

Joy: The Power of Integrity
December 17, 2006 at St. John's United Church by Linda Yates
(The Pain and the Joy of the lives and deaths of Ross and Alan)

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Today we light the candle of Joy which stands out on our Advent Wreath because it is pink. It seems an odd thing to designate this Sunday as "Joy" when we think that it is coupled with the gospel reading from Luke 3:1-14. When it is read properly, as Paul Healey has done today in his dramatic reading, it seems more than a little scary.

When we think of joy at this time of year, we call to mind angelic choirs, angelic children and image after image of babes born in mangers complete with little round halos circling their heads. That joy would be a part of these scenes, we understand. John the Baptist on the other hand, can seem a bit of a stretch at this time of year. In today's reading, an adult Jesus is about to be baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus isn't the only one lined up to be baptized. Clearly, something very important is happening around this strange man John. Hordes of people seeking redemption, forgiveness and desperately craving an encounter of some kind with God have converged on John. They are begging him to baptize them and beseeching him to teach them.

But what, you may ask, does this have to do with pink candles and joy?

I learned a new thing about joy this year. I learned it on the most awful of occasions. I learned it at two funerals which were both very different from one another in style and very much the same in terms of having publicly observed some crucial lessons about who God is and what it means to be a person of God.

In early November, Carl called me with terrible news. Ross Newcombe, the son of Cheryl and Roy Newcombe had died. Cheryl was a former Chair of the Halifax Regional Water Commission's Board with whom Carl works closely. It took some time for me to comprehend what Carl was telling me. This young man suddenly dropped dead at the age of 27. Apparently he had a very thin space in the wall of his heart which suddenly gave way and he instantly died. I had never met Ross but I knew he and his partner Lindsay Hope lived in a First Nations community on the edge of Yellowknife called Behchoko. Lindsay had accepted a job teaching Inuit children. Ross worked there also as a teaching assistant. On the rare occasions when I caught up with Cheryl she would tell me all about Ross' latest adventures. He had an interesting life. Besides work that he loved, he was an avid snowmobiler and raised sled dog teams. In fact, he and his Mom competed in a dog sledding competition. He was a man of action, a man of humour and a man of quiet caring. Carl and I think a lot of Cheryl and her partner Roy, so the death of their son hit us hard.

We attended Ross' funeral in Fall River. A very remarkable thing happened. Ross' wife Lindsay gave his eulogy. In all my years of doing and attending funerals I have never seen this happen. Usually, the spouse of someone who has died is too distraught to be capable of doing something like that. What quickly became apparent were two things: first, that Lindsay was infused with the power of having shared her life with Ross and secondly that the grieving process that she was led through by the Inuit Community and their elders had so filled her with strength that it enable her to do this amazing thing.

Lindsay talked about the immediate aftermath of Ross' death. All of the kids from the school came along with some of their parents. She said that at one point there were in excess of 60 people in their tiny house. Then just stayed and stayed and told Ross stories. As she listened to story after story about Ross she was astonished. Ross was a kind of unassuming confident man but his influence in the community was large. One Inuit boy, Lindsay said, a boy who had been troubled in many ways took her aside and said he had been suicidal one day. He had a plan and he was organizing to carry it out when Ross dropped by. Ross invited the boy to go snowmobiling with him. The young man said that as the two exchanged eye contact, he knew that Ross knew he was about to die. But Ross never referred to that directly. The boy took him up on his offer. When they returned home that day, Ross made a date to go again with him in a couple of days. He continued to come back. The boy said the urge to die left him and he began to believe in himself again. Ross had given him new life through just quietly accompanying him. The Inuit elders told Lindsay that before he died they had recognized Ross as the most powerful person in the community. He was not rich. He was not a professional of any kind. He was not the principal or a government official or a politician. He wasn't a teacher. In terms of his paid work he was an assistant at the school. None of these designations however would have made him the most powerful man in the community anyway. It was how he lived that made him powerful. His integrity as a human being made him powerful. Ross' connection to God, his basic belief in the salvagability, that is the inherent God given dignity of every human being, was what made him powerful. (This is not surprising to those of us who knew how he grew up. There has always been room at the Newcombe family table for one more foster child.) Because Ross was powerful, Ross could effect change. Ross was capable of altering the trajectory of the future of human beings, of communities and to a certain extent the trajectory of humanity. It sounds dramatic, but it is as true as it is counterintuitive to how we are trained by our North American culture.

As I milled around after the funeral, again and again, I heard similar things. The stories were all of this young man and wonder of his unassuming, humble, open manner of treating all human beings with dignity and respect. This young man who lived his life with a profound sense of dignity was immensely powerful in his gentleness. What was a surprising discovery to me was that while I observed at Ross' funeral the incredible pain of loss, I also observed a tremendous, almost physically palpable **joy**. It was an absolute joy recognized and felt by the people who knew him as they suddenly realized that they had both the privilege of knowing him and in being known by him.

The other funeral I didn't attend. I was the presider. I was therefore much more intimately involved. I am speaking of the funeral of Alan Drysdale, long time member of this faith community and beloved man in so many capacities and communities. I had the privilege of knowing Alan personally and also of walking with him and Myrla as he died. Here was another man who was so widely respected and beloved because of his consistent caring, his wisdom and his profound and tenacious sense of ethics. The cup of human kindness that Alan held out for his fellow human beings was heaping full and spilling over. He had a genuine, even passionate, curiosity about everyone he meant. When he asked

how you were, he *really* wanted to know exactly how you were and how everyone you loved were. I always felt with Alan, because of all of these things and much, much more that he was intimately connected to God. Although all you who had the privilege of knowing him would agree that if he were here now, he would be blushing, protesting and shaking his head in refusal as he stared at his shoes.

The bottom line about Alan is this: he too was a man of immense integrity. He too was powerful in his gentleness. When Alan expressed an opinion it carried much weight. Again, when I was moving through his death and his funeral I observed through the many, many stories told by those who encountered him, both the combination of the terrible pain of the loss of such a large and powerful human spirit as well as the sheer joy of having had the gift of knowing someone like Alan and having been known by him.

Neither of these men were perfect, nor were they saints. Those who lived with them can attest to that. They were exceptional in their commitment to human dignity and their care to match their beliefs and faith with living actions. I think both Alan and Ross were such talented men that they probably could have made a ton of money doing other things. Many in the fast track of life, in the upwardly mobile lane of life, might look at the time Ross and Alan spent on the troubled people, the down and out, the lost and the lonely and humble in life as a waste of valuable time. Most people might think that, in fact. Ross and Alan could not help themselves. The time and care they spend on the dignity of others poured out of a sense of internal rightness and Spirit-connectedness. For them, it was time spent in the essentials of life.

When the people waiting for baptism and teaching ask John the Baptist what they need to do in order to prepare the coming of the Messiah, John says: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” In other words, you have to share your stuff folks. In fact, you have to share until you are uncomfortable. If you want to experience the joy of knowing and being in intimate relationship with God, your connection to your fellow human beings is absolutely the key. This is John’s response. To the tax collectors, those most dreaded of all professionals in the ancient world, John tells them to collect no more than the amount prescribed by government. In those days it was an assumed practice to extort more money than was required by the state from the mostly poor masses. In fact, it was condoned practice by the state – considered to be a kind of “tip.” To voluntarily not collect such a vital piece of your entitlement would have been considered horrific in its implications of lost income.

Likewise, the soldiers ask John “What should we do?” John’s response is to instruct them not to extort money from anyone by threats or false allegations. Be satisfied with your wages, he says. Again, a soldier’s income would have been largely subsidized by a license to extract money from the masses by force, threats and terror. He does not however say, “Do not stop being a soldier.” He says that as a class, a profession and as individuals their living is to be done under the demands of ethics, integrity and the will of God. John is telling them and us, the modern hearers of the word, that as communities and as individuals our behavior and our belief systems must be grounded in integrity to the word of God.

The power of baptism is contained in the promises we make: as parents, as adult believers, as a church community. It is all about making a commitment to God and therefore to a way of life that is often difficult. This is hard news on this third day of Advent but the promise of a life lived in such commitment is the reception of both the power and the pain of Joy.

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