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Imagination and Religious-Moral Education: Janusz Korczak's Fable "How God Took to His Feet and Fled the Temple"

Brief Introduction

My presentation at the colloquium is based on a careful reading and interpretation of the fable that appears here immediately below. It is quite important that persons who plan to attend this session lend this fable a considered reading and reflect upon its possible meanings in general and in the context of the 'topics for reflection and discussion' that are provided following the fable (on pages 5 and 6 below) in particular. As the outstanding humanist progressive moral educator of Polish-Jewish origins, Janusz Korczak (Warsaw, 1878, Treblinka, 1942) is not well-known in the Anglo-Saxon world, some background information on his life, writings and work is provided on pages 7-8, following the topics for reflection and discussion.

Hoping you will find this fable interesting and generative,

Sincerely,

Marc Silverman

The Senate of Madmen, Janusz Korczak

Scene seven

The Fable

The CARPENTER leaves - The Old Man and Janek

THE OLD MAN

Ah, there you are Janek.

Janek, come here dear, I have a fable to tell you - would you like to know how it came to be? - Well, we met and we fell in love - honestly, it was born within my heart and my head marveled. - It grew, feeling its way rather than reasoning - and the head marveled. - And God was not angry. Because the head takes a guess, but the heart might know, or might not know, but it is always sure, right from the start. -- People might say that I'm having a laugh and that it's not allowed: Ha, Ha! God might take offence and punish the offender - Not only the sinner who made up the story, but those who listen to him. Because it's not true: God is neither old nor weak, and his punishments are severe -- not that I am worried, what will be will be. -- Because I know; you, me, God, and the fable - we will understand each other somehow, and we won't argue -- it is true Janek, you are my friend, aren't you, you wouldn't look down on the words of a madman? --- Nor would He, but keep that to yourself.

The world is a troubled place, my boy. Empty, for all those people around, dark even with electricity, cold despite central heating, and not altogether clean, for all the terracotta, shiny glaze and bathroom stoneware. And even with all that music around, man grows weary without God and prayer, without tenderness, which almsgiving brings, and the fear of sin. Good deed, unrewarded, has grown thin, temptation has paled to nothingness. - Anything goes, unfettered by today's penal and commercial codes and the police. - Man lolls about in sin like a young colt in grass, wallows in crime. Goodness has gone to seed, belief grown flabby. Faith is no longer felt, only examined. Conscience no longer chastises, no longer rebukes, only niggles. Priests have gone to the dogs - one dabbles in politics, another has taken to scribbling, yet another sets up shop. - All those temples and bells, yet none of God's spirit in them. Knowledge and faith have come to blows; father locks horns with his unruly young son. The eclipse of the sun is long predicted by astronomers, the comet no longer strikes terror, they know all there is to know about the solar system. Tar brings no fear; they smooth roads and motorways with it. Boils are a thing of the past, shirts are changed weekly. Madmen are given arms and hydrotherapy. - The telephone interrupts prayer. - Time was when it was God's eye that saw through man, now it's the X-ray. Thunder, now tamed, conducts light, lifts containers, shows pictures and collects news. Providence, once the protection against hail and draught, now it's insurance; a blessing exchanged for a guarantee on a bill of exchange; a father's deathbed wish made way for the notary and last will and testament. Respect is no longer lent to the deceased's rest: Turn the lights off, give a nudge with the knees and the table spells out answers. - Not God's writing on the wall, but a fortune teller.

A medal on the chest carries less weight than a toothbrush. - How can a driver tip his hat before the church with his hands on the steering wheel; or the pilot above the steeple? Once he would cross himself, now he oils his machine. No reverence, no humility, he won't bend his knee or bow his head. Not anointed but voted in and elected. Big mouth silenced the voice of the soul and in place of the cross, antennas spring up everywhere. Once man's faith would be broken, today it just comes apart like washed out cloth. Once it was the heretic - obstinate and dangerous - now a mere swindler and freak. There used to be visions, religious madness, but today if anyone goes mad it's because of the vagaries of the stock market or from some indecent disease. - Barbaric sports, pagan dances and lewd songs are here again.

We, the priests, are to blame: they told us to fear God more than to love Him, yet He is harmless - people realized that - indulgent, kind, smiling, gentle and light. - Has man himself not committed enough wrongs, meted out enough punishments? -- They used to huddle together in the face of danger, but these days there is no plague - vaccinations have seen to that. Faith however is only of use to the sad and lonely - and how many of those on the wide highroad.

What is to be done if the real God has faded from man's thoughts, from time and deed? He can see he is not needed, so he put people off, distanced and isolated himself from them, disappeared.

I say 'real', Janek, --- because today everything is artificial: instead of bread we have vitamins, instead of mother's breast, synthetic powders and artificial additives, and conjuring tricks in a circus.

But I was going to tell you a fable...

The times were bad, my boy: Sadness, crime, premonitions of things to come, anxiety, unease and impotence.

- It can't go on like this - one voice said - then another. We must find the real God again, build a magnificent temple, welcome Him ceremoniously and settle Him in a permanent place of His residence. They must know - unfortunately these are the times we live in - we have to accept it.

And so a conference was called, a committee chosen, press release sent out, three-prize competition for the design of the temple announced, jury elected, a third meeting, a tenth meeting, a president, a vice president, a treasurer voted in. At the meeting: tuxedos, uniforms, cassocks, medals - envoys, senators, ministers, chief constable, princes, company representatives, professors, tradesmen, industrialists, foremen, peasants, free trades. "What a mixed bag" - said the count. - But what wouldn't we do for the people?" - There were frictions: so and so had been left out, too many of some, not enough of others, such and such doesn't want to deal or collaborate with such and such. - *Concordia res parvae crescunt*. - They came to an agreement. At long last, a start was made.

And so: they bring bricks, cement, plaster, sand and marble; so many square meters, so many floors. Cost estimates - the finance minister grimaced. Money cobbled together from banks, gentry, some aristocracy and poor widows' pensions. Speeches, colorful ribbons - instead of laurels. Taxes collected on gambling and hunting. An exhibition of model designs, arguments, back biting. Painters and sculptors. Deliveries. The place heaves, rumbles, fizzles with effort. School parties file past to see the marvel.

Next, a command: to find and deliver God. A generous reward out of available funds was announced by the head of department. - They search, they rummage, they ask, they seek high and low. May as well look for a needle in a haystack. There are no photographs, no likenesses of any kind, no descriptions, no known nationality, no distinguishing features.. - Have you seen? Have you heard? - No such thing! Only rumors and false trails.

He exists - that's a fact. Indeed: old and grey. A soldier spotted him the other night; rumor had it he was seen in a night shelter; feeding crumbs to a sparrow; tut-tut, publicly talked with a young woman; a hangman saw him while executing a criminal - he was probably imagining things, drunk no doubt.

But God was found. Not by a policeman, not by a detective, not by a man of cloth, not even by a soothsayer (for he was asked too) - He was found by Marcysia, in a nightingale's nest. Carelessly, she blabbed. Then promptly burst into tears. - "Don't be stupid, He will like it, people said, the palace of marble and gold - the throne, the carpets, the candelabra, the incense, the music. - "But maybe He prefers it this way; maybe He doesn't want any of this". - She sobs. - What's the point in reasoning with a fool?

It was certain beyond any shadow of a doubt. The nightingale - a pious bird blessed with a beautiful singing voice. But this one - my goodness! Every nightingale aims to soar high, but this one - tireless. At long last under cross examination He confessed. He wasn't in hiding at all - He'd thought he was no longer needed, He was not in the habit of reading papers. - Why not, with pleasure, if people wish it and authorities demand it.

Three triumphal arches, flags, car, luxury coach, ministers of the church, of agriculture and social welfare; a multitude of clerics, banners, flowers, a guard of honor. - Here He comes! - Editorials - I cannot remember how many cannon shots. - Crowds at the station and along the streets. Police stationed in doorways, ambulances parked in side streets, just in case. - He rides an open carriage pulled by four white horses, so that everyone can see. - Children and

veterans in the front row. - Guilds of brewers, tanners, butchers. - Crowds: both in elegant streets and in poor suburbs. On rooftops operators on the lookout, and pressed against the wall stands the old lady- Faith, shaken, she sways on her feet and looks on through tear-filled eyes - “ I have lived to see this “ - she whispers with trembling lips. Next to her stands blind Justice. - And Hope with three stupid kids. She lifts the youngest in her arms and says “Look!” - but the little half-wit only sucks greedily on his sweet and checks how much is still left of it.

A line of vehicles rumbles past and behind it a throng of people. Impressive! And how they show up the socialists: their marches do well to attract a thousand, here a good five kilometers of sheep.

“Such noble figure” - says theatre director.. “Getting on a bit” - says the doctor. “How marvelous - enthuses a zealot - but sad somehow”

It is true; he had only smiled once, on passing a line of scouts. He stopped the vehicle by the wall where Faith, Justice and Hope stood. He rose as is though intending to stand, but gave up the idea and wearily sank back on His cushions. People did not understand what He meant, horses started off again and they reached their destination with no further interruptions.

Order reigned. Only a handful of discreet pickpocketing case arrests, a few harmless fainting fits in the crowd.

In advance of all this there were many discussions about who should make the welcome speech. So and so is learned, so and so is distinguished, this one is well regarded, another has a strong voice. - A doctor of philosophy got all his books out: in accordance with the art of rhetoric he will begin with expressions of astonishment and rapture, with pathos, and then he will roar his disapproval of the laws of the land, and finish off with whispered humility. He rehearsed the speech three times in front of the mirror.

There He sits, the holy old man, the Ancient of Days - He might be listening or He might not.

At the foot of the throne hide detectives disguised as beggars - He looks at them gently and understands, wise man that He is, that there is no choice in such a crowd of people.

He is chewing something, smile flickering in his eyes.

“You God ... for you... with you... Oh, you ... tell us if we understand you correctly”.

"You fools"- the voice is carefree and cheerful.

Silence fell. - He looked around. In an instant, it was as though He vanished, filled the temple with His being.. He rose. - He raised His hand. Blinding light. - And thunderous voice. - It made the very columns arch, the ceiling sway, and the walls tilt. All froze in terror.

The architect later made excuses that he calculated the normal load of the temple, how could have he predicted? - But soon miraculously all straightened again.

“My children - love your neighbor” - and that was all.

All sighed with relief. In a dark corner by the entrance there stood a young couple, a student and her fiancée, a lieutenant.

“You see?”

And the sound of a kiss. The majestic old man winked and playfully wagged His finger at them. - But all this lasted but for the blink of an eye.

High official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs proclaimed that God’s statement was ambiguous: he knows very little about relationships.

And so - they left, they turned the lights off; a truck came to collect the flowers. God stepped off the throne, looked around once, twice and sighed. He tapped the marble and instantly knew how much profit the building firm made. He stepped forward but found the ermine cloak too heavy. He threw it aside and made for the side gate. It opened wide.

He left. - Took to his feet, fled, vanished - this time not in an official car, but ordinarily, on foot. - What a scandal - so much expense, so much effort, such work force - and to treat all this with such contempt - clearly, something’s gone to his head.

But maybe you’ve had enough, Janek?

JANEK

Not at all, It’s just that dad might be needing me. - So how did it all end?

OLD MAN

Well, he scurried along. - Again into the deep countryside. In the woods he turned into a blueberry and had a nap. He supped with a settler who narrowly survived an enemy bullet and had been honored with a cross for bravery, who treated God to soured milk and left. He travelled on a Jewish wagon, chatted with the driver, briefly rode a field mouse, talked with the town chemist, was seen amongst the miners during the mine fire, shed tears in the city abattoir, and again hid in a lily of the valley. - Many a time they came so close to catching him, but every time in the last moment he wagged His finger, murmured something under his breath - and was gone: nothing - vapour.

While the sun warmed him he kept moving but come winter he returned to the capital, but not to the temple. He dislikes being hemmed in.

There by the fence He saw children playing. He stopped to look and just then the detective nearly got the old man, but He too was on His guard. He wanted to run but realized He won’t be able to, so he staggered and leapt up in the air, only to rain down again as a shower of marbles, clinking.

The catcher fell to his knees, trying to gather them up. - No way! - even ordinary marbles will slip away, let alone divine ones. - and the marbles hop-hop - each one dropped into a different boy or girl. And so they dispersed amongst the children. And the children found it most amusing.

“What an arrangement, brother. Now we will hold God in our hearts, since He’ll have nothing to do with you. Each one of us just one marble, so that it's not too much.”

(Lydia Bauman, translation from the Polish; Marc Silverman, editor)

Topics for reflection and discussion

- Passages in the fable that support or contradict the following assessment of the modern/post-modern world: "The more modern/post-modern civilization – capitalism, industrialization, urbanization and technology – progresses, wo/man's spirit and humanity dissipate and disintegrate."
- The images of human beings, the world and God in this fable and possible connections between them and other images in other art forms such as literature, poetry, paintings, theatre, films, etc. with which your mind freely associates.
- The character/characteristics of God, people in general and specific individual among them in light of these three dimensions (and possible additional ones of your own choice) :
 - 1) Physical-external appearance
 - 2) Patterns of behavior and relating/responding
 - 3) Thoughts, wants, needs, intentions and statements
- The main messages Korczak seeks to convey through this fable.

Background information: Janusz Korczak, His Play, *The Senate of Madmen* and the fable in its seventh scene.

Janusz Korczak (1878, Warsaw – 1942, Treblinka)

There is a broad consensus among educational thinkers, researchers and practitioners familiar with the life, writing, and work of Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) that he was at once one of the outstanding humanist educators of the 20th century – some would even say in the annals of human history – and an exceptionally gifted, path-breaking social-pedagogue of international standing. Borrowing from the similarity between the Hebrew noun for 'respect' and for 'weight', and between the Hebrew verb 'to weigh', we can say Korczak 'weighed the' weight' of human beings in general and of children specifically, in their respective particular, physical, and cultural 'actuality' and 'presence'. The type of respect Korczak lent to persons (as well as to animate and natural life) differs considerably from the self-proclaimed humanism of so many highly educated people who lend great respect to their ideal conceptions of humanity while encountering great difficulty in actually respecting the many real people who comprise it.

The well-known American developmental psychologist and moral philosopher Lawrence Kohlberg who towards the end of his own life became aware of Korczak's life, work and writings places him among those exceptional humanists and great moral educators, such as Socrates, Mother Teresa, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. who reached the highest possible stage of moral development. In this stage of *agape*, they affirm life from a “cosmic perspective” – they feel some mystic union with God, Life or Nature; and accept the finitude of the self's own life, while finding its meaning in a moral life, a life in which a sense of love for and union with Life or God is expressed in love for fellow human beings (Kohlberg, 1981).

The most powerful and poignant expression of the radical and boundless altruistic, self-sacrificing nature of Korczak's love of human beings is located on the road he took in the last months of the Warsaw ghetto when it became increasingly clear that the Nazis were planning to deport all Jews – including all children with no exception for those residing in orphanages like the one he headed – to death camps, and to liquidate the ghetto entirely. He found the various offers to escape the ghetto made by friends and colleagues outside its walls a great insult to his life's vocation, and felt that acceptance of any of them was totally unconscionable. Whatever fate awaited "his" children, he would be there with and for them, to comfort and support them. He would make their fate into his destiny. The well-known

psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim expressed his admiration for Korczak's behavior in the horrific world of the Holocaust in these words:

"If giving up one's life so that those one cares for will not feel deserted is heroism; if sacrificing one's life for one's convictions even though one could easily have saved it without betraying them is martyrdom then Dr. Janusz Korczak is one of the genuine martyrs and heroes of our age" (Bruno Bettelheim, 1986:X)

Expressing Bettelheim's words in Jewish traditional religious terminology, it can be said that Korczak was a genuine *Tzadik*, an exceptionally righteous person.

Korczak's originality as an educator is embodied in the educational system he developed and implemented, which enabled abused, emotionally and intellectually deprived children from broken families, who suffered from considerable social-interpersonal pathologies, to undergo significant processes of self-re-formation over a period of six to eight years by virtue of their residence in the two orphanages he headed. In 1933, Korczak conducted a follow-up study of all the children who had spent a number of years in the orphanage for Polish-Jewish children in Warsaw, which he founded in 1912. Korczak found that only a very few had turned to crime or prostitution as adults. The overwhelming majority of his graduates were living normative lives, had found decent employment, and had established families of their own.

The effectiveness of this system under his supervision and leadership earned him world-wide recognition as an exceptionally gifted pedagogue and moral educator of the highest order. In many European educational circles he was called the twentieth century's Polish Pestalozzi - the replication of the famous Swiss social-pedagogue and educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) whom Korczak himself greatly admired. In some very significant ways, once one accesses his educational theory and practices, it would be fair to say that Korczak is the twentieth century Polish version of the U.S.A.'s outstanding philosopher, philosopher of education, educational theorist and practitioner, John Dewey (1859 -1952).

Korczak's play, *The Senate of Madmen*, and the fable in its seventh scene

Korczak's play *The Senate of Madmen*, was first performed in the Athaneum theatre in October 1, 1931. The Athaneum was the most important workers' theatre in Warsaw, and many considered its director and leading actor, Stefan Jaracz, as the Laurence Olivier of Poland (Lifton, 1988: 190). This play is set in an insane asylum, where all the patients are anonymous, characterized only by epithets, such as the sad monk; the murderer; the colonel; the worker; the old man; the doctor, and many more. In its seventh scene one of the saner patients, the old man shares a fable with a young boy named Yanek about "How God took to His Feet and Ran away from the sanctuary the townspeople built for Him." Yanek, not a patient, is the son of the carpenter, an ex-patient who shows his gratitude to the head of the asylum for curing him by coming once a week to fix broken furniture. Yanek usually accompanies his father on these weekly visits to help him.

The play itself addresses perennial and contemporary philosophic, political and cultural existential issues of constant concern to Korczak since his young adulthood, to Polish society and to the world before the first World-War up to the first years of the 1930's. Among the

issues addressed are: The borders between sanity and insanity; the oppression, alienation and crushing of human beings due to the rapid and intense processes of capitalistic industrialization and urbanization; Eugenics; the meaning of life and of living a meaningful life; wars, their nature and justification; and more...

Though the fable appears in the seventh scene, it is the text – read out loud by a famous actress at a party for artists in her home - that inspired the Atheneum's director and leading performer to encourage Korczak to use it as the building-block to compose the other parts he had written into an entire play.

References

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