

SOFiA Newsletter 169, December 2023

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

Subscription Holiday

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‘If only... ’ Thoughts on an unfolding tragedy in Gaza

I have been asked to reflect on recent tragic and violent events in Palestine/Israel. Even as I write my thoughts are still being clarified. I have strongly held opinions about the recent history of Palestine/Israel, but the tragedy currently unfolding in that place raises deeper questions than can be resolved by standard arguments. Foundational questions are posed afresh: can humanity control its tendency towards violence?; Is it possible to live in peace with neighbours who live and believe differently?; can we escape from humanity’s tragic desire to possess what is valued by others?

The words of a statement in an American Jewish magazine, “Tikkun”, a few days after the Hamas attack caught my attention: “It is only by recognising our shared fears and our shared tears that we will find our way through this nightmare....This moment calls us to slow down, sit

with the pain and complexity, and grapple with our discomfort. It is a moment for digging deep, seeing across differences, and remembering our deep yearning for peace and justice.”

It's as though a scientist without moral compass resolved to test the limits of human compassion. He took a small container and in it he placed two related families. Then he poured into the container a mix of good intentions and demonic possibilities. He left it all to ripen in the warm Palestinian sun. Soon the families were swimming in a container filled with greed, fear, distrust, patriotic fervour, impossible hopes and an insatiable desire for revenge when wronged. For good measure he sprinkled his toxic mix with strong doses of twentieth century colonialism and of religion redesigned to justify human greed. A generous sprinkling of great power rivalry and imperial ambition and to top it all off, an irrational belief that it's possible to build peace through violent means. The result was predictable.

On May 14th 1948, while the United Nations was still discussing a proposal to establish a Jewish state on Palestinian territory and alongside a Palestinian state, Ben Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel, with himself as the first President. It was a time of jubilation for European Jewish communities bruised by the horrors of the Nazi sponsored holocaust. They would have their own nation and be free to be themselves, to make their own laws, to express their faith without being surrounded by antisemitic prejudice. On that same day Palestinians and citizens of surrounding Arab nations were fearful and strongly opposed the establishment of the new state on land belonging to another people.

The story that unfolded is a tragedy made up of a long list of 'If onlies...stillborn possibilities and wrong turnings.

- If only, there had been meaningful consultation with Palestinian people when the idea of an Israeli state was first proposed....
- If only, earlier Jewish settlers in Palestine had respected the land and livelihood of the indigenous people, if Palestinians had not been dispossessed of their lands, their villages destroyed, their people scattered....
- If only, Palestinian land had not continued to be stolen and Jewish settlements built on it....

- If only, the founders of Zionism (a form of assertive Judaism) had heeded the warnings of Jewish intellectuals like Martin Buber who feared the new nation might descend into a form of nationalism that would obscure the ancient promise of being a people through whom humanity would be blessed....
- If only, there had been a Gandhi, a M.L. King, a Nelson Mandela, to lead non-violent Palestinian opposition to what was happening....
- If only, Palestinian leaders had been able to resist the help and advice of militant forms of Islam....
- If only, the USA, Britain, and other western nations had not manipulated events to serve their political, economic and military advantage....
- If only, armament manufacturers had not so readily provided weapons to those caught up in a mounting spiral of violence....

The list of 'if onlies' could go on and on. Today's tragedies are the products of choices made without sensitivity to future consequences. They are memories that imprison good people in a cycle of violence from which they feel unable to escape. We cannot change past events but perhaps we can rob them of their power to damage the present. Is it possible for nations to repent, turn and face a new direction, to claim a new beginning? If only....

As I think and pray my way into today's pain in Gaza and throughout Palestine/Israel I am aware that on 5th November 1881, a colonial force invaded and destroyed the Maori village of Parihaka in western Taranaki. The village was a centre of non-violent opposition to settler confiscation of Maori land. The dynamics of Parihaka have rough parallels with what has unfolded in Palestine over the same 120 years – colonial ambition, disregard of the rights and dignity of tangata whenua, morality derailed by human greed. The details differ and the scale of the destruction in and around Gaza is greater but the two events seem to me to be on the same page. The great difference is that the people of Parihaka and their leaders refused to meet violence with violence, to perpetuate a cycle of violence. If only....?

The land and people of Palestine have witnessed some of the most heinous of crimes against humanity – tossed about by successive imperial powers and ravaged by the fury of Crusader warriors. But across the centuries Palestine has also been home to spiritual insights with the

potential to reshape humanity, to jolt us into new ways of living. The love-soaked teaching of Jesus was first heard and heeded in this place. Muslims recognise Jerusalem as a place uniquely touched by Allah, the compassionate and merciful creator. The story of Moses who experienced God as Holy Presence who hears and feels the pain of the oppressed has a treasured place within Judaism. Celtic Christians speak of 'thin places' – places where the holy presence is most deeply felt. Surely Palestine is historically such a place. In 2008 I attended a meeting in Jerusalem of the International Council of Christians and Jews. The theme was peacemaking. I was impressed by an Address by Rabbi Ron Kronish, founder and director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. He expressed his continuing disappointment that the peace-loving wisdom of the Faiths in the land was disregarded by those negotiating for peace. I wonder, can the words of Micah be given a place at the negotiating table: "do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God...beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks...so all shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees. 'If only....

Rev Dr Keith Rowe / October 30, 2023

Creating Peace Without Weapons. An Appeal for Peace in the Israel-Gaza Conflict

This is a slightly slimmed down and lightly paraphrased translation of a Youtube video by Eugen Drewermann, a pacifist German theologian who has written lots about war and peace and who is also a passionate campaigner against NATO and US military bases in Germany.

I have always said that only forgiveness and non-violence can overcome violence and establish peace. Is that still true, given the current situation in Ukraine and Gaza?

I say, Yes, we have only one possibility of coming to peace. We must not put our hope in weapons and in the peace of the graveyard and the battlefield. Instead, we need to understand the anxiety of our opponents and work through it. We mustn't work against each other using power politics. Instead, we should spread trust and be willing to sign agreements.

According to Paragraph 51 of the constitution of the United Nations, “Nations have a right to defend themselves.” The churches, the states, all ministers say, Israel has a right to defend itself. In a certain sense, we have to say that too, because Hamas’s attack is violent aggression, that we can only regret and wish it had not happened. But what can happen so that this stops and doesn’t just keep on going?

Jews might perhaps ask what right do we Christians have to join the debate. We should keep our mouths shut; we Christians have for long enough oppressed Jews. I had a discussion on German TV with a Jew, who did not want Christians to continually think they are superior to Jews and said, “You Christians would still believe in Wotan if it wasn’t for us.” She may be right; actually we have become Jews through the Jew from Nazareth. We must not turn the God, whom Jesus brought to us, the Jewish God as father of all peoples, into a god of war. This is what the Christian God became through Constantine in 312; a god of battles, a peace-bringer on the battlefield and we must stop it in the name of the Jew Jesus.

In his day, Jesus believed that his God, the Jewish God, would make true what he promised Abraham; that he will be the father of a people as rich as the stars in the sky and the sand on the beach and that he will be a blessing for all peoples (see Genesis 12:1-3).

If that, Israel’s commission, is the basis for there being a promised land for his people, then you only need to keep telling the biblical story a bit further. Israel dwells now as a state in Palestine, claiming God’s promise. But how do you win the land that God has promised? We are Israelis and Arabs. The bible tells the story of both of us. Both are children of Abraham, both are brothers. The story is that Sarah, Abraham’s wife, despaired of having children, so she took her slave and servant Hagar (an Egyptian) and had her bear a child from Abraham, Ismael. The name came about because Sarah took a dislike to Hagar and had Abraham banish her, twice in fact.

Ismael and Israel, both children of Abraham, must live with one another. Otherwise they cannot settle in and occupy the land that has been promised by God. Martin Buber, a pious Jew, could explain it like this: If Zionism wants to prove itself in its religious truth, according to which God promised us as children of Abraham a land. A land that we now, after 2000 years of dispersal, since the time of the Romans, since the

end of the Bar Kochbar rebellion at the beginning of the second century, want to re-occupy. If we want to do this by appealing to the bible, there is only one way; we must live there with the other people who are there, with our brothers, with the other children of Abrahams in an inclusive community. That's the only way we can enter this land again in reverence and kindness.

We can tell the story differently. In Genesis 4, Cain murders his brother because he doesn't feel accepted. He can sacrifice as much as he wants, but there is someone nearby and the eyes of God look at him, not at Cain. Out of inferiority feelings, out of hatred, out of the fear of not being accepted, of not being good enough, he kills him. Then God explains that the earth has opened its mouth and calls out to heaven because it had to drink the blood of your brother. You will be a refugee on earth and the earth will refuse to give you its fruit. When humans kill humans, they lose the ground under their feet, the mouth of earth opens up to an abyss, a world of anxiety, of apocalypse. We must not live like that.

So we we face the question, how we deal with so-called evil. Everyone says, we must fight it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says we must not resist evil. This is our equivalent to 9.11 for the Americans. There is a similarity between the two. A surprise attack, a terrorist action that hurts unbelievably and sacrifices innocent people. How do we overcome something like that? We said then, we must hit back. We attributed the cause to Afghanistan, which was not correct. The result? 20 years of war with thousands of deaths. \$300 billion dollars spent in a war that has brought nothing but more misery and suffering. And today there is hunger in Afghanistan, because we have other things to do, we must continue militarily elsewhere. It was then that the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, said (there was no Christian who spoke like this), "This is a great chance for non-violence." As Christians we could say, also as Jews, "Do not resist evil."

We must ask about the causes. Why do they hate us so? What did we do to them? There were decades of the English colonial regime in Palestine. We took over, after they dropped Palestine in the face of Jewish terrorist attacks like that on the King David Hotel. Begin (later President of Israel) was a member of this group, Irgun, and was able to ally himself with Arafat of the PLO, based on the Oslo Peace agreement.

In this world, wanting peace by understanding the causes of a lack of peace and working to overcome them is deadly dangerous. We risk a lot when we talk of peace, but we should have the courage to do it.

- In 1914 there was a socialist who declared, workers mustn't shoot at workers. He was murdered.
- Mahatma Gandhi in 1947 said that he is a Hindu, a Christian, and a Muslim and they all adore the same God and that they are destined for peace over the whole little planet earth and that this God is so broad that he embraces them all. Gandhi was murdered for this prayer and confession.
- Martin Luther King wanted the Vietnam war to end. He wanted people to forgive each other. To stop dropping more bombs on a land the size of Bavaria than in the whole of the second world war. To stop defoliating the jungle with chemicals that cause cancer and birth defects. Peace is possible. For that, he was murdered.
- Rabin was an Israeli general. He understood that there can't be war for ever and ever. As a military man, he understood better than the politicians, that a two-state solution can only come when Jews give the Arabs a fair chance to self-determination. Then we are no longer an occupying power. In 1995 he was murdered.
- Anwar Sadat was murdered because he dared to negotiate peace. Land for peace was his compromise. He went to the Israeli Parliament, into the Knesset in Jerusalem. For that he was murdered.

People who want peace in a crazy world are murdered. This has been true since the time of Jesus, who was crucified. Should things continue like this? They don't have to. We should learn at last from the disaster of murdering humans that that we investigate the causes. We are not lords of the world. We don't have to continue the colonial regime. Earth does not belong to us, especially not an earth that God gives us. We have to share it as a gift of God with one another. Then hatred must cease and fighting people whom we declare to be animals becomes impossible. That is not the language of a person, who as president of Israel should keep the power of Israel's regime. We must rediscover the language of humanity and those whom we would like to condemn because of their deeds are the victims that we must understand so that we can grow

together. Otherwise we will always be about to wage war, claiming we are right and we will only multiply hatred. We eliminate Hamas, we plough their underground tunnels, we decide that there will be no more Hamas. That is the deadly program for the elimination of an unknown quantity of humans, and a whole area.

Can't this be done differently? Israel is militarily and economically and technically 10 times superior than the Arabs who live in an open-air prison. We give you the water that you need, the food that you need, the medical treatment that you need. You no longer live in separate zones like subhumans alongside us. We accept you as our brothers, as children of Abraham. We learn to see the bible in a new relevance in our days. Can we say that as Christians? We call ourselves Christians because we call Jesus the Messiah. The Mea Shearim in Jerusalem say that there cannot be a state of Israel because the Messiah has not yet come and the Jews say to us Christians, Christ cannot be the Messiah, because you haven't realised his message of peace. Then a state of Israel in the sense of the Orthodox Mea Shearim would have a basis. The messiah would not come as a second David with military power, with better bombs, with better tanks with better infantry in a grand offensive. He would come kindly and humane and sympathetic. A different Messiah will never come from God. That is what I can certainly say, as a human being, as a theologian reading the bible that the Jews gave us. I thank you for listening and for the uncomfortable demand it makes.

Eugen Drewermann. Translated by the Editor from
https://youtu.be/FpW_BFEk8Q4?si=UOtvsHdLORPFQd3x

Welcome to Limbo. Please leave your certainties at the door

A sermon held by the Rev Clay Nelson on 5 December 2021. This is reprinted in his memory as he died on Thursday 2 November 2023.

Buddha told a parable: A man was travelling across a field when he encountered a tiger. He began to run, and the tiger chased after him. Coming to a precipice, he slipped and was able to catch hold of the root of a wild strawberry bush, hanging in the air. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down only to find that another

tiger was waiting to eat him. He thought the bush could sustain him for a while, until he saw two mice gnawing away the vine. A tiger above, a tiger below. The man saw a ripe strawberry near him. Grabbing the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other, and ate it. How sweet and delicious.

This is how the Enlightened One welcomes us to Limbo and invites us to enjoy the moment. For as Shunryu Suzuki Roshi puts it: “Life is like stepping into a boat that is about to sail out to sea and sink.”

Limbo is a place we are called to live without the comfort of certainties, other than those of death and taxes. You don’t have to be Siddhartha Gautama, AKA the Buddha, or a Unitarian minister to know that we find Limbo stressful. As human beings we share a tendency to scramble for certainty whenever we realise that everything around us is in flux. In difficult times the stress of trying to find solid ground — something predictable and safe to stand on — seems to intensify. But in truth, the very nature of our existence is forever in flux.

This isn’t exactly headline news. All of us have lived in times of uncertainty, individually, as a family, in a city, and in a country. But rarely have we lived in a time of global uncertainty. Perhaps World War II, 9/11 and the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 come close. But the present pandemic is by far the worst of them all. No country has been spared since the first case was recorded. The 5.2 million who have died and 264 million who have become ill are hard to wrap our minds around. The economic consequences have been horrific. The psychological toll is counted in broken relationships, domestic violence, and suicides. We have been through Alpha and Delta and now we are threatened by Omicron, which we know little about. All we know is that there are a lot more Greek letters to name future Covid variants until we reach the last letter, Omega, but for the moment we have come out of lockdown. We can savour a flat white or pot of tea at our favourite café.

What exactly is the attraction of certainty anyway. It turns out the brain likes it and finds uncertainty painful. Certainty is the confidence we have in our beliefs, including the sense that something just “feels right.”

Jonah Lehrer coined a phrase called “ Information Craving”. The idea is that we crave information for the sake of it. Often that information doesn’t make us more effective or adaptive, it just reduces a sense of

uncertainty. It's part of the reason that mind games like solitaire, Sudoku and crosswords are enjoyable. They give us a little rush from creating more certainty in the world, in a safe way.

Scientific American Mind magazine goes so far as to call this an "information addiction". It's all about the burst of dopamine we get when a circuit is completed. It feels good — but that doesn't mean it's good for us all the time.

Knowing that we automatically avoid uncertainty explains why any kind of change can be hard — it's inherently uncertain. It explains why we prefer things we know over things that might be more fun, or better for us, but are new and therefore uncertain. It explains why we prefer the certainty of focusing on problems and finding answers in data from the past, rather than risking the uncertainty of new, creative solutions. It is why some religions prefer a theology of certainty. This is why Christians drawn to this view have supported slavery, support homophobia, stand against other faith traditions and cultures, speak against care of the earth, advocate an economics of neoliberal capitalism, and stay closed to any possibility of question and of change in their approach and faith. While it is good to have a foundation of faith to stand upon, a theology of certainty that takes such an unbending approach has caused much harm. And, tragically, it is a theology that is practised by many.

A characteristic of uncertainty is impermanence. It is hard to feel grounded when there might be an earthquake tomorrow. One of the virtues of Buddhism is that it does not shy away from uncertainty or impermanence. This is the fundamental anxiety of being human. Anxiety or queasiness in the face of impermanence isn't something that afflicts just a few of us; it's an all-pervasive state that human beings share. But rather than being disheartened by the ambiguity, the uncertainty of life, what if we accepted it and relaxed into it? What if we said, "Yes, this is the way it is; this is what it means to be human." Once, someone asked a well-known meditation master, "In this world where everything changes, where nothing remains the same, where loss and grief are inherent in our very coming into existence, how can there be any happiness? How can we find security when we see that we can't count on anything being the way we want it to be?"

The teacher, looking compassionately at this fellow, held up a drinking glass and said, "You see this goblet? For me this glass is already broken. I

enjoy it. I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns.

“If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on a shelf and the wind knocks it over, or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course’.

“When I understand that this glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious. Every moment is just as it is, and nothing needs to be otherwise.”

To achieve what the meditation master experienced we need to overcome our addiction. We must stop craving information to keep uncertainty at bay.

The Buddha offers a simple spiritual path, but not one easy to live out: Bird’s Nest Roshi was a teacher who lived in and did meditation in a tree. The governor of his province heard about Bird’s Nest Roshi and went to see him. He found the master sitting in his tree, doing meditation. He called to him, saying, “Oh, Bird’s Nest, you look very insecure to me up there.” Bird’s Nest Roshi looked down at the governor and replied, “Oh Governor, you look very insecure to me down there.” All things are under the law of change and political position is the most ephemeral of all. The governor knew very well what Bird’s Nest Roshi was talking about. So he took a different tack. “Tell me,” he said, “What is it that all the Buddhas taught?” Bird’s Nest replied: “Never do evil; Always do good; Keep your mind pure; Thus all the Buddhas taught.” The governor responded, “Always do good; never do evil; keep your mind pure—I knew that when I was three years old.” “Yes,” said Bird’s Nest Roshi, “A three-year-old child may know it, but even an eighty-year-old politician cannot put it into practice.”

To begin this practice, Pema Chödrön, an American Buddhist nun, shares a dream about her ex-husband:

“I was just settling down for a quiet evening at home when he arrived with six unknown guests and then disappeared, leaving me to take care of them. I was furious. When I woke up, I thought ruefully, ‘So much for being finished with anger.’ Then I started thinking about an incident that had occurred the previous day, and I began to get furious all over again. This completely stopped me in my tracks, and I realised that waking or sleeping, it’s just the same. It isn’t the content of our movie that needs

our attention, it's the projector. It isn't the current story line that's the root of our pain; it's our propensity to be bothered in the first place. The propensity to feel sorry for ourselves, the propensity to be jealous, the propensity to get angry — our habitual, all-too-familiar emotional responses are like seeds that we just keep watering and nurturing. But every time we pause and stay present with the underlying energy, we stop reinforcing these propensities and begin to open ourselves to refreshingly new possibilities. As you respond differently to an old habit, you may start to notice changes. In the past when you got angry, it might have taken you three days to cool down, but if you keep interrupting the angry thoughts, you may get to the point at which it takes only a day to drop the anger. Eventually, only hours or even one and a half minutes. You're starting to be liberated from suffering.

"Then you can begin practising to live the three vows: Do no harm. Take care of one another and embrace the world as it is. Do not begin this practice thinking the vows can be achieved. There will be no dopamine high reward. No test to pass. So how will you know you have experienced some level of enlightenment? One indication is you experience chaos as good news. Limbo doesn't scare you, in fact, you begin to see its beauty. You step into groundlessness and find it relaxing. You feel fully present with an open heart to the world as it is, while not longing for a world that isn't."

Not there yet? Me neither. Buddhists often refer to these vows as commitments, which suggests this is a process not to be achieved but lived. I can sign up for that, since resisting the uncertainty and impermanence of inescapable Limbo isn't doing it for me.

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(<https://aucklandunitarian.org.nz/welcome-to-limbo-please-leave-your-certainties-at-the-door/>)*