

Civic Valentines

When one falls in love, one becomes credible; and so it is with a city when it falls in love with itself. It becomes credible, believable to itself. And it attracts. When a civic leader is in love with a city, he/she is listened to. He/she is credible. People know this: that the quality of life is initially and inevitably predicated by love. And prescriptions not fired by the passion for a town are useless. You cannot fool the instinct of people, all of whom recognize what they themselves aspire to-----a passion for what is at stake. And what is at stake is always the quality of life, which people know cannot be bettered, unless love is factored in.

People who are not in love are irresponsible. A town that is not in love with itself is irresponsible, and civically apt for mistakes. Responsibility is a cold duty; and it inspires no one. A citizenry is incited to action by the eros of mutual care, by having a common object of love—their city. A town that is not in love will cut corners, lose sight of the common good. It loses sight of the common good because it has lost sight of what is commonly beautiful, and the beautiful is not landscape, or cityscape or architectonic; the beautiful is what people have built in the spaces between each other--a reciprocity, an exchange of ideals, a shared vision.

There is a self-privileging Canadian attitude that says “we don’t need to advertise ourselves to the world”. If this notion is remotely attractive, it is the ground zero of the ethos that has rendered Ontario less than mythic to itself. For myths are created by an enthusiasm to publicize the dramas of affection. To conceal the charisma of what we love with a kind of pride isn’t at all charismatic to the rest of the world. And there’s no point to taking a cavalier attitude as a virtue. It is self-absorption masquerading as self-confidence.

For a vibrant citizenry, confidence is not a “done deal” or the finished project. Confidence must be companioned by an urge to share one’s hard-earned narratives as communities, towns and cities. This impulse to give of oneself, to rejoice, to reach out and to invite strangers into our self-reflections, is crucial. It cultivates us as a national culture and cultivates our membership in the globality of nations.

Ethnicity is dead. A cold and disappointing truth. Ethnicity is made up of cultural habit and genealogy. And it is revised in a time when ideas migrate to us before we have a chance to move. And who will claim, in a post-modern forum, that the individual does not choose to re-invent himself/herself at every turn, to be regularly free of the

constraints of the chromosomal and the historic? When it suits us, we affiliate ourselves to genealogy; when we choose to be ourselves and unique, we disaffiliate. The question of indebtedness to the past and liberation from the past amounts to an art form we have not mastered in our time. And it is of no assistance in the shaping of a collective identity.

It is time to stop ignoring the anger, sullenness in the character of daily civic life. People are angry about something; so how can they be creative? They don't believe in institutions, leaders, or authority. There is widespread disbelief in "accreditation". How do we restore societal "faith", without which society garrisons itself in gated communities and retreats into zones of security? In the absence of socio-spiritual guidelines, once provided by faith groups and religions, governance must invent ideals that are credible and beautiful, with credible mediators of those ideals. For lack of which we see a common retreat to the "tribal", whether it be ideological or multicultural. We need what will bridge the communities and provide a gesture of solidarity that will make for economic cohesion and societal cohesion. More than that, we need to see ourselves as something more than communities. An economy will not move forward on the strength of "tribal" allegiances alone, just as a culture will not move forward on the strength of economic allegiances alone. We need to move from "community" to "communality".

It is time to restore a "literacy of grace". The lack of which is evident on roads, streets, byways, schools, in all public places. A literacy of grace amounts to civility. A literacy of grace is a pledge of civic care among citizens. It is called grace because citizens know that they live their lives in a forum of hope larger than their strategies. By instinct they seek to reenact within the civic a benevolence assumed as the nature of life itself, and made explicit the ethic of a city. It is a premise of faith that accounts for civic care. When that faith is corrupted, credible stewardship is difficult to enact and difficult to perceive.

Polls show that over fifty percent of the Canadian people have no confidence in the honesty of elected officials. There is a loss of civic faith; lost by the deconstruction of accredited officials and institutions, lost by opportunism in commerce and governance, lost in the cynicism of dutiful journalism, lost by national and personal griefs unattended to by the ideals that each generation is entitled to.

Civic faith is badgered by bad planning, no planning, by builders with little or no regard for aesthetic, when aesthetic is the proof of municipal concern for the citizen. Civic faith has been hijacked by a technology that substitutes expedience for encounter. Civic faith is besieged with every billboard and design that would turn the citizen into a mere consumer. Civic faith is enfeebled with every politically correct caveat to the citizen speaking his or her passions. Civic faith is diminished whenever the enthusiasm of belief

is muted by the tribunals of the status quo. Civic faith is diminished whenever social policy encourages an ethic of entitlement, and not an ethic of sufficiency.

(For the citizen knows that “sustainability” is not about the aggravation of desires, but about the re-education of desire towards civic grace).

The literacy of grace has been perforated by the populisms of media scripting, and the short-hand of telecommunications and information technology. The loss of the literacy of grace has left us on a ground bed of anger, sullenness and disenchantment. And so we mourn the loss of community, of neighborhood and of shared purpose. The literacy of grace trailed off like a shadow, somewhere between the isolating technologies and urban topographies of strip malls, clover-leafs and gated communities.

Only the restoration of a literacy of grace could enable again passion, enthusiasm, cooperation and focus on commonly understood ideals. It may be called “a literacy of grace” because the citizen must learn again the gestures of human involvement and relation, the way one learns to read words. We have forgotten how to read each other by the alphabet of needs, common desires, universal ideals, national enthusiasms and primal requests.

A literacy of grace is not about to be nursed into health by edicts of mutual respect, equity or tolerance. For these are the byproducts of something more substantive. A literacy of grace is based on more than its features. A literacy of grace is based on a shared eros and joy-- the eros of cohabitation on the same planet, with the knowledge of being of similar flesh, and similar thoughts and similar feelings. Diversity will mean nothing, until we reclaim these commonalities.

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