

READING AND SERMON JANUARY 17, 2010

First UU Society

READING: *Once and For All* by Charles Isherwood

Last week Fred Lyman left an article in my mailbox. Dated Monday Jan 1, 2010, It was a fascinating review in The NY Times, by Charles Isherwood of an innovative play with a cast of 13 Teens titled “ Once and For All We’re Gonna Tell You Who We Are, So Shut Up and Listen.” I have chosen some excerpts from the article to share with you for this mornings reading.

“The joyous and miserable chaos of adolescence is distilled into a remarkable hour of theater in "Once and for All We're Gonna Tell You Who We Are So Shut Up and Listen,"

Don't let that long, fist- shaking title put you off. Although the show is performed by an energetic, fresh-faced cast of 13 teenagers,..There is very little dialogue in "Once and for All," which superficially resembles a free-spirited hour in' the rumpus room. Angst-ridden invective is blessedly absent, although you might get assaulted with a little Silly String, The show, directed by Alexander Devriendt, who conceived it along with Joeri Smet and the cast, essentially begins with the youngsters trooping casually onstage and seating themselves in chairs lined up in a neat row. Five minutes of messy horseplay follow. A couple of the boys pester one another using balloons like rubber bands. Two girls tip their chairs back, fall giggling to the floor and rope in a lanky boy to join their games. Another pair of girls constructs a pyramid from plastic cups, until somebody kicks it down in a fit of destruction. One girl is absorbed in a peculiar rite: burning Bar bie's feet with a cigarette lighter. .

Just when the roughhousing threatens to reel out of control, an alarm bell sounds, and the kids scamper offstage, only to return a few moments later and enact precisely the same behaviors allover again. What seemed to be a spontaneous expression of unbridled energy is revealed to be a carefully choreographed ritual, bringing home the telling point that even

in adolescence- make that particularly in adolescence- there is no such thing as being totally un-self conscious. Although the raucous music track favors loud rock and electronica, "Once and for All" generally presents its ideas gently. Behind its apparently casual, unstructured surface is a shrewd and compassionate understanding of the adolescent mind at work even as it is at play....

At one point the actors describe their behaviors rather than perform them. During another vignette they skulk onstage in what is clearly meant to be a state of heavy inebriation, each lost in a private world filled ' with fanciful or tormenting visions. In another sequence the communal fun becomes charged with the tenderness and anxiety of sexual exploration. ' "The sense of living your life in a fishbowl is never more potent than it is when you're a teenager - unless you grow up to be a sports star, a movie idol or, God forbid, Paris Hilton. And so the action in "Once and for All" often jerks to a sudden halt, as the performers direct watchful, wary stares on the audience, 'the standins for the disapproving parents and guardians. "I have to go too far," one young woman announces, in one of the few, short monologues. No matter what time curfew is, she'll be breaking it, she adds. How else to test the waters of adult responsibility?

"I'm confused," a youngster behind me said, trying to discern a pattern as the kids kept pressing rewind and entering all over again. Well, exactly. Quicksilver changes in mood - from joyful abandon to sullen introspection to earnest thoughtfulness - are the stuff of adolescence, when hormones wreak havoc on the nervous system, and the future is both an open field you want to sprint toward and black cloud enveloping the horizon. "Once and for All" embraces and emphasizes the contradictions of the developing mind, creating a vivid 3-D'X-ray of the psyche in its formative years...

Of course as true-to-life as' these adolescents appear to be, they depart from reality in one pronounced way ,that parents are sure to note. Unlike actual teenagers, after these kids have made an unholy mess of the place, they clean up after themselves."

SERMON:

Whose Listening Anyway?

The reading this morning set off a number of alarms, quotes from adults that have become commonplace, sort of a grown up mantra.. “Kids today have no manners. They are rude, vulgar, secretive, isolated, and critical of everything and everyone. They have no goals or skills. They watch too much TV, sit and stare at the computer all day. They do whatever they want with no respect for authority. They don’ t listen. They never compromise over anything, they just shoot each other if things don’t go their way. There should be a law that all kids at the age of 13 should be put into compulsory suspended animation until their hormones settle down, about the age of 30. Then we can teach them something!”

These are all comments I have heard from up standing, law abiding citizens who have washed their hands of anything to do with relating to kids. Good folks, even friends, and some parents who have concluded that teenagers live in a world of their own making, that we can’t relate too, so why bother?

It is true that we have all experienced some real ambivalence and confusion over the distant and sometimes strange or violent behaviors of kids today, and many feel that adolescents have created a culture within themselves that has shunned and shut out adults especially those who show any authority over them at all.

For far too many kids, this is the image that our modern teens are labeled with, as the distance between us as seems to have grown immensely.

The long and short of it is we don’t understand what is happening or how they have gotten away from us, or stopped communicating with us, by using an electronic language all of their own, that is designed to isolate us even further.

Sadly, it is not only teens that have drifted, it has also become the age of Nanny 911.

If you have not seen it please check it out. It centers on the behaviors of young kids, grossly misbehaving, hitting and swearing at their parents, screaming incessantly for no reason, refusing to do anything they are asked without a major meltdown.

So enters stage left, Nanny 911, who steps in and confronts little Billy age 5, who has just torn apart the living room and is perched on the edge of the sofa, sneering at his mother. By now, mom is exhausted, frustrated and terrorized by her son's behavior.

What did Nanny 911 do? Scream at him? Spank him? Take away his favorite toy, which he already broke? Ground him for the next year?

No she walked up to him, slowly reached out for his hand and very softly said, "Billy, I want to talk with you." Surprised by her unexpected response, he stepped off the couch, he took her hand and they talked, real words, with tears and anger and apologies and rules for behavior that his parents also agreed too.

Could it be that easy? Probably not in many cases, but the behavior was caught it at a young age and with consistency, hopefully there will be more communication and less yelling in that troubled household. This is certainly a far cry from what some of us grew up with... 'children should be seen and not heard' or " only speak when you are spoken too..."

Obviously something is very wrong and maybe it's more than merely demanding obedience. No one likes to be ordered to conform without a good reason. But we all do need to learn to live with boundaries. No one wants to feel that true friends can only be found in cryptic messages from a small electronic box; or to find that a sense of community means fantasies played out on a computer game with invisible partners. Violence is intriguing, drugs and alcohol can mask the pain of not belonging, or feeling misunderstood or being overly criticized. Bullying both verbally and physically, can be an ultimate cry for help, a deep unresolved ache to feel noticed and valued; Music can nurture and soothe or be loud enough to obliterate all that is not wished to be heard.

Like all serious social issues that live with us each day, we tend to renounce or ignore, criticize or put down what we don't understand. That is so much easier than taking the time to calm down, and take a good look at exactly what it is that we don't know.

My nephew John Victor is 16 years old. He is a quiet kid, and a very talented musician. Sometimes he seems lost in the bell of his Tuba and absorbed by the

music he loves. He spends hours on his computer. Our conversations are often short. I don't always know what to say to him. I really don't understand his world, that is until I read his College essay. The task was to write an essay about what it is you know about what you don't know! It's probably a question we should all attempt to answer!

I would like to read to you his response:

"A few years ago while I was falling asleep in bed, allowing my mind to trickle down whatever stream of thought it chose, I came to the distinct and rational realization that *I didn't even know what I didn't know*. This idea was a bit of a shock to me, because it came at a time when I, like most kids at some point in their lives, thought I knew everything. The next day I eagerly told my classmates what I had discovered, but all I received in response was a blunt "So?", for which I had no response. It seemed that the enthusiasm I held over my first rough philosophical abstraction was not shared by others, so I filed it away and waited for a time where I could prove it to be true.

Those times occurred and still occur with surprising frequency. For example, I was recently looking up how many G-forces 'opening shock' causes during skydiving, and discovered that there is a whole science behind calculating and reducing 'opening shock', which almost brings the packing style of the canopy to an art form. It truly amazes me whenever I find a door that opens to an entirely new school of thought. Another example would be font design. Even though we are surrounded by thousands of fonts, most of us never think of how much effort and thought goes into making them. When I watched the documentary Helvetica I was astonished.

It had simply never occurred to me that some people's livelihoods are based entirely around designing and selling fonts, and that certain people become as emotional over fonts as I do over music. On the subject of music, I've been continually amazed at the quantity of music that's been produced, and that's being produced even now. I originally had a plan to become at least moderately familiar with all the genres, but now I realize that that's not possible. The amount of music currently floating around and being produced is just so staggeringly huge that I could never dream of listening to it all.

And so, I have come to the conclusion that I truly don't know what I don't know. The more I learn, the smaller I become in the grand scope of things. No matter how hard I try to be

well-rounded, I will still be 'specializing' in a sense. That's not to say I have given up trying to learn as much as I can, as I am learning and discovering new ideas and concepts faster than ever. It's just stating my acceptance that I will never be able to keep up with all that goes on in the world, and that to contribute the most to mankind's collective consciousness I must, in fact, specialize as much as I can afford, and develop that area as much as I can. I have chosen the tuba as my area of specialization, and I will do my best to bring the tuba up to a level it has yet to reach.”

I was deeply moved by his essay and grateful to have had the opportunity to read it and to share it with you this morning with his permission. I didn't know what he was thinking. I simply, could have asked. I had no idea he was such a deep thinker.

John like most kids, like the actors in “Once and For All” and the kids that hang out on the corner, or text each other incessantly, or meet each Sunday in the teen room, or those who seem to fight us every step of the way...are all looking, searching for those adults in their lives who are willing to sit down and say “I don't know.” I don't know what you are feeling, or thinking or what you believe or value in life. I don't know what you are afraid of or happy about or even if you do know how much I love you.

After church today, when we have had our coffee and conversation with one another, the Teens in our congregation have not waited for us to extend them an invitation, to find out what it is we don't know. Instead they have put together a Youth Ally workshop to help us understand who they are, what they need from us and how we can better relate to them. It is an amazing gesture that I hope everyone here this morning will attend.

Underneath all the drama, the hormones and the temptations that would flatten anyone of us, should we find ourselves growing up as they are in this culture. We have in this church a remarkable group of Teens, I am extremely proud of, who are doing for us what we should have done for them a long time ago.

I trust that we will be the ones, this time, who will be doing the listening...
So be it Amen

Rev Holly Baylies © January 2010