

Two Young Heroes

A sermon by Steven Epperson

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I want to begin today's remarks with a couple of quotes, and while I'm reading them, I want you to guess when they were written. All right, are you ready? First quote:

"I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the...youth of today; for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words. When I was a boy, we were taught to be discrete and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly...impatient of restraint." (Hesiod)

And here's the second quote: "Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers." (Socrates)

Sound familiar, something like what we may have read in the papers this summer: young people running amok at the Stanley Cup riots, or the so-called "feral thugs" who participated in the major riots, looting and arson that took place last month in London? Here's the answer to today's quiz: the first passage was written by the ancient Greek author Hesiod, who lived in the 8th century B.C., and the second, was spoken by Socrates in 5th century B.C. Athens.

It's no stretch to say that adults have been complaining for millennia about the collapse of moral standards, bad behavior, and absence of restraint and discipline in their societies, and placing the blame directly on young people. Here's an editorial from the UK's *Daily Express* from 1981: "Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a revulsion from authority and discipline. There has been a permissive revolution...and now we all reap the whirlwind" in the behaviour of our hooligan youth. In the *Times* newspaper from 1898, we read: "It is melancholy to find that parents are not ashamed to confess that children of seven or eight years old are entirely beyond their control;" and in the records of debates in the British House of Commons from 1842, we read this assertion: "the morals of our children are tenfold worse than formerly." A century and a half later, Bart Simpson of the TV animated show *The Simpsons*, more than

confirmed this lament when he confessed: “I don't know why I did it, I don't know why I enjoyed it, and I don't know why I'll do it again,” but I will.

Bart may not have known why—but pundits always have: from the political/cultural right, in 2011, it's the “liberal intelligentsia hell-bent on a revolutionary transformation of society.” On the left, it's “rap music...trashy materialism...and idiot computer games.” In 1981, it's the fault of “imported ethnic criminality.” In 1956, the outrageous behavior of the young was the direct result, according to this editorial: of “rag-time, blues and the boogie-woogie, which surely originated in the jungle.” In 1913, it was silent movies; in 1905, it was murders enacted on the stage; in 1900 it was the “garbage” infecting music hall programmes that “glorifies immorality.” And in the 1840s, it was putting money in the hands of impressionable youth—that is to say, wages to child labourers working for a pittance at murderous, maiming 10-12 hours shifts; children tending the factory machines of the Industrial Revolution—they were to blame for widespread moral panic of their times. (quotes from Bagehot, “We Have Been Here Before,” *The Economist*, 8/16/11)

Fortunately, hysteria, self-righteousness, ideology, high-brow taste, and hatred and disdain for kids are not going to have the last words this morning, nor will blaming the young. Oscar Wilde may have thought he summed it all up when he quipped: “I am not young enough to *know everything*.” Shaw may have thought that: “Youth is wasted on the young,” but by my lights and experience, I believe that the opposite is the case, and that it's far closer to the truth to say that: “The perennial desire of youth to do something useful or good speaks to an instinct that we have not succeeded in repressing.” (Tony Judt, from *Ill Fares the Land*, 186) That desire is largely fueling the Arab Spring and the massive, massive social justice and civil society protests taking place in Israel, Chile, Athens, Spain and elsewhere; that desire to be useful and good also mobilized young people to turn up after the riots here and London to help clean up the mess.

In the time remaining, I want to share with you two examples of young people speaking up and out on behalf that “perennial desire to do something useful and good;” and thank god we haven’t yet succeeded in repressing it.

First story: as you know, Toronto City residents recently elected Rob Ford as mayor. Ford ran for office on a Tea Party-like platform, the kind that believes governments should only provide roads and cops, and promised to drastically shrink the size and cost of city government. Once elected, his office engaged KPMG consultants as part of the city’s core service review. What followed from KPMG was an array of program-cutting suggestions that included cuts and imposing user fees to nearly every city program and service including transit, heritage and culture sites and organizations, libraries, student nutrition programs and school crossing guards.

To his credit, Ford announced a special Executive Committee meeting and invited the public to attend and tell City Hall just what they thought of the proposals. What followed was a 23 hour marathon hearing; 169 speakers, allotted three minutes, filled the committee room and two overflow rooms, and took their turn; most of them—teachers, human resources consultants, a manager of a catering company, paramedics, and others—had never spoken up at City Hall, and many had taken a day off work to participate.

Among that group of citizens, one speaker really grabbed my attention: her name is Anika Tabovaradan. Anika is a fourteen year old, grade 10 student at Albert Campbell High School in Scarborough. Her parents immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka. Anika’s a regular at her neighbourhood library at Woodside Square. For her, the library is a refuge—a place to study, to download music from bands like Arcade Fire, and because it has air-conditioning, a place she can go to escape the heat. Her parents describe her as shy and very introverted, so when she announced to them that she wanted to go and speak at the City Hall budget cuts

meeting, they weren't sure if that was such a good idea. But she prevailed upon them; they drove her there, and she waited, and waited for her turn.

It was 2:05 a.m.—twenty hours into the hearings before Anika took her turn at the microphone. Earlier she had written out what she wanted to say about her beloved library, but then sitting before the Mayor and Council, she just started speaking—pouring out words and tears from the depths of her heart and soul:

Hello, my name is Anika...I'm no director, I'm no president; I'm just a 14 year old from Scarborough. The Woodside Square Library is so important to me! If other branches are shut down, branches like mine that are so busy...and the wait for computers is already so long! People who do not have internet access at home depend upon their libraries to do their homework, and if we don't have our homework done, what will we do with our lives? I'm no taxpayer, but when I get to use the computers in the library and do my homework...I'll be able to get a good job someday, get some good education; and when the day comes to pay taxes, I'll be glad that years before, people paid their taxes to keep the system going. So then I'll pay taxes for the kids who depend on the computers in my time. I'm not making much sense anymore..." (transcribed from You Tube: "Toronto Deputation by: Anika Tabovaran, *The Toronto 300*)

And then, though the mayor sat there impassively, a great cheer rose up in that room. Anika had cried so much that she literally had to wipe the desk top with the mountain of tissues people gave her while she was speaking. And I wept watching her on the internet days later; and I walked out into our back yard and stood in the clean laundry waving in the summer breeze and wept some more for the beauty of it, for the heart-breaking, aching shame of it all. It was a moment's distillation of all that is noble and innocent about us; all that is low-down, short-sighted and hard-hearted. George Bernard Shaw is wrong—"youth is [**not**] wasted on the young"; all-too-often, it is wasted *on us*—it's *we* who have grown weary, flinty, old, and reckless. Billions for fighter jets we don't need, for prisons even though crime is actually declining, a billion for a convention centre, half a billion for refurbishing a sports arena—while

we can't adequately house our fellow Canadians; we can't pay a living wage; we make hundreds of thousands stand in line for food bank handouts, and force our police into front-line mental health intervention because we won't pay for an urgent response centre or adequate community services.

“Society,” wrote Edmund Burke, “is the partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born.” A fourteen-year old girl in Toronto spoke up last summer because she instinctively knows about that unwritten, crucial compact between the living, the dead, and the generations that will follow. “The perennial desire of youth to do something useful or good speaks to an instinct that we have not succeeded in repressing.” That desire, that instinct is alive and well in Anika Tabovaradan. She gives me some hope, and believe me I need it. What about you?

Second story, second young hero in my book.

It's December 2008, and the waning weeks of the George Bush administration; a time for last minute corporate handouts, and the evasion of environmental regulations that are supposed to be the law of the land. The place is the Federal Building in Salt Lake City, Utah. Publicly owned land, entrusted to the then-not-so-tender-mercy of the Interior Department, is being auctioned off in long-term leases to gas and oil companies for drilling and resources extraction.

However, there are two problems with the government sponsored auction—and here things get interesting. First, the auction was in blatant violation of federal law under Secretarial order 3226 that requires the Bureau of Land Management to weigh the impacts of climate change for all its major decisions, especially resource development and land sales—that is, the law was put into effect to mitigate the impacts of catastrophic climate change and defend a livable future

on this planet. A federal judge in Montana has ruled that the BLM was in constant violation of the law throughout the years of Bush administration, especially in its final days.

The second problem is that a young man, then 27 years old, knew this and decided to act on that knowledge and, in his words, “stand in the way of an illegitimate auction that threatened my future”—his name is Tim DeChristopher, a member of the 1st Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City. Tim attended the auction, registered and began to bid on the land leases. You see, this land was being auctioned off to corporate insiders for pennies on the dollar—parcels of publicly owned land situated, in many cases, in extremely fragile ecosystems and adjacent to the some of the most magnificent national parks in North America.

As the auction proceeded, it soon became clear to everyone in the room that a suspiciously young person, who was not an insider, not a member of the club, was throwing a spanner in the works—that is, he was placing bids on parcels far in excess of what others were bidding, and thus jacking up the prices toward what those parcels may *actually* have been worth. Federal candy was being snatched away from greedy adults by a mere kid; and that could not continue.

So Federal Agent Dan Love finally approached bidder # 70 and asked Tim, in so many words, what the hell was going on—and then Tim told him clearly and openly that he was there to bear witness and try to stop what he believed was an illegal auction.

To make a long story short—Tim DeChristopher was charged on two felony counts of misrepresenting himself and placing bogus bids at a federal lease auction. On March 3rd of this year, a jury convicted him, and the federal prosecutor demanded that the judge sentence him to serve serious jail time as a deterrent to others and to promote respect for the law—in spite of the fact that the federal probation officer recommended probation or community service at most—in

spite of the fact that the judge himself, after the sentencing hearing, admitted that DeChristopher was punished for pointing out something that a lot of people don't want to hear: human-caused climate change and government negligence in addressing its consequences are threatening the globe—in spite of the fact, that many of the parcels of land leased that day in December 2008 were subsequently ruled in federal courts to be inappropriate for oil and gas drilling. In sum, in spite of the fact that Tim was RIGHT, last summer the prosecutor called down the punitive weight of the law because Tim was exercising his conscience, was unrepentant because he felt he had to do something to stop illegal, expanded drilling on public lands, and because he continued to bravely exercise his constitutional right to free speech. And so on July 26th, Tim was sentenced to two years in prison and fined \$10,000.

Throughout his trial, Tim was forbidden to explain the reasons for his actions, forbidden to argue that he was invoking a time-honoured American tradition of civil disobedience to force attention on the issue; forbidden, in fact, to tell the jury that he had successfully raised the down payment for the leases he bid on, and offered it to the BLM; forbidden even to say that the auction had been reversed because it was illegitimate in the first place! Throughout the trial, de Christopher was forced to keep his mouth shut.

It was only at the hearing in July when he was about to be sentenced that Tim was finally allowed to speak his mind; and I tell you, I think it's a masterpiece of civil disobedience writing. In mature, thoughtful, heartfelt words—without stridency or arrogance—he provided a tutorial on the US jury system as it pertained to his case; it meticulously exposed the flaws and legal irregularities in the government's auctioning off of environmentally sensitive land. Most striking in his statement to the court was the way he defended his actions based on the respect for the

law, the authority of conscience, and his hopes for the well-being of future generations. Here are a couple of quotes:

- “When a corrupted government is no longer willing to uphold the rule of law,” Tim said to the court, “I advocate that citizens step up to that responsibility—this is really the heart of what this case is about. [For] the rule of law is dependent upon a government that is willing to abide by the law. Disrespect for the rule of law begins when the government believes itself and its corporate sponsors to be above the law.”
- “The reality is not that I lack respect for the law; it’s that I have a greater respect for justice. Where there is a conflict between the law and the higher moral code that we all share...that recognizes our interconnectedness rather than viewing ourselves as isolated...alienated individuals...[then] my loyalty is to that higher moral code.”
- “If the government is going to refuse to step up to the responsibility to defend a livable future, I believe that creates a moral imperative for me and other citizens...”
- I have no desire to go to prison...or be a martyr. I want you to join me in standing up for the right and responsibility of citizens to challenge their government...You have authority over my life, but not my principles. Those are my alone.”

Over a hundred and fifty years ago, William Ellery Channing, one of the founders of Unitarianism in North America, wrote that “conscience is the principle of duty,” and that each of us as “moral beings” is endowed with it. He called it “the supreme power within us,” and that “its essence, its grand characteristic is sovereignty. It speaks with divine authority...and happiness and honor depend on the reverence with which we listen to it.” (Channing, “Evidences of Christianity,” *The Works of William E. Channing*....1888, p. 196)

In the closing paragraph of an editorial I wrote for the *Salt Lake Tribune* last month in honour of Tim de Christopher, I wrote this:

“It is a source of joy, hope and pride when a young person [like] Tim shows such courage, skill...and moral goodness. If I were Tim’s father, if he were a member of my religious community...I would be proud of what he did in December 2008, proud of how he has behaved

since then, and proud of what he said and wrote on behalf of the rule of law, the future well-being of our planet, and the authority of conscience.”

Great good has come from the conscience inspired, courageous words and deeds of Anika Tabovaradan and Tim de Christopher. Last Tuesday, the Toronto City Council announced that library branches in that city will not be closed down. And, according to Naomi Klein and the environmentalist Bill McKibben, Tim’s protest and sentencing has ignited the largest civil disobedience action this century on this continent—to date, over 1300 people have been arrested in Washington, DC in mass protests against the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline that will haul Canada’s tar sands down to the Gulf of Mexico.

Anika and Tim represent a “moral economy” (EP Thompson) where ethical behavior is expressed by loyalty and conviction to a broader set of social values—what Tim de Christopher called “justice” and “interconnectedness.” Anika put it this way: someday I’ll have a good education, a good job, and when the day comes for me to pay taxes, I’ll be glad that years before people paid theirs....and I’ll pay mine “for the kids who depend on the computers in my time.”

Let’s us remember, let us affirm that youth is **not** wasted on the young; all we have to do is look for it, see it staring us in the face, and thank god we haven’t repressed its perennial desire to do something useful and good.

(You can watch Anika speaking to the Toronto City Council on **You Tube** at: “Toronto Deputation by: Anika Tabovaradan, *The Toronto 300*; also see: Jayme Poisson, “Video: Wild applause for teen’s 2 a.m. speech for libraries,” *Toronto Star*, July, 30, 2011; Daniel Dale and David Rider, “Ford unswayed by 22 hours of talk, teen’s tears,” *Toronto Star*, July 30, 2011. For the full text of Tim De Christopher’s written/oral statement at his sentencing hearing, go to: www.grist.org. “Tim DeChristopher’s statement to the court”; for some articles on Tim De Christopher, see: Donald E. Skinner, “De Christopher receives two-year prison sentence,” *UU World*, August, 1, 2011, and “Tar Sands Action inspired by a UU’s civil disobedience,” *UU World*, August 15, 2011; as well, check out: “Justice Denied,” and “A Sad Day,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 27 and 29, 2011—the editors of the *Salt Lake Tribune* condemn Tim’s conviction and sentence; Steven Epperson, “De Christopher’s principled dissent,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 6, 2011. On recent and ongoing civil society/social protests see: Jack Shenker, “How youth-led revolts shook elites around the world,” *Guardian*, August 12, 2011, and Uri Avnery, “Three perspectives on the amazing growth of tent cities of protest across Israeli society,” *Tikkun*, August 6, 2011.)