

Adapt or Perish

Service at Glasgow Unitarian Church - Sunday 17th August 2014

Led by Lyanne Mitchell

This service theme had its beginnings in the Tate Modern, London some weeks ago. I was visiting the exhibition 'Henri Matisse - the cut-outs.'

I wasn't prepared for the brilliant colour – and scale – of Matisse's later work, spreading from one gallery to the next like some super-abundant garden. Swallows dive, fish fly, flowers burst open, figures dance, bright combinations of colour and shape blossom on a pure white ground, and it really lifted my spirit.

They were created with nothing more than paper, pins and scissors. They are as extraordinary as the reduced circumstances in which they were made – by an old man unable to stand without support, often confined to a wheelchair and eventually to his bed.

Henri Matisse was in a wheelchair by 1941, following radical colon surgery at the age of 71. He could no longer work at his easel. For years he had made paper cut outs as part of his preparation process for his paintings - he could move them around, pinning and re-pinning them to his canvas until he was happy with the composition. He came to realise that cut paper could be his new creative medium for what he gratefully called his "second life". (studio) Paper and scissors, replaced brushes giving him colour and form, and a creative expression that would evolve through the last 13 years of his life. He produced cut out designs for books, stained glass windows, tapestries and ceramics.

Praised for their bold use of colour and abstract beauty, they began to gain attention as artworks in their own right. In fact it is said that when Picasso first saw them, he admitted to being 'rather jealous'.

The exhibition re-examines the cut-outs as a form of expression, exploring their transition from studio pieces into permanent works that came to be considered among his most glorious. While Matisse's health continued to deteriorate, his cut-outs became more daring in their use of scale and subject matter. In the final room, one of the captions draws attention to the thousands of pinpricks visible in the paper pieces of these last cut-outs. This is what it took, not just the scissoring but the pinning, and re-pinning - trying it all out

over and over again until the relationships between the pieces were exactly right.

It is the lesson of a lifetime, and an inspiration to the viewer: ideally, this is how we should all be - still aspiring, still relishing the beauty of life even as we face its end. It is a paradox - Matisse's age and ill health forced him to transform a simple technique which he had previously been using as a basic composition tool, into a medium which would produce his most iconic works of art

This is only one example - taken from the world of art - 'Adapt or Perish'.

We look around our world - economies are faltering. Societies are being crushed. Wars are raging. Resources are being depleted. Systems are crumbling. Power is shifting. Religions are being rethought. Alliances are being tested. Maps are changing.

The world is going through unprecedented abrupt changes on all fronts and in a few years it will be unrecognisable. Throughout this transition and in preparation of the next stage, people need to do one thing: Adapt or perish. And adaptation is the one redeeming feature of humanity. It is one thing that we do very well. We have survived because we adapted -throughout the millennia.

Darwin knew what he was talking about...

Life forms evolved throughout the millennia by natural selection. What Charles Darwin meant by this term was that species survive when they are "better adapted for immediate, local environment". It took the scientific community about one century to finally come to terms and reluctantly accept it. So in nature, over time who survives is dictated by the ability to adapt to a changing environment. Biologists by and large have incorporated natural selection to mainstream teaching and researching.

A prominent sociologist Robert Merton took this theory one step further and applied it to people. He developed a theory to explain deviant behavior but it seems to me that within it, lies a great truth about individual evolution. It has been called "typology of modes of individual adaptation". There are 5 modes of personal adaptation according to Merton:

1. Conformity
2. Innovation
3. Ritualism

4. Retreatism

5. Rebellion

Each way of behaving or reacting is defined by the individual's attitude towards society's widely accepted goals and means of achieving these goals.

Conformists accept the defined goals and use legitimate means,

Innovators accept goals but invent new means of achieving accepted goals,

Ritualists reject the goals but use available means,

Retreatists reject everything,

Rebels reject everything but try to substitute accepted goals and available means with others.

It is challenging to draw parallels between Merton's theory devised to explain criminal behavior and our understanding of innovation. Innovation is a pure case of **anomie** as Merton defined it.

Anomie is a "condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals" It is the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community. Within Innovation, Merton believed there's discontinuity between goals and means. In other words - 'Let's think outside the box.'

Although Merton's theory was concerned with deviant or criminal behaviour, I believe that devising new means to survive, succeed, create, get ahead doesn't have to be bad. Actually it can be very good. Better than good. It can be a salvation.

Adaptation = Innovation

So, Mr. Merton, I'd like to say - **Let there be anomie. Let there be innovation!**

So that's the scientific bit - what about religion? The Church of England recently voted to allow women to become bishops for the first time in its history. Its ruling General Synod gave approval to legislation introducing the change by the required two-thirds majority. This need to adapt took a huge leap of faith. Some see it as a "cosmic shift" - arguing that the Church's theology has been changed by its acceptance that men and women are equally eligible to lead and teach Christianity.

With this decision, the Church is acknowledging the importance secular society places on equality, signalling that it wants to end its isolation from the lives of the people it serves. Faith is what we can do first separately and then

as a whole. And since we are talking about people not amoebas, we are talking about the will to adapt. The will to achieve the same old goals of survival, contribution, acceptance by new means. That's innovation. That's adaptation.

To come closer to home, I was most interested in Ash Jame's report in the Inquirer - on the 2020 Congregational Development training week held at Hucklow - which Janet attended, representing GUC.

Ash tells us that in the UK today, only 22% of us are '**Millennials**' - in other words, 'Digital Natives' who have grown up with digital communication, social media, and unprecedented access to information. (Keir story?) The 'Baby Boomers' like me, are now catching up and also becoming well-versed with the freedoms of new technology. There is now a very real disconnection from the past - from the traditional ways we have used to share our Unitarian faith - we need to adapt or perish!

The writer and sociologist Alvin Toffler says '*The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and re-learn*'.

Whether we like it or not, the practical way to do this is by embracing the world of Social Media. This is the best tool for church growth outside personal contact. It is now an essential way of extending influence to the wider world.

Social media should coordinate with website, newspaper, magazine and printed information. We need to say more than 'You are Welcome'. Images and stories about the liberal beliefs we hold will illustrate our values and attract those with similar ones. We are taking the first steps - our new Publicity and Communication (Lesley Hart, one of our members, informed us at our first meeting that the term 'Outreach' is now very out-dated, so we will use the title 'Publicity & Communication') The group is made up of 8 people who are committed to learn and use these tools more effectively to increase GUC's visibility.

But we must remember that even if we succeed in creating a superb, branded media presence that attracts a new, younger audience to our building - it remains true that an unappealing environment, unfriendly attitude - lack of welcome or joyless services will almost instantly undo all our hard work. We can still appear exclusive and impenetrable. What about taking a stranger around GUC and ask them what they see? Or ask a passer-by on the street about Unitarianism; that could be quite instructive. The answers may help our brand audit. We have made a very good start by installing our new signs on the building - that was desperately needed! I am hopeful that our new Publicity & Communication group will build on this.

Am I being too cruel if I return to my starting example - Henri Matisse and dare to make an analogy?

Like the old painter, is our movement and this fellowship in ill health? is it aging and weak?.... Is it perhaps already consigned to a metaphorical wheelchair?no longer able to use the traditional tools of communication it used to use?

Here in GUC, are we going to take to our metaphorical beds? Give up and say... 'Oh we're too old, we're too late to learn all this new stuff'?

No!

..... Like Henri, we are turning to new tools of expression - not paper, pins and scissors.....in our case, digital tools like an expanded website, Face Book, twitter, video and blogging.

Hopefully, like Henri Matisse, we'll be brave enough to adapt - we will not perish and eventually, we shall be grateful, as he was - to bring about our own 'SECOND LIFE'?

Thank you for listening.