

## THE READING

From the anthology "Politics and Innocence"  
"The End of Innocence" by Elizabeth Campbell

In searching for a theme to pull my thoughts together, I came to the essence of where I believe we are, both as a culture and as a movement [Humanistic Psychology]. Perhaps never before has there been such a species-wide consciousness raising as during the past few years.

[The book was published in 1986] We have had some rude awakenings, particularly in our Western world, regarding our human capabilities and limitations. What we are experiencing is a systemic breakdown and it is increasingly clear that no emergency treatment is sufficient, no band-aid action will suffice. Included in our common understanding are the following::

1. We have become a global village. . . .
2. Our spaceship appears headed toward self-destruction.
3. There is the threat of worldwide economic collapse. .4. The world is fraught with social upheavals, social structures are crumbling.
5. Perhaps most frightening, our world has become a global powder keg. . .

The fact is that we are in a period of great transition and urgency does seem to be commonly realized, and we are sensing that the scope of this transition is larger, the stakes higher, than we have experience in our short human history. . . A unique feature of this particular transition is the acceleration of change which is the cumulative effect of our technology which has made it possible for us to be aware of this escalating change and has precipitated the end of innocence.

[This was written more than 30 years ago and Dr. Campbell and her fellow authors in the anthology could not imagine the world we are facing in 2019.]

# The Sermon

[fairytales]

The subject I want to address this morning is not a new one. It involves one of the most basic religious issues: how we face the world.

Most of us grew up with fairytales. While many of them are not politically correct for a variety of reasons, and some question the violence they portray, they have, for generations, been a way that societal values have been passed on. The most common variety begins, “Once upon a time . . . “ and ends, “. . . and they all lived happily ever after.” Between the beginning formula and the ending one, common to all of them is a struggle between good and evil – clear and pure good, and equally clear and pure evil. The outcome of the story is hardly ever in doubt for long, because we are taught early that good always triumphs.

Most of us identify with the purely good characters in the stories, and we are taught that if we remain good enough, we will triumph in life. There may also be some who, having been convinced how wicked they are, identify with the evil characters and continually live with the expectation that they will be defeated by the good.

The common religion interprets its story in a way similar to the fairy tales, and we are led to the same conclusions about life. It proclaims there is a higher power in the universe that is going to make sure that everything comes out right in the long run. There is good and there is evil, but good **will** prosper. We may not be perfectly good, we may, in fact be sinners, but we can nonetheless be saved by having faith in the one who was or is perfectly good.

There are people who go through life believing that this is how the world is: that good is ultimately rewarded and evil is punished. Chances are, there may be some here who still believe that. The corollary is, of course, if we suffer, it must be because of something we did. Even mature adults carry that message around in their heads. I cannot tell you the number of times that members of congregations I’ve served have, in facing a crisis, said to me, “There must be some reason why I am being punished this way.” Most people can think of something they’ve done for which they believe punishment is deserved, thus justifying the assumption that they deserve the misfortune. The belief that it is somehow justified makes it easier for some people to accept suffering because at least it is merited. The unfaithfulness of a spouse, the death of a child, the loss of a job, betrayal by friends: you name it and someone has believed that they had it coming.

Or, from the other perspective, those who still have a firm belief in their own purity, feel in the face of similar crises that there are evil forces afoot that are attacking them precisely because they are so pure. They are counting on finding a magical white knight to slay the dragons. There are times when it feels as if some people come to their ministers with the secret wish that if they are really good, the minister will speak a magical incantation and they will be permitted a happy ending. Or some labor under the illusion that a new spouse, or a new therapist, or a new book, or a new location, or a new cure will make everything turn out “the way it’s s’posed to be, which is to say, “happy.”

[man on the bridge]

I shared with you in the past one of my favorite stories. It’s about a young man who had so many problems staring him in the face that he had decided to end it all. He was climbing on the rail of the bridge when he was accosted by what appeared to be an ugly old bagperson of the female persuasion, who said to him,

“This is your lucky night.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

"I bet I look like an ugly old crone to you."

"Well . . ."

"Well," she said, I'm not. I'm really an enchanted princess. If you will share my bed tonight, tomorrow I will be released from the spell and I will grant you three wishes."

He, of course, consented and they headed for her humble abode. After a night of intense passion, he awoke at the first morning light and on the pillow beside him he saw the same ugly face he had seen the night before.

"What happened? You haven't changed."

"Aren't you a little old, to believe in fairy tales?" she replied.

[pseudo-innocence]

We have to differentiate between "innocence" and "pseudo-innocence." True innocence is the view we ascribe to the child whose experience has told him or her that the world is a playground, laid out for joy, in which there are no cares. Psychologists suggest that rather than being a true reflection of childhood experience, this is the result of "childhood amnesia." It is a projection backward by adults of how they wish their childhood had been, but probably wasn't. Few children past the ages of two have such limited experience of the world. But that, at least, is the nature of our dream of what childhood should have been like. Rollo May writes of "pseudo-innocence" as:

*capitalizing on naivete, it consists of a childhood that is never outgrown. When we face questions too big and too horrendous to contemplate, such as the dropping of the atomic bomb, we tend to shrink into this kind of innocence and make a virtue of powerlessness, weakness, and helplessness. . . . It is this innocence that cannot come to terms with the destructiveness in one's self or others.*

Pseudo-innocence makes a virtue of being powerless. Pseudo-innocence says, "I am just a piece of driftwood on the seas of life, but I know that everything will come out for the best." While, to some, pseudo-innocence passes as a kind of naive spirituality, a blind trust in the power of goodness, May suggests that it is not so romantic: it is, in truth, the wearing of blinders. It is a refusal to face the ambiguity of life: the unfairness, the reality of the evil that we may do, as well as the good of which we are capable in the face of evil. Pseudo-innocence chooses powerlessness.

The psychotherapist Sheldon Kopp suggests:

*Growing up often means facing the anguished isolation of no longer belonging, as we wander in exile through a strange world that makes no sense. Each of us must make his or her own separate way through an indifferent, unfamiliar landscape in which good is not necessarily rewarded, nor evil punished. Adding to the confusion, at times we find ourselves graced with unearned love and happiness, or burdened with "undeserved" calamity and pain.*

As children, we sometimes believe that the sun goes down because we are tired and comes up because we are ready to get up. Can you remember saying, "Rain, rain go away . . ." and being disappointed when it didn't? What, of course, if it had? One of the contemporary novels about a liberal minister -Peter DeVries' "Mackerel Plaza," had a minister who freaked out when the community prayer service for rain was followed by an unpredicted downpour. Some of us understand that the fact that B follows A does not mean that A caused B.

Most of the experiments of behavioral psychologists demonstrate that animals need only to be rewarded occasionally for their behavior, in order for them to associate that behavior with the reward. It isn't necessary to feed them every time they push the right button – just every so often. If it gets too infrequent they will get a little neurotic, but then a run of rewards

will assure them. If one in a hundred prayers is accompanied by the desired result, that is enough to convince some people that their God is really listening to them and charting the course of the world in accordance with their requests. "His eye is on the sparrow."

[Country of the Blind]

H.G. Wells, in his short story, "The Country of the Blind," illustrates the problem of communal innocence. It's about an isolated mountain valley in South America in which a strange disease resulted in the blinding of the entire population and the destruction of their genes for sight. Generation after generation, the people were blind, and they adapted well to it. They began sleeping during the day and doing their work in the cool of the night, since light had no impact on them. They memorized the paths and were able to live with no sense of disability. Then a young man from outside happened upon the community. Having heard that the one-eyed man was king in the land of the blind, he thought he had it made. What he discovered was that he was out of step with the community. He stumbled a lot, trying to get around at night. His sense of hearing was not as acute as that of the residents. The doctors decided that he was handicapped and they were prepared to "help" him by making him equal the only way they could - by blinding him. He managed to escape.

In a culture which ostensibly believes that the universe is organized for our benefit and that we have been supernaturally presented with the rules by which we can control the roll of the dice, those of us who look around and observe the randomness of life, who question the order which others affirm, are somewhat in the position of the young man who could see in the land of the blind: we are out of step. The evidence is clear that Christianity and Islam have historically been prepared to do whatever was necessary to help those who did not see the world as their leaders did – to blind or murder those who saw the world in a different light – for their own good, of course.

[a pseudo-innocent nation?]

Ours is, of course, a nation in which pseudo-innocence predominates in its understandings of international relations. We at least pretend to believe that our nation is always motivated only by the purest of intentions, wishing to bring freedom and prosperity to the world. Strange, isn't it, how we almost invariably support dictators when there is a democratic choice in client states. Dictators are better in maintaining order – and by the way, maintaining economic preferences for American business.

I still have a vivid memory of a live broadcast of a speech by Lyndon Johnson when I was in college. In it he candidly summarized American foreign policy with the statement, "We've got what the rest of the world wants, and we're not gonna let them take it away from us." We usually cloak our self-serving interactions with others in garb of self-sacrifice, generosity, and innocence. We bomb distant nations as a "defensive" action in the name of our "national interests." Ask the people of Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Honduras, for instance, how "generous" America has been to them.

When there are wars, God, of course, is on our side, being that we are on his.

Rollo May suggests that there is a contemporary disinterest in history because we are determined to maintain our sense of innocence.

*To hang on to this picture of innocence, you must deny history. For history is the record, among other things, of human sins and evils, of wars and confrontations of power, and all the other manifestations of [our] long struggle toward and enlarged and deepened consciousness.*

[Sheldon Kopp]

Sheldon Kopp, the psychotherapist to whom I referred earlier, wrote a book on **An End to Innocence** as a result of his encounter with his mortality. He had given up on Pollyannaish tales of innocence and purity, and had decided that the only way for him to come out on top in this life was to work very hard and become a superb therapist, doing good for people. He did that, and then discovered that he had a brain tumor, and then another brain tumor, and then a heart attack. He wrote:

*At the time I fell ill, I still believed that life had inherent meaning, and that I had an important part to play in what was to happen to me and to those around me. My tumor seemed an undeserved and tragic fate. How the hell did that fit into the grand scheme? Not only had I started out as the innocent victim of my parents' mistreatment, nobly transcending that unfair disadvantage, I had gone on to transform my suffering into a continuing fight against injustice. Why should a good guy like me end up with a brain tumor?*

Kopp reports that the answer to that question proved to be, "Why not?" It is like his realization that his mother's hatred of him was probably not a result of anything personal. "Any kid living in that house at that time would have served as a suitable target. It was just my bad luck that I was the one who wandered in." It wasn't that he was a bad person; it wasn't his fault.

[removing our blinders]

It is not the point of this sermon that we are victims of fate and can do nothing about our lives. On the contrary, my point is almost but not quite the opposite. Our attempts to relate to the world as if it were bound to play by our rules are doomed to failure. Our attempts to fit all of our experience into our neat categories of justice and injustice, fair and unfair, good and evil, require that we wear blinders that shield us from much of what is real, including our own complexity. Those blinders get in the way of our awareness and of our ability to identify with the sufferings of other people as well as with its joys. So much energy goes into our trying to pretend that we live in a simple fairytale world, that our energy to take responsibility for the complex world in which we live is sapped.

We human beings are the creators of values. The values we celebrate are not the universe's – they are the products of our experience and of the best of human imaginations. We have the ability to imagine a better world than we have experienced yet. The problem comes when we delude ourselves into believing that the world we live in is the world we have imagined. What we believe to be true is never the whole of the truth – at best it is only a portion of the truth.

The challenge we face, if we are to get beyond innocence, is to learn how to accept our own complexity, our lack of purity. We cannot face life without any illusions, but we can do our best to differentiate between our illusions and reality.

[perfection not required]

Wilfred Gaylin tells an instructive story about a 90 year old man on his deathbed. He is filled with joy because of the massive deception he has pulled off. For 90 years he pretended that he was a good man. He has fooled everyone into believing that he was generous, courteous, and kind, in spite of internal temptations to do otherwise. Says Gaylin, "This evil man will, I predict, be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven."

We need not be fairytale pure. We need not be without fault. It is not demanded of us by the universe, nor by those who love us – why should we demand it of ourselves. What we must learn to do is to be responsible – to be responsible for the outcomes of the acts which we

choose; responsible for what we choose to do and not to do. In the long run, the world will do its thing, perhaps undaunted by us, but we will have the satisfaction of knowing that we have done our best.

**[After the Good News]**

Last Friday, I received the latest UU World Magazine in the mail. It contains a selection from the brilliant new book by my one-time intern, Nancy McDonald Ladd, who is now senior minister of the River Road UU Church in Bethesda Maryland and, I believe, one of the outstanding UU ministers of our time. Her book, which I believe should be required reading for UU's, is entitled: "**After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism.**" The magazine excerpt from Nancy's book is entitled: "Nothing We Do Will Be Perfect." She writes of:

*. . . The dawning realization that we are not now and have never been innocent, or perfect, or pure. . . Our belief in the "inherent goodness" of human beings, our confidence in reason and self-culture and personal rectitude – has set us up. . . Liberal religious people not only tend to believe that we are called to perfection, but we also believe that we are already basically perfect. . . We must become aware of both our power and our culpability in the conversion toward mutuality that will make the future survivable for us all. We are indeed powerful. And we are interconnected. And we are responsible for our own damn choices, including the ones that cause deep harm.*

Nancy is not a pessimist. She declares her belief that:

*Just because we are honest does not mean we cannot be hopeful. Hope, after all, is not just another version of optimism. Optimism tells a preordained narrative. It is an assertion that the scales have already been tipped toward triumph. . .*

*Hope is different. Like faith, hope is the exact opposite of certainty. It does not presume an outcome for good or for ill. It lies in the waiting moment when the tug from both directions is not yet fully resolved and when a great many things are still possible. It moves in the humble spaces that open when we allow ourselves to be uncertain and thus not fully self-contained. It is the possibility, though not the inevitability, of a better way.*

I commend Nancy's book, *After the Good News*, to you. It offers a powerful critique of some of our shortcomings and insights into how we might proceed more effectively in a world beyond Innocence.

[no guarantees]

My friends, there are no guarantees in this world. We have within us the ability to do both good and evil. It is only by going beyond innocence, by accepting the complexity of the world, and our own complexity, that we may be able to contribute to ministering to a world that is in such need of what our closing hymn calls a "liberating ministry" to which we can contribute by go[ing] forward in the power of love, proclaim[ing] the truth that makes us free.