







Ghost Ship Memorial ~ Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland, California Thursday, December 15th, 2016

GHOST SHIP THOUGHTS

by Shaiyel Seltzer

“To be alive is to know your purpose ...

When I'm sure I've finally found it / Gonna wrap these arms all around it,” sings Mary Chapin Carpenter in her precious song, “A Place in the World.” The tragic Oakland Ghost Ship warehouse fire brought me to thoughts of people who simply want a home, to belong somewhere, and if you get to share your gifts, your talents with your intended family, that **is supreme love.**

When riding the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Orange line subway system, one can see the burnt remnants of the Ghost Ship warehouse. As one disembarks the subway at the Oakland’s neighborhood of Fruitvale, one is met with the smell of singed wood and human ash. My path to pick up an Oakland Police report led me to walk down 12th street; unexpectedly leading me on the path to guidance and support for the victim’s loved ones. Speaking with Chaplain Mike with Billy Graham’s crisis mission (truck from North Carolina), I learned of outpouring need of grief counseling, and Billy Graham’s condition. As I walked further, I met memorials. I cleaned them a bit up; standing up candles that could still be lit, and flowers that could still bloom in their vases. Amongst the letters, dolls, and signs, I was most moved by inscription, “Rest in Power.”

All people, whether one knows it or not, wants simply to find their place in this world. Some shut down and curse the world due to be made to feel like an outcast, especially when one finds a group of outcasts to join, only to be casted out by the outcasts. In Portland, Oregon I spent considerable time helping foster teens and young adults to engage, embrace, and vocalize their challenges and talents through artistic and/or musical projects through the volunteer program an organization has called P:EAR, Creatively Mentoring Homeless Youth <http://pearmentor.org/>. I think it speaks volumes to the condition of a society when one is homeless due to violence, sexual orientation, or other matters, and there is nowhere to go - no matter what age.

There are seemingly outcasts who do quite well financially with their talents, and are simply deemed, “eccentric.” Howard Hughes seemed to embrace the need to be an outcast, and then was imprisoned by it. Emily Dickenson is known for her reclusiveness too. She is more known for saying, “All I need to see I can see from my window,” than her poems these days. Maybe her poem, “The Soul Selects her own Society” offers clues, even understanding but a glimpse to her own eccentricity. In this century, Prince exemplified religious eccentricity made cool. Monks often take a vow of silence. Maybe though reclusiveness and eremitism look sickly, it is actually holy; a human being simply wanting an almost, or exclusively intentional relationship with their chosen Creator. If so, who is to say whether being an outcast is healthy or not?

There are those who intentionally take a “sabbatical.” The word originates from Mosaic Law (1590’s B.C.A. estimation), found in Leviticus 25 in regards to every seventh year, farm land was to remain untilled. In 7 cycles of 7, debts, debtors, and slaves were released in the year of Jubilee. Today it is used in broad matters; whether relating to research or from a career, or other life challenges. Depending on the type and length of sabbatical, one can become disconnected from society – for good, and for unfortunate consequences.

Let’s explore some of outcast’s synonym’s: bum, vagabond, friendless, eliminated, dead, untouchable, forgotten, left, black sheep, refugee, gone, sorry, wretch, inferior, derelict, abhorrent, abject, godforsaken, icky, abominable, beggared, cheap, crass, currish, degenerate, despicable, mean, detestable, dirty, disgusting, sinner, silenced, hated, heel, poor, loathed, ignoble, ignominious, low, low-down, lowest, odious, paltry, gypsy, varlet, castaway, pitiable, pitiful, scummy, scurvy, shabby, sordid, swinish, unworthy, worthless, wretched, fugitive, a nobody, deportee, exiled, expatriate, hobo, rascal, reprobate, tramp, vagrant, displaced person, despised, scum, empty, beggar, criminal, down-and-out, leper, jilted, left behind, jolted, lesser, eighty-sixed, persona non grata, forgotten, forsaken, given-up-on, scalawag, renegade, cullion, unsuitable, scapegoat, transgressor, villain, liar, worm, rascal, bezonian, solitary, scullion, blackguard/listed, brute, caitiff, ingrate, knave, libertine, miscreant, lowlife, solitary, scamp, pariah, pauper, pelagic, neglected, poltroon, rapsallion, segregated, stigmatized, dog, companionless, contemptible, rogue, evacuee, scapegrace, pilgrim, reprobate, scoundrel, reclusive, malformed, rejected, secluded, troglodytic, uncherished, wanderer, colonist, expatriated, fugitive, lone/r, ostracized, raked, bad, snake, shunned, odd, alien, lorn/forlorn, estranged, eccentric, sidelined, abandoned, condemned, senseless, vile, renounced, weed, glutton, pigeon-holed, hobo, homeless, criticized, down-and-out, insignificant, finished, destitute, peculiar, embarrassed, socially backward, falsely accused, irrational, joker, jester/court jester, dwarf, giant, troll, ogre, fiend, monster, tyrant, goblin/hobgoblin, elf, imp, fay, daft, zany, weird, idiotic, bizarre, sad, abnormal, crack/ed-up, crazy, mad, outlandish, humiliated, excommunicated, departer, loser, phantom, ghost...

Then there are people born with their reputation preceding them through physical propensity to be “untouchable.” **“To be a leper was to be an outcast beyond any hope but any solace but the grave.... This reservation was shunned as if it were the mouth of a burning hell.”** (*Encyclopedia Americana* 1919) From India to Palestine to all of Europe, determined “lepers” were immediately separated, often into their own colonies with punishments not only for lepers attempting to reintegrate into society, but those who chose to cross the physical boundaries assigned to lepers. If you crossed that boundary, you were exiled; left to live with lepers. Within the *Bible*, *Leviticus* 13 and 14 addresses leprosy by making it the Priest’s responsibility to diagnose, demand that all body hair be shaved off, separate the possible leper from society, and treat leprosy. Treating leprosy included oils and sacrificing male lambs and various birds for blood use. Leprosy was believed to also infect garments and dwellings, so homes were inspected too. *Leviticus* 14:21 distinguishes economic status, considered further humiliating to “sin,” **“And if he be poor, and his means suffice not, then he shall take one he-lamb for a guilt-offering to be waved, to make atonement for him, and one tenth part of an ephah of fine flour mingled with oil for a meal-offering, and a log of oil.”** *Leviticus* 13:45 and 46 makes it clear that one must cry, confessing leprosy, **“Unclean Unclean”(45) All the days wherein the plague is in him he shall be unclean; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his dwelling be.”** (46)

“I sometimes think my head is so large because it is so full of dreams.” said Joseph Carey Merrick. Leaving school at age 13 (common in the 1800’s), Joseph attempted to not just “do,” but dreamed to be a useful “somebody.” He found work rolling cigars in a factory, then when his right hand outgrew ability, his father secured him a hawker’s license enabled him to be a haberdashery shop, door to door salesman until his disfigurement made Commissioners for Hackney Carriages withdraw his license when it came up for renewal. Then when he was 17, he entered the Leicester Union Workhouse whose products were mostly textiles. Succumbing to accepting his caitiff-dom, he entered the world of human novelty exhibitionism. **“Being unable to get employment my father got me a pedlar’s license to hawk the town, but being deformed, people would not come to the door to buy my wares. In consequence of my ill luck my life was again made a misery to me, so that I again ran away and went hawking on my own account, but my deformity had grown to such an extent, so that I could not move about the town without having a crowd of people gather around me. I then went into the infirmary at Leicester, where I remained for two or three years, when I had to undergo an operation on my face, having three or four ounces of flesh cut away; so thought I, I’ll get my living by being exhibited about the country.”** The end to Joseph’s 27 year old life is believed to have happened because he simply wanted to sleep like other human beings by lying down. All he wanted was dignity. **“Tis true my form is something odd, / But blaming me is blaming God; / Could I create myself anew / I would not fail in pleasing you. If I could reach from pole to pole / Or grasp the ocean with a span, / I would be measured by the soul; / The mind’s the standard of the man.”** — Joseph adapted poem, "False Greatness" by Isaac Watts to use as his letter closing.

Whether chased out of town by torchbearers or brigade soldiers, rounded up and placed into an internment camp, driven into packing decrepit train cars and sent to live in ghettos or concentration camps, historic events, too many to mention, forced people to become outcasts. Often hiding in forests or even high heated mountains, people did their best to form new community homes, though unfortunately many were found and led to slaughter. Some decided to even kill themselves rather than be enslaved. Outcasts are often steeped in prolific morals and altruisms. When chosen, war often showcases the most courageous people.

Sometimes you sell your beloved instruments to pay for airline tickets with the only hope that “across the pond” – London, England they will accept your 1950’s rock n’ roll rooted style of music. That is how Lee Rocker (who during flight conjured the band name), Slim Jim Phantom, and Brian Setzer became, “The Stray Cats.” Penning a song about an introspective black and orange cat sitting on a fence, Setzer captured the group’s renegade outcast outlook in their hit song, “Stray Cat Strut.” **“I ain’t got enough dough to pay the rent / I’m flat broke but I don’t care / I strut right by with my tail in the air... Don’t go crossing my**

path / I don't bother chasing mice around / I slink down the alleyway looking for a fight / Howling to the moonlight on a hot summer night / Singin' the blues while the lady cats cry / 'Wild stray cat, you're a real gone guy' I wish I could be as carefree and wild / But I got cat class and I got cat style."

And then there is loneliness and, "the loner." Often called, "the lone wolf," but in more modern use is the term, "radical individualism," people who channel their anger due to accumulative personal rejections, often stemming from childhood, cast out frustration through various volatile manners, with sometimes deadly consequences. But the Beatles took a different route, differentiating "the loner" from one who is lonely. Groundbreaking song, "Eleanor Rigby," characterizes loneliness as deplorably sad, and questions society, **"Eleanor Rigby, picks up the rice / In the church where a wedding has been / Lives in a dream / Waits at the window, wearing the face / That she keeps in a jar by the door / Who is it for / All the lonely people / Where do they all come from? / All the lonely people / Where do they all belong?"** Eleanor Rigby was a real person, born and lived in Liverpool, and so in remembrance, will forever – never be lonely.

The adage, "It's lonely at the top" is true. Throughout history, certain humans rose to power socially, religiously, or by birthright; becoming dictators, tyrants, persecutors, false prophets, and non-benevolent kings and queens. Often consequence of achieving power is choosing a life of exile – like Napoleon Bonaparte, and Manuel Noriega. "Love" is given answer to exile in premise of "The Lion King" song, "Can you feel the Love Tonight?" Elton John sings, **"It's enough to make kings and vagabonds believe the very best."**

And sometimes, in eulogizing someone you revere, you are able to reveal your own reclusive vulnerable nature in the midst of a dedicated quietude life. **"An only child alone and wild - a cabinet maker's son / His hands were meant for different work - and his heart was known to none / He left his home and went his lone and solitary way / And he gave to me a gift I know I never can repay."** Years after writing the megahit, "Leader of the Band" about his father, Dan Fogelberg reveals his own garrulous challenge, "That was totally spontaneous; it was a one-day wonder. I just happened to sit down with the guitar and bingo, that thing was done. I mean I never consciously wanted to write a song to my father. If I had consciously thought about it, I never would have done it. Because I thought it was too obscure and certainly non-commercial. That for me was a real great moment, because whether or not that song was ever a hit, it meant a great deal to my father. He got to hear it, and it said things that neither one of us could say to each other. We weren't real communicative males, you know - we're Midwestern (laughs). So that song was so timely because he only lasted about another year after that. That'll always be a real special song to me."

In the iconic song, "Lonely People," America gives hope to the lonely, **"This is for all the lonely people / Thinking that life has passed them by / Don't give up / Until you drink from the silver cup / And ride that highway in the sky."** The challenge is when, nobly, one wants to "fit in." But the questions still linger, "Where do lonely people belong? How does one integrate, or reintegrate into society when one has been "gone" so long – whether intentionally or unintentionally due to illness? How does one "prove" to others that they are now "okay?" That they are valuable, productive, loyal, and deserving respect despite whether depression, or other mental illnesses and addictions took "hold," and even physical illness like encephalitis epidemic portrayed in film, "Awakenings?" What does it say that with more ways to "be in touch" with people, less and less people are feeling loved? How are we each allowing people to reintegrate into our lives? Or do we choose people to be passé and "disposable," like a used paper napkin? Like a banana peel? It is about quality and dignity; the friendship. A hand written card. A telephone call on one's birthday, on a holiday, on an anniversary. Until each individual in a society decides that "high touch" is not only more important than "high tech" and "high volume" of information, of chatter and clatter, but choose to reweave the tapestry of physical neighborhoods, its collective selfishness and self-centeredness dooms. Until then, maybe I'll just sail with Christopher Cross, offering peace within solitude, **"Sailing takes me away to where I've always heard it could be / Just a dream and the wind to carry me / And soon I will be free."** Keep on sailing Ghost Ship. As your loved ones requested, "Rest in Power."
– Shaiyel Seltzer