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Sermon

A Witch for Our Time

Years ago, the American social critic Tom Wolfe was writing a magazine article on real contemporary artists. Asking Who's an artist?, Wolfe rejected classical definitions and turned instead to popular stereotypes. He decided that an artist is someone living in a garret and starving for their vision, a vision so unusual it may not even be art.

Ed Roth was one possibility. Big Daddy lives in southern California. He customizes cars. Of course he's starving. His work is stunning, but hardly anyone knows him.

Another possibility were the engineers who've designed and built the towering neon signs at the casinos on the strip in Las Vegas, Nevada. Enter Vegas at night and your eyes are stabbed by the flash of neon lights, that split the night: huge, brilliant, wild, vulgar, utterly fascinating.

Perhaps a similar use of popular stereotypes can help us discover who might be a real witch today.

This morning I'll nominate a candidate, explore her background and the most secret aspect of her life, the power of darkness. Finally, we'll look at why her gift might also be ours.

First of all, why witches? Well, 'tis the season. 'Tis also a fast-growing faith tradition, with which we UU's generally are sympathetic, since witches are historical outcasts, like our spiritual ancestors. We try to create places where on Sunday morning witches, and other minorities, can be free to be themselves. We believe in people being themselves, spiritually and religiously. That goal reflects the inherent dignity and worth of every human being.

Stereotypes of witches have several traits.

A witch is thought to be powerful, mysterious, often misunderstood. Usually she's a woman. Older. Unattractive. She is often unmanned, that is, alone, without a man in her life to protect her. Usually poor or, paradoxically, quite propertied. (Because if poor, then automatically vulnerable; but if rich, then sometimes surrounded by covetous neighbours who might directly profit from her conviction and execution as a witch.) She usually wears a distinctive costume. She can weave mesmerizing spells and work magic.

Now who in the world might be like that today?

Why, Mother Teresa, of course. Who else?

Seriously? Well, humour me.

Who exactly was Mother Teresa?

A girl whose middle name was Agnes, born in Albania in 1910. In 1928 she joined the Sisters of Loreto in Ireland. The Sisters are a "non-cloistered congregation of religious women, dedicated primarily to education."

She signed up to be a missionary in India, and arrived in Calcutta in 1929. Two years later, she professed her vows, of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The Sisters have unusual takes on these vows. To them, poverty means individual but not corporate poverty. Every year, each Sister figures out her needs for the coming year. Anything extra belongs to the order. Individually poor, but collectively rich beyond the dreams of avarice.

At the Sisters' motherhouse in Kentucky one evening, at dinner I sat next to a young woman, a nun who was managing their portfolio. Imagine, nuns, with big investments! This brilliant young Ph.D. could probably have made six or seven figures a year, on Wall Street.

Chastity, they also have an odd take on. Since they all have married Jesus, they don't have sex with other people, but otherwise -- anything goes. My seminary teacher, for example, a Loreto Sister, lived with her female partner in Marin County, California, and cheerfully called herself a "non-practicing lesbian." Whatever!

Obedience is interpreted Quaker-style: obedience to the inner light in each of us, whether we call it God, or conscience, or the Pope, whatever.

I asked my teacher if her boss in Rome knew about all these interpretations. She said sure, the Pope is studying the constitution of our order before he approves it. Something in her tone of voice made me ask, How long has he been studying it? She said, since approximately 1961.

Mother Teresa taught young girls in Bengal for seventeen years. In 1946, on a train to Darjeeling, she received “a call within a call,” to serve the poor in the streets of Calcutta. Jesus identified with the poor and the suffering, and Mother Teresa identified with Jesus.

In 1948, she formed her own order, the Missionaries of Charity.

Forming the order was not easy. Her superiors, all male, asked her pointedly, What exactly are you going to do? How? With whom, and how do you teach them? Where? Can't others do this better? Will you succeed? Why?

She had a reputation for being overly decisive, so her spiritual director ordered her to develop prudence. She was obedient all right, but chafed at obedience. When they gave her a hard time, she asked them, How come, when God asks something, people turn extra-careful, but when people ask something, things get done -- quickly?

She brooked no opposition. She wrote to the archbishop, “Delay no longer. Keep me not back.” She added scornfully, “You are still afraid.” To her superiors, she was a royal pain in the neck.

When her superiors said, “Mother, let it rest,” she called on higher authority. She told them Jesus had challenged her: “Wilt thou refuse me?” (She had made a private vow in 1942 to refuse God nothing.)

Finally, in January 1948, the archbishop yielded, and that August, Pope Pius XII gave his approval. Mother Teresa was off and running.

She set out on her great adventure on December 21, 1948. For the first time as a “Missionary of Charity,” she plunged into what she called “the dark holes of the poor” in the slums of Calcutta. She had five rupees to her name.

“I just did some washing of sores,” she wrote later, “and dressings, gave some medicine to some – The old man lying on the street – not wanted – all alone – just sick and dying – I gave him carbarsone (an amoebacide) and water to drink and the old man was so strangely grateful.”

The rest of her story has become well-known. They gave her the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979. When she died, ten years ago, she was mourned around the world.

But a hidden aspect of the story was revealed to the public only this past summer. Mother Teresa had a secret. For nearly 50 years, from 1948 until she died in 1997, Mother Teresa was spiritually bereft. Except for an interval of one month, she felt alienated from God and also from Jesus, the bridegroom of her vows.

Stunning! Who can imagine that? All those years, all that magnificent public work, yet – privately, a spiritual moonscape.

It had been a long time coming. As she took her final vows in May 1937, she reported happily that she was no longer afraid of crosses – imagine a cross-cringing nun! -- but she had begun to know darkness as a companion.

What did this darkness mean? One of her biographers suggests, it meant interior suffering,
without any consolation,
spiritual dryness,

and the terrible combination of -- alienation from God, together with a deep longing for God. Alienation combined with longing is like falling in love with what's killing you. It's the addicts' experience, and it is exquisitely hideous.

Mystics are said to know such darkness, seeking union with the holy while remaining estranged from it. Prophets might call it a part of the modern condition.

She tried to hide this alienation even from God. Perhaps originally the alienation itself was hidden from her, and so a habit of hiding grew up.

She wrote of feeling “not wanted by God – repulsed – empty – no faith – no love – no zeal. Souls hold no attraction. Heaven means nothing – to me it looks like an empty place --.”

According to her superiors, the darkness she felt may have been partly a corrective, a God-given purifier of motives, especially for the danger of pride in the success of the order.

Partly too Mother Teresa may have endured suffering because the person she most identified with ended his life in suffering. As Jesus cried, “Father, Father,

why have you abandoned me?” so too Mother Teresa asked, “Jesus, Jesus, why have you abandoned me?”

I suspect we would have welcomed her here, in this Fellowship, would we not?

Did she really recover from the darkness? That’s unclear. She recovered for a one-month window in 1958, following the death of Pius XII, the pope who approved her order into existence. But that recovery soon slipped away, and the darkness returned, to remain with her for the rest of her life. Yet she functioned effectively and powerfully despite the darkness, so it didn’t finally defeat her.

Eventually, with the help of confessors, spiritual directors, and superiors, she came to understand the darkness – hello, darkness, my old friend --, and even to make peace with it. Anguishing, that darkness, but not debilitating.

She came to see the darkness as a gift from God. We have choices about how we see things that come to us, regardless of the source – whether it’s called God, or the Universe, the Great Spirit, Fate, or something else. Given a lemon, we can always make lemonade, and if we do, the lemon ceases to be a lemon, but becomes rather an opportunity, fully recognized, cheerfully grasped.

The gift of darkness also brought her closer to the poor of the world, whom she felt called to serve. Not she, plus they, against the uncaring world out there, but “we” together, creating something of value, with the outside world’s uncaring just a footnote. She became one of them. Solidarity.

She said that she saw Jesus “in the distressing disguise of the needy.” She recognized that the distress that was her portion, was also part of the gift to her.

But was this not hypocrisy, feeling such anguish inside, yet presenting a cheerful face to the world? (She called it her mask.)

She worried about that. She wrote, “Is this not deceiving people – Every time I have wanted to tell the truth – that I have no faith – the words just do not come – my mouth remains closed.”

It might be hypocrisy for some of us, but perhaps not for her. Sharing her private sorrow, though tempting, would have distracted attention from Jesus and the people she was trying to serve, and redirected that focus instead on her. Was it Oscar Wilde who said, A bore is someone who, when you ask, How are you, actually tells you?

We have said that witches are powerful creatures. In 1985 the secretary-general of the United Nations, Javier Perez de Cuellar, called Mother Teresa “the most powerful woman in the world.”

Here is a final story about that strange power. It was told to me as true.

San Francisco in the 1980’s was, and is, a beautiful city, full of hills and cozy neighbourhoods, in one of which there was a run-down old firehouse. The neighbours formed a non-profit corporation, complete with a board of directors and a chair, and the corporation bought the firehouse from the city, for one dollar.

For two years they renovated it. They ripped up, tore down, reconstructed, dry walled, repainted, and polished the gem until it was shining, and everyone was proud and delighted.

Then they sat down to figure out who got what, and how much of it, and when -- and everything collapsed. Soon they were quarrelling, people quit speaking to one another, and nothing got decided or done. The firehouse stayed unused. No one could agree on how to use it.

Finally, at a board meeting, old Joe, their board chair, had an idea. Someone he really admired was coming to town soon. Why not ask Mother Teresa for advice?

Everyone laughed at the idea. But someone said, She couldn’t do any worse. Why not humour Joe?

Two days later, Joe called an emergency meeting. He said, She answered my letter! She’s booked that day, dawn to dusk. But -- if I met her where she’s staying and rode around all day in her car with her, we could steal five minutes here and there. She says – that’s the best she can offer. This woman whom I have adored for so long, this living saint -- wants me to spend the whole day with her, and sorry, but that’s the best she can do. Boy, am I going!

As the great day approached, excitement built. Morale was up, quarrelling down.

That night, at the special board meeting, Joe walked in, late, with an expression on his face that they had never seen before. “If I died, right now,” he said, “I’d die a happy man. This has been the greatest day of my life.”

What happened? they asked.

“Well,” Joe said, “we took the limousine and visited an AIDS ward. She talked with these poor boys who are fixing to die and I tagged along. She chatted, touched their foreheads, prayed with them. They were mesmerized. They’re still going to die, of course, but Mother Teresa blessed them, and their lives are all -- different now.

“At a parochial school, the kids mobbed her, tugged at her sleeve and skirt, sat in her lap. One little girl still had the price tag on her dress. Their parents were all dressed up too, snapping photographs, some of them playing hooky from work to see their kids meet Mother Teresa.

“Then Mother Teresa and I had lunch together. Just the two of us -- and 1,200 of her best friends. Downtown, under the dome at City Hall. The Supreme Court was there, captains of industry, big labour leaders, every parish priest in creation, plus imams, rabbis, ministers of every stripe, baseball players, schoolteachers, professors, TV anchors, scholars, celebrities, famous authors, and every swanky chef in San Francisco, on account of -- they had prepared the meal.

“A wag said, If a bomb drops on City Hall, goodbye, northern California.

“And just before we make our entrance, Mother Teresa takes my arm. What a reaction! Half the room leaps to their feet, clasps their hands, eyes to the ceiling. The other half drops to their knees, clasping their hands, eyes on the floor. Big people, suddenly eight years old. Amazing.”

But someone at the meeting said, “The firehouse, Joe. Did she ever talk about the firehouse?”

“Ah, the firehouse,” Joe said. “Well, mainly she said, ‘Thank you.’”

“‘Thank you?’” someone asked.

Joe nodded. “I don’t know how it happened, or when exactly, but -- I gave her the firehouse.”

Dead silence. Then: “You WHAT?” Everyone began talking at once. “Joe, you can’t do that. It’s our firehouse. You had no right.”

But they discovered that the by-laws, which they hauled out, did authorize the board chair to make contracts on behalf of the corporation. Joe produced the bill of sale, the transfer deed, all the papers done up properly.

He had sold it for a dollar, he said, just what they'd paid. Of course, it being Mother Teresa, he had to loan her the dollar.

They all lit into Joe, suddenly as bitter now as they had been months before. Joe kept saying he really didn't know how it happened, but this was Mother Teresa, didn't they realize that?

They were ready to leave, and all go home, still mad, when someone in the back spoke up.

"Maybe," he said, "we're being too hard on old Joe. We agreed to consult Mother Teresa, after all, and she's a powerful, mysterious lady, around whom strange things can happen. She'll have good ideas on what to do. The firehouse will finally be well used, that's for sure, which was the whole point of talking with her. She tends to get people to work in harmony for good causes. Why not give her a shot?"

Someone else added, "Especially since she owns the building now."

Someone else said, "You know, I think we'll be telling our grandkids about this day, years from now. They'll be laughing about it, and so will we."

Eventually they all reconsidered, and told Joe that they were sorry they got so mad. They gave three cheers for him, and everyone retired to their friendly neighbourhood tavern.

Was this a witch story, or a darkness story, or both?

Powerful and mysterious things sometimes happen, especially around people whom it is easy to misunderstand. More good is sometimes done in this world than credit is given for.

Perhaps the gift of darkness to Mother Teresa is also Mother Teresa's gift to us. As our chilly days grow shorter, and the nights grow longer, we can celebrate the power that surrounds us, and exists within us, and cherish what we have been given, no matter how unlikely the outward package may make it seem.

May it be so.

Amen.