it. Seeing 'terrorist' murderers released early, giving up power in policing, having to open yourself to democratic votes - for democracy is only different from dictatorship in who is given a voice. In a democracy you, the people, say what you think of me. In a dictatorship I, the dictator, tell you what to think of me.
 - Democracy isn't perfect, but it is, in its proper form, about devolving power to the other.
 - This is clearly a huge current issue in the US, where we've seen the nature of political discourse under the spotlight. Shooting a 'liberal' congresswoman will solve...nothing. Nor will throwing verbal grenades at one another. And if you didn't think this was serious before... well now people are actually dying. Americans are killing Americans. This is an inside job. The hate has got really bad.

- The problem with having to see the humanity in the other is how painful that can be.
 - It would be equally violent to simply lock opposing sides in a room
 - They would simply beat one another til the strongest or fittest won.
 - Reconciliation doesn't come with forced contact.
 - The question is not how to achieve peace, but how to achieve a *just* peace.
- This is why I'm a big fan of the TAZ - the Temporary Autonomous Zone. Why?
 - It gives us a model of working towards peace that minimises - or tries to eliminate - violence
 - It gives us a model that is, I believe, more achievable and sustainable.
 - It gives us a model that is about divesting power, shedding celebrity and eschewing political gain.
- People have criticised TAZ because they say it won't bring lasting change. They're right in one way. TAZ is not the 'peace talks.' But TAZ prepares the ground so that peace can break out - and stay broken out. How? By allowing people to experience bursts of peace.
 - It changes the atmosphere. Bit by bit, it gives space for people to experience the common humanity in the other.
 - You may have heard something of it in NI, but there is a definite sense now that people really want peace to stay. Small pockets of violence remain, and for a while people thought it might threaten to return to the old ways... but these pockets are now quashed, not amplified.
- TAZ is closely linked to the work I've been doing on piracy because those who work with TAZ methods are very often seen as cultural heretics.
 - You see them in the Middle East - these shifty characters who are *talking to the enemy* and are thus under suspicion of heresy on both sides.
 - But what these people are doing is creating a heretical, dangerous space where glimpses of a new mode of being can be seen.
 - And this is what pirates have always done: taken a blocked culture and, by throwing some shit around, disturbed it, shaken it up and allowed it to be freed.
 - Pirate Radio stations...
 - From 'Radio is my Bomb' ... 'we'd like women's radio, ethnic radio...'
 - And this HAS happened. RIMB was published in 1987, but things have shifted. And it was

the temporary autonomous stations that did it.

- People have also criticised TAZ because they see it as diminishing commitment. And again, I think this is wrong-headed.
 - TAZ is ALL about commitment. But commitment with a different view of time.
 - Look at Jesus in feeding of 5000. Was he not committed to those people? Surely he should have stuck with them and kept feeding them? His radical commitment to humanity meant that his ministry was a TAZ. To have been anything else would have given the perception of commitment, but resulted in burnout. And we've all seen that in ministers, right?
 - TAZ is about temporary structures, but committed relationships. We don't bind ourselves to structures, because these end up killing us. By committing to people we allow ourselves to be able to form and re-form in ways that are people-centred, and good for people. The church has never really learned this lesson, despite Jesus making it pretty clear:
 - 'Sabbath made for man, not man for the Sabbath.
 - He never actually wrote down 'how it should be.'
 - If you look at people like Geoff Halper from ICAHD, he is super-committed to the cause. But he'll duck and dive and use whatever means to achieve this - going on a boat into Gaza, organising tours, rebuilding houses, getting school kids together, doing multi-faith camps.
- Empathy...
 - When we look at the other...what do we see. Need to radically reimagine the nature of Christian empathy.
 - Levinas: I'm afraid of the other because I have unresolved feelings within myself. They are so good, and I need to work out my own fear of them. This is the enigma *of* the other.
 - Žizek: I'm afraid of the other because they have unresolved feelings within themselves. They - and I - are in need of work. The mysteries of the ancient Egyptians... This is the enigma *in* the other.
 - From Levinas' viewpoint, we are wary of the mysterious Ancient Egyptians because we don't understand them – their actions and language are strange to us, and we would need to overcome the fear within us of this strangeness if we were to engage them. But Žizek – and the line of Hegel and Lacan – would have us reflect that the actions of the Ancient Egyptians were strange *even to themselves*. So if we were to engage them, it would not be simply a case of overcoming *our* fear of their strange ways, but reconciling ourselves to the fact that *they* have not overcome their *own* fear of their *own* strangeness. This principle then reflects back on to us, and our consciousness of the

enigmas within each of us too.

- Once again, it is useful to meditate on the incarnation in this light. In this thought experiment we can imagine God looking in love on fallen humanity in those last few days and hours before the first Christmas. Did he feel fear about what he was about to undertake? If so, what was the root of that fear? Levinas would locate it within God himself: a concern that he might fail, that these humans that he had created were more of an enigma to him than perhaps he had bargained for. Žižek would locate the fear elsewhere, and I think this is perhaps closer to the truth: God looks down and is concerned less that humans are enigmatic, but more concerned that they are an enigma to themselves. In other words, will they even understand what God is about to do?
 - God's empathy with us is perhaps thus not grounded in overcoming his internal fear of failure and being able to look at us from a state of fully resolved selfhood, but grounded in accepting what he is going to look like from *our* perspective as conflicted and unresolved selves:
 - *"For Hegel the Incarnation is not a move by means of which God makes himself accessible/visible to humans, but a move by means of which God looks at himself from the (distorting) human perspective."*
- This is the complex play that we need to get to grips with when we come to the theatre in which we want peace to begin to play out.
 - First we need a desire to empathise with the other. Not to purify them, not to get rid of them, not to be done with them.
 - Secondly we need courage to act, in the full knowledge that the move towards peace may leave us branded as a heretic, and may lead to discord within our host community.
 - This is perhaps something of what Jesus meant when he said he came not to bring peace but a sword. Put that verse in context and Jesus goes on to talk about ruptures within the home community: *man against father, daughter against mother...* But then goes on to talk about finding life by losing it - and I think there's an inversion there that suggests that the path to peace will cause some difficulty.
 - Thirdly, we need to meditate on our fears and motivations about engaging 'the other.'
 - There are very few 'contentless gifts.' We *will* have ulterior motives, and we need to become conscious of them. Are we just trying to convert them? Are we trying to make ourselves feel good?
 - And what about our fears - where do they lie? Are there prejudices within us we need to face

up to? Do we fear that we won't understand them, or that they won't understand us - or themselves?

- Fourthly, and connected I know to what Kevin has told me about your trip up til now, we need to listen to the other.
 - Listening is dangerous. It implies that we are taking someone seriously. To remain silent is to create a powerful act of non-speech, to leave a space *for the other to listen to themselves*.
 - As I've written in the book, the connected act of meditation offers a powerful critique to the consumer-capitalist culture of use-value, to borrow a term from Marx. To meditate is to become useless, to have no value... to leave space for the other to then listen to themselves.
 - Again, as I point out in the book - I think the difference between Jesus and Paul is instructive here.
 - Look at that...
 - As we live in such frenetic urbanised worlds - and that's not a value judgement - silence is so hard to find. And so the opportunity for the other to be heard is diminished.
 - Silence allows us to listen to the other within the self. Turn off the chatter from incessant internet feeds, from chirping devices and headphones.
 - Silence allows us to listen to the 'big other.' The still small voice of God.
 - Silence allows us to listen to our neighbours and enemies. Perhaps terrorists have to use bombs because they think it's the only way to get heard?
 - Silence, then, is an act of hospitality. To listen is to have already offered yourself: your attention, your time. Dialogue with the other will come... but we need to listen first. This is what Ikon have done in 'the evangelism project' in Belfast.
- I think these are hugely important questions for all of us, and for American Christians in particular.
 - 9/11 was HUGE. An enormous rupture. If you are not still shocked by it, go back and look again.
 - In one sense this was an enormous challenge to the Christian heritage of the US. How will we respond when extremist Muslims do this to us?
 - It's hardly for me to criticise, but I will offer all I can, and that's a critique. That from a distance, the response looked troublesome. Guantanamo, the rush to war, the treatment of Muslims and viral suspicion of all who were 'different.'

- I think the challenge of the key text from my book is still right there for us: a wise, religious person who 'has it all sorted' wants to know the greatest commandment... And Jesus turns it round to talk about love. That's the core. Love for the other. Concern for the other. And the problem is - you've demonised socialism.
- Not only that, but you've made it almost impossible to listen, made it a crime to give an ear to those who hate us. What can be wrong with listening to them? If we don't listen, they have to shout louder.
- Think of Jesus when presented with the woman caught in adultery... So much noise and confusion and accusation. Stone her!! Where could peace come from here? The pirate Jesus confounds them all - he writes in the dust:
 - When the accusation is made, Jesus at first makes no reply but writes with his finger on the ground. What on earth is he doing? Commentators have had plenty of suggestions, but there is one meaning that seems to me obvious in the light of what I think we learned that morning [of September 11]. He hesitates. He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation, tell the woman who she is and what her fate should be. He allows a moment, in which people are given time to see themselves differently precisely because he refuses to make the sense they want. When he lifts his head, there is both judgement and release.
 - So this is writing in the dust because it tries to hold that moment for a little longer, long enough for some of our demons to walk away.