

Blue Monday II
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UCV

Just a reminder: about four years ago, Cliff Arnall, a researcher/instructor at the University of Cardiff, calculated that the third Monday in January is, by far, the most depressing day in the year. He has made a strong case for the singular gloominess of this day; a day that just so happens to be coming up right around the corner; *as in tomorrow*. Think about it! the cozy Christmas season glow is now but a dim memory; add to that cold, leaden weather—we're still a couple of weeks away from the mid point between winter and spring; then, add the fact that many a new year's resolution has already been broken, excessive holiday season credit card bills are just now coming due and arriving in your mailbox, plus, as if I need to tell you, Monday is the beginning of a new work week, and thus generally reviled any way; you couple all of this with that nagging, incessant, inner voice that says "Steven! Your article for the *Bulletin* was due yesterday; get cracking and write it, *now!*" Add up all that cumulative damage—and what spews out is a sure fire formula for a very depressing day ahead.

So! Dear congregation, we've have all been warned. Blue Monday dawns tomorrow, heading toward us like a rogue iceberg looking for a reckoning, and a wreck; time to take evasive action, maneuver around it or bowl our way over the day with some good music, food and company.

In last year's Blue Monday sermon, we looked at the widespread, debilitating phenomenon of depression. And I had thought, months ago, in planning for this second Blue Monday service, to continue exploring the landscape of mental illness, that last skeleton in our closet, when certain events of the past several months, the past couple of weeks, persistently intruded and high-jacked what I wanted to share with you today. To put it bluntly, *I've* got a bad case of the blues.

But first, in preparing what ended up being a remarkably uplifting, life-affirming memorial service last week for long-time UCV member Marie Brown, I came across a statement highlighted and set aside by Marie to be discovered by us after her death. It's a list of ten assertions and proposals; and I'm just going to read the first one as a way to launch out on the rest of what I have to share with you today. It's #1 on the list, and it goes like this: "The three plagues of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom account for the bulk of suffering in the human community." I want to focus in the second plague: helplessness, for that's at the root of my blues this season. And I hardly know where to start.

I'm feeling blue because about some things and some times...I just feel helpless: issues too big, problems too endemic, vast and remote, conflicts so complex, intractable and beyond my ability to influence them in any way—do you know what I mean? Oh my goodness, do I have the blues!

Helplessness. I got the blues this past week reading that this city, that is, us, we have been stuck footing the bill, now estimated at \$458 million, for the completion of the so-called Olympic Village under construction in Southeast False Creek. That in spite of warnings from the minister of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver to the mayor, city staff, and religious leaders, because he had seen it already—the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City and the havoc it wreaked there, in spite of my warnings, we got sold a bad bill of goods by civic boosters, Olympic Games enthusiasts, and politicians—all of them keen on making Vancouver a so-called world class city—with the result that we've been reduced, in fact, by them and creditors and crediting agencies to what we really are—a *banana metropolis*; transfixed by glamour and boutique culture, while the real, daily, unglitzy guts of this city: plentiful, safe, affordable housing, excellent schools, well paid teachers, dependable, adequate mass transit, and a living wage economy fall in neglect.

Instead, what we've got gives me the blues: a billion dollar, 1980s style white elephant convention centre, a \$700 million Sea-to-Sky highway expansion for a ski resort; a \$1.7 billion airport to downtown RAV line, not the more and dependable buses and the routes we really need; \$365 million dollars for a BC Place Stadium rejuvenation; another billion for "security" forces during the Olympics; plans to shut down large swaths of the city and put them off-limits during the Olympics, shutting down universities, colleges, and schools...and who knows what else? *And for what? For whom?* So that we can show off our Potemkin Village to the world for three weeks in a year from now; a shallow façade behind which festers one of the least affordable cities in the world wracked with chronic malfeasance, a full spectrum housing crisis, endemic poverty, a transit fleet that breaks down with every frost and snow storm stranding 1000s of people by the roadside. Oh yes, I've got the 2010 Olympic blues. (on least affordable, see Bula, "Vancouver...", *Vancouver Sun*, 22 Jan. 2007; on the numbers, the money—pick up any local newspaper)

Helplessness. The shattering fall of Wall Street and of world-wide financial institutions, an economic tsunami whose waves have thrown millions out of work, gutted retirement accounts, emptied government treasuries, and immiserated countless millions worldwide, boy that gives me the blues! I've got the "greed is good" blues, the subprime mortgage, short selling, complex debt securities blues, the de-regulation, laissez faire fundamentalism, the \$700 billion bail-out, down-the-rat-hole blues. I've got the blues that a certain government closer to home seemed to have seized on this financial meltdown as an opportunity to score partisan political points, precipitate a governance crisis, and petition for proroguing Parliament; that governing body that is supposed to represent us, and that has met to do the people's business for exactly *how many days* in the past nine months? That gives me the blues!

Even closer to home, I wake up at nights and can't go back to sleep, and it's not because of the "where did my money go blues"; it's the faces of members of the congregation that I haven't seen here in months that keep me tossing and turning, and wondering: where did they go? Why aren't they here? What did I do, what have we done, perhaps, to not help them feel welcome and at home in this place? And when I hear stories, and I do, that some adult snarled at a fussy child, or at a young person horsing around, or at a parent who should be "making their children behave"...and then I don't see that child, that parent, that family again; let me tell you, I lay awake at night, and I get the blues.

Listen, I know that there are times and seasons for things, for more or less activity in a community such as ours. As well, we're complicated creatures; our beliefs are a work in progress. And sometimes, it comes to pass, after the first warm glow of finding this place and religion with relief and a sense of finally coming home, that people can also come to the realization that building your own theology, that democratic, self-governance, volunteering, community building, and financial pledging comes with a reckoning that can send people on their way out of here and back down the road. This is not a religion for the faint of heart, the free rider, or the consolation of black and white fundamentalism. For those who come to that kind of reckoning and decide to move on, I give you my blessing as you continue on your journey. It's not that that gives me the blues, though I wonder sometimes; rather, it's the members of our congregation we don't reach out to in their times of need and distress, the people we don't welcome with a greeting, a polite question about who they are and how they're doing, and the normal restlessness of kids that provokes our censure and that propels them and their families away from us—that's what keeps me awake at night and gives me the blues.

Helplessness. The blues. That's what I've felt these past three weeks, as well reading the news about the tragedy, the death, and the destruction in Gaza. Let me level with you. I can't think of any conflict that is more complex, intractable, and that has been as self-righteously commented upon as the wars between Israel and its Arab neighbours. I can add nothing enlightening to the endless rivers of ink that have flowed in analyzing causes, assigning blame, sympathizing with victims, and lamenting the botched opportunities to secure some semblance of lasting peace for those people locked in this seemingly endless tragedy of war. With you I have followed and tried to comprehend this conflict for years with anger, tears, revulsion, fear, hope, and near exhaustion. That's right, I've got the Israel/Palestine blues.

Here I want to make three sets of observations, and I want to be frank: first, for not one year, not one day, have the people of Israel lived peacefully and securely within even internationally recognized territorial boundaries. That level of anxiety is unimaginable to me. As well, no nation state that I am aware of has come into existence without tragedy; the tragedy of the loss of life, property, and territory. Just ask the people of our own First Nations; this country was not conceived nor settled immaculately with bloodless hands

Second observation; that being said, on numerous occasions and public settings, I have I firmly supported the creation of a viable, secure Palestinian state in the WestBank/Gaza Strip. And I support those who strive to bring this about by means as non-violent as possible.

These two sets of observations lead me to affirm what journalist Bradley Burston has called "10 Commandments for Arab and Jew at War," five of which right now I want to read to you. One. "Thou shalt not kill the civilian. Period. Never target the innocent...make heroic efforts to respect non-combatants." Two. "Neither shall you use civilians as human shields." Three. "Thou shalt not worship the use of force, nor mistake revenge for self-defense...nor believe that military might, carried to an extreme, will resolve the conflict." Four. "Thou shalt not practice humiliation, nor collective punishment. Remove all checkpoints" unless absolutely necessary and demonstrate respect at those that remain. "Do everything possible to allow civilians to work, pray, study, and live as normally as possible." And here I'm skipping to number Ten: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain. The clergyman—rabbi, reverend or imam, who counsels hatred for the other, who preaches that the Lord is on the side of wider and deeper war in not a man of God." AMEN to that. (see B. Burston, Ten commandments..., *Haaretz*, 3 Nov. 2008)

And now the Israel/Palestine blues brings me to my third observation. And I want to say this now especially because since December 2nd, I'm a Canadian citizen and share with you a vested interest in the well-being of this country. The Israel/Palestine blues is pushing me to sing the: "We Gotta Get Our Own House in Order Blues" as well, oh yes we do; we must.

Justifiably, we decry poverty and violence elsewhere, and call for peace and remediation in the world; we want to see our nation as a leader in international efforts for peace, health, and combating poverty. And yet, according to a recent report from the Canadian Assembly of First Nations, listen to this: 1 in 4 First Nations children live in poverty; mold contaminates half of First Nations homes; 1/3rd are overcrowded; 1 in 3 First Nations people don't have safe drinking water; unemployment is over 50%. When using the United Nations 2001 Development Index, First Nations communities ranks 76th out of 174 nations, while the rest of Canada ranks 8th. And did I mention that 1/3rd of all households in the GVRD have difficulty finding and remaining in affordable housing to rent or own; and that we have the largest percentage of working poor families of any major city in Canada? (on 1st Nations, see "Royal Commission on Aboriginal People after 10 years: A Report Card," www.afn.ca; on Vancouver, see W. Boei, "Housing Solution...", *Vancouver Sun*, 16 Nov. 2006)

Got the blues, yet? One more verse in the "Gotta Get Our Own House in Order" blues, and then, and then....some light in all this darkness, hopefully.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the size of Western Europe, home to 60 million people, and, by virtue of the extraordinary mineral wealth it possesses, should be one of the most prosperous nations on earth. Instead, and what gets rarely reported, an estimated 5 million people have lost their lives there since 1996, 45, 000 people, half of them children, die there every month, due to a dirty, systematic looting war for its mineral riches, much of it aided and abetted by international mining corporations hungry for Congo's gold, diamonds, copper, uranium and coltran—a mineral that's crucial in the production of video games and cell phones. Of companies identified as complicit in this violence by an October 2002 UN Security Council Report, 10 of them are Canadian mining giants, including Barrick Gold, 1st Quantum, and Vancouver based

Tenke/Lundin Mining and International Panorama Resources. The report reads like a John LeCarre novel, baring the links between carnage, terror, and looting carried out by powerful states and companies. Jim Freedman of Canada, along with his other fellow UN experts, has called for sanctions, the freezing of assets, and hearings before international tribunals. The Canadian government's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade issued reports in 2005 and 2007 calling on the government to compel companies to abide by stricter judicial, social, and environmental norms. The current government received the report and then apparently seems to have just locked it away.

I've got the "Gotta Get Our Own House in Order Blues" people. Do you hear me? The credibility, the efficacy, of our justifiable calls for justice, peace and equity in the world are contingent on taking stock of *who we are, where we are*, looking closer to home and getting our *own affairs* in order. Roy Romanow called Canada a nation half built; we've got our work cut out for us to complete what has been started, and build a land where our people are housed, educated, healed, efficiently transported, meaningfully employed, and competently governed. *And then* our light will shine, our voices will ring out, our hands will heal. Speed the day! (see G. Dent, "Canada in the Congo War...", *The Dominion*, issue 45, 14 May 2007; J. Khan, "Looters' War' in the Congo: UN Report exposes role of Canadian mining companies," *The Dominion*, issue 55, 3 Nov.2008; Z. Moloo, "Canada's Contribution to Congo's War...", *The Dominion*, issue 55, 20 November 2008; Chris McGreal, "War in Congo kills 45,000 people each month," *Guardian*, 23 Jan.2008; Ian Fisher, et al, "Chaos in Congo: A Primer...", *NYT*, 6 Feb 2000.)

Throughout my remarks today I have violated one of the commandments of preaching: don't throw the kitchen sink into your sermon. But you see, my blues aren't simple. They're heavy; I'm standing at the crossroads, and they're bearing down on me from every which way like a multiple train wreck, until all I can do is sing the "Blue Monday Multiple Complex Blues."

There's a way to shake this. Yes there is. First, you sing and shout it out. That's what we've doing in this service. Second, gotta do something, gotta rise from blues besotted beds of lethargy, gotta dance it out, gotta do something.

Got the 2010 Olympics Blues; the Israel/Palestine Blues; the Canada/First Nations Blues; and the Congo War Canada Mining Blues? Then pull out the *Sunday Unitarian* insert from the order of service, and follow the prompts; *resolve* that you're going to make a couple of telephone calls, visit a couple of websites *and soon*, and give some people down the line a gentle, determined piece of your mind. We may be stuck with the Olympics, but what we need is safe, affordable housing and ample, dependable mass transit, so that our nation doesn't just hang there half built.

The federal government needs to follow through with the recommendations of the "Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples" and the 2005 Kelowna Accords, so that our nation doesn't just hang there half built. It needs to demand corporate responsibility from the ten Canadian mining companies that are abetting warfare in the Congo, actions in violation of the Principles of the UN and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, corporate responsibility so that our nation doesn't just hang there half built.

We need to support good people in organizations working for peace in the Middle East like the Canadian Muslim Congress, the American Friends Service Committee, and Jewish Voice for Peace. Pick up a phone, visit a website, speak your mind, offer some help and shake off the blues. This isn't politics; this is doing *religion*, the kind that, in Matthew chapter 25, says feeds the hungry, gives drink to those who thirst, clothes the naked, and visits the sick and those in prison.

And finally, if you've got the "UCV Where Are Those People Blues?" where's that person? Those children? That family? That friend of mine...I wonder where she is; where they are? How are they doing? Why aren't they here...? Then what I want you to do, is think of one person, just one, and then pull out a UCV directory,

and today, or this week, make one telephone call or write one letter, and say: "hello, I've been thinking of you. How are you? Is there anything I need to know, or that I can do, because I've missed you." Do this and we'll help build community, and you'll help yourselves and your minister to get a good night's sleep.

So let's shake it out, dance it out this week; get ready for Blue Monday, give it a hearty push, a you're-not-going-to-get-me-down-this-year; by heaven and earth we don't have to be helpless; and together, let's sing "Let Union Be In All Our Hearts." So be it.