

## Cover Ups

**GUC - Sunday 13th January 2013**

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I was really stumped about what I would talk about today, until I read an excellent article in last w/end's Sunday Times Culture magazine by the award winning art critic Waldemar Januszczak. He explained something about a famous painting which has puzzled me for years, ever since I met it as an art student, decades ago. It also triggered my ideas for this service, which I hope you will find interesting. My theme for this morning is 'COVER-UPS'.

I'd like to read an extract from Januszczak's article.

***'The massacre of the Innocents' by Peter Bruegel the Elder.***

*This extraordinary image was acquired by Charles 11 after the restoration. Painted in 1565, it originally depicted one of the bible's darkest moments : the killing of every male child in Bethlehem on the express orders of king Herod. I hope you haven't forgotten the story. The three wise men have told Herod that a new king of the Jews has been born in bethlehem. But they won't tell him where. So Herod gives the order for every male child in Bethlehem under the age of two to be murdered. And that's what Bruegel originally showed us.*

*Hang on a moment though. Look closely at the picture today and you won't find any innocents being massacred. Where have the dead babies gone? Where's the blood and the gore?*

*I'm afraid it's all hidden under that delightfully painted snow. Soon after it was finished, Massacre of the Innocents was bought by the Holy Roman Emperor,*

*Rudolf 11, and it was Rudolf who decided that the events depicted were too ghastly for him and too easily mistaken for actual events in his empire. So he had the massacred innocents painted out.*

*See the old woman on the left crying over some loaves of bread in the snow? Those loaves were originally dead babies. See the calf, by the barrel in the foreground, having its throat slit? That was originally a baby. See the wild boar being lanced just below the group of mounted soldiers? That was a baby. Every bundle carried by every wailing mother was originally a baby. See the dead swan that a soldier is carrying by the neck, above the two soldiers in red? That was a baby.*

*Thus all this crisp white snow, which Bruegal has painted to prettily, and which makes all the other colours in the picture, sing so vibrantly, is proving to be an excellent cover up for tons and tons of unimaginable evil.'*

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Christmas is well and truly behind us! ....and we missed out yet again on a white one. Instead, we had plenty of rain, wind, and floods. We hardly ever get a white Christmas..... because, I think in some way, they don't really belong in the real world. They are works of the imagination and wishful thinking, created out of our annual need to imagine away the problematics of life and replace them briefly, with a snowy fantasy.

Bing Crosby at one point took a short break from dreaming of a white Christmas, when he commented :-

*'Unless we make Christmas an occasion to share our blessings, all the snow in Alaska won't make it white!'* His classic hit song, "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas" tapped into all the soldiers' yearning for home during WW2. It was the 2nd 'richest' song in history, in the sense that it generated the most income. The first richest song, was 'Happy birthday to You' (which originally began life as 'Good Morning to You' and was written by two schoolteachers in the States for their classes)

Surely snow is the most beautiful physical cover-up of all. Breugal used it to cover up the horror of dead babies in his painting - and it makes the natural beauty of nature - trees and landscapes even more magical. It transforms dirty streets and gloomy cityscapes.

Raymond Briggs is the brilliant illustrator and creator of 'the Snowman' a classic children's picture book without words, which was adapted into a charming animated film over 30 years ago. Since then, he has consistently refused his permission to allow animators to make a follow-up sequel, despite many requests. But recently, he gave in. Perhaps some of you saw the new film over Christmas on TV...called 'The Snowman and the Snow Dog'?

Raymond Briggs is now in his late 70's and is quite a crotchety individual. Although he had no input into the original film's animation, it was skillfully taken from his drawings and of course, featured his characters, the boy and the snowman.

The leading artist working on the new, updated film had to secure Raymond Briggs' approval of the new story. I sympathised with his nerves, meeting and presenting his story to Briggs who had been his life-long idol as an illustrator. The new story is very like the first one. It shows an older boy character who has moved into the same house, but now it has become part of a housing estate. His beloved pet dog has just died and he builds a replica of the snowman but adds a snow dog. They go flying as they did before, (sadly, the wonderful 'Walking in the Air' has been replaced by a decidedly inferior anthem.) The ending is full of pathos, as before. The snowman melts overnight....but there is a final magical element to the end of the new story....the snow dog transforms into a real dog, to the delight of the boy. Some may think this is a harmless cover-up about mortality for children, in the same tradition as Santa. Cover-ups are comforting.

Over all, Raymond Briggs appears to have approved the the new version and has complimented the team of animators on their hard work.... but he comments that he has never gone in for 'happy endings', saying that everyone has to die - including people you love, parents and beloved pets. Briggs allows the snowman to 'die' - he melts.

On a more serious level, cover ups have been happening since the world began. History is littered with them. Napoleon said of history itself - "*History is a set of lies agreed upon.*"

None of us would find comfort in the recent cover ups which have filled the news :- The Jimmy Saville cover up by the BBC and many others. How many knew about his shameful abuse of young girls and looked the other way? And now, even after his death, how many are still involved in hiding the truth? We've had cover ups by the police - Hillsborough was just one shocking example. The media cover up on phone hacking; Numerous political cover ups of scandals, dirty deals of all kinds; cover ups of war crimes....the list is endless and hugely depressing.

Let's face it - it is in all of us. Isn't it a part of human nature ? this need to cover up wrong doing, guilty secrets, mistakes, faults. We look for ways to justify our behaviour or to pretend it didn't happen. None of us is exempt. On a personal level, haven't we all, at times, covered up stuff that we regret, and kept it hidden from others?

But what about the cover ups we do to and within ourselves, about ourselves? Every overweight person becomes an expert on using clothes to cover up a multitude of sins!

It takes enormous courage to face up to our own private cover ups - to acknowledge that we are kidding ourselves and to take responsibility for our weaknesses and mistakes, our ill chosen words or actions. Cover ups are comforting. They shield us from harsh reality. There is no way forward for the addict but to first of all acknowledge the addiction...stop hiding the evidence....and begin the long hard journey to change habits.

There's not a lot we can do in the face of national / International cover ups.....and we may not have to cover up major crimes or addictions.....but I know I have some serious 'reality checks' to do within my own life at the beginning of this new year. Things I must uncover and face up to.

And here is where belonging to a faith community like ours comes in. I would like to read you these words by Mark Morrison Reed :-

### **The task of the Religious Community.**

*The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others.*

*Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.*

*It is the church that assures that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community.*

*The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too is limited to do all that must be done.*

***Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.***

It is encouraging to me to be a Unitarian - to belong to this movement shared by people who have a proud and hard-won heritage of daring to be different ; who refuse to run with the pack ; who like to think for themselves about religion and who struggle to be fair and broad minded.

When we face up to difficult situations and have to take hard decisions, it helps us to know that we belong to a liberal faith community who aim to be unafraid to speak out and to stand up and be counted and who are not prepared to swallow down 'happy religious pills' and cover themselves with 'spiritual comfort blankets'.

But we should remember that this process of uncovering goes more than one way - further and deeper than facing up to *negative* things we have hidden -

we also need to uncover more qualities that need to be shown and expressed more clearly to one another - kindness, understanding, patience and empathy.

May we find, in the spirit of resolution for a new year, the will and energy to uncover more of these!

I would like to end with these words by Robert French Leavens :-

*'Holy and beautiful the custom  
which brings us together,  
In the presence of the Most High.*

*To face our ideals,  
To remember our loved ones in absence,  
To give thanks, to make confession,  
To offer forgiveness,  
To be enlightened, and to be strengthened.*

*Through this quiet hour breathes  
The worship of ages,  
The cathedral music of history.*

*Three unseen guests attend,  
Faith, hope and love.  
Let all our hearts prepare them a place.'*

Thank you for listening.

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