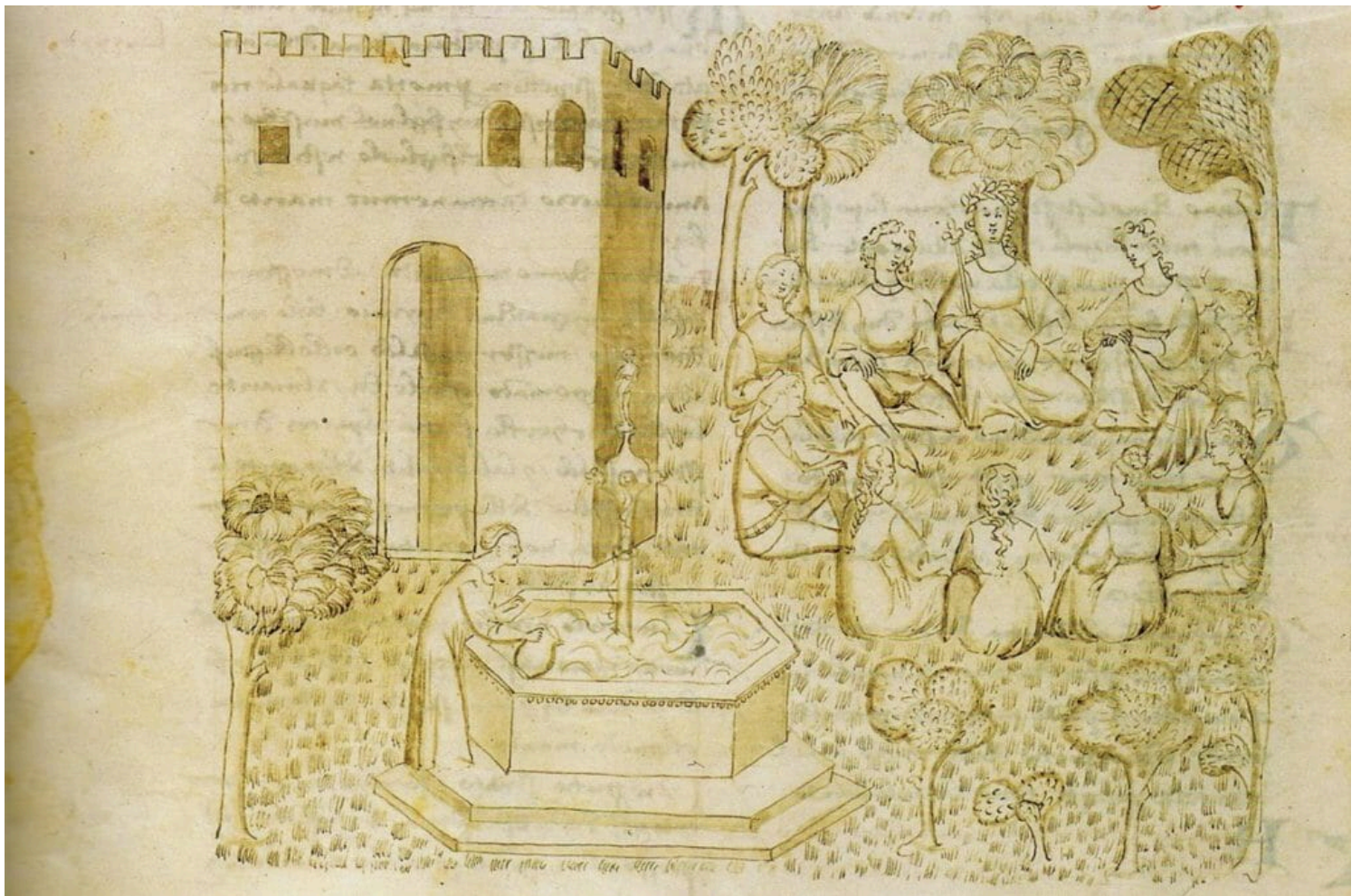


WHAT ELSE CAN ONE DO IN SO-CALLED DARK TIMES BUT OFFER THE CIVIL HUMANISM OF NEIGHBOURLY LOVE?

Posted on January 7, 2018 by Andrew Brown



Drawing of the noblemen and women in the garden at Fiesole by Boccaccio

READING: From “[**Men in Dark Times**](#)”(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970, pp.22-23)

by Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) :

The question is how much reality must be retained even in a world become inhuman if humanity is not to be reduced to an empty phrase or a phantom. Or to put it another way, to what extent do we remain obligated to the world even when we have been expelled from it or have withdrawn from it? For I certainly do not wish to assert that the inner emigration, the flight from the world to concealment, from public life to anonymity (when that is what it really was and not just a pretext for doing what everyone did with enough inner reservations to salve one's conscience), was not a justified attitude, and in many cases the only possible one. Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is constantly acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped. When people choose this alternative, private life too can retain a by no means insignificant reality, even though it remains impotent. Only it is essential for them to realize that the realness of this reality consists not in its deeply personal note, any more than it springs from privacy as such but inheres in the world from which they have escaped. They must remember that they are constantly on the run, and that the world's reality is actually expressed by their escape. Thus, too, the true force of escapism springs from persecution, and the personal strength of the fugitives increases as the persecution and danger increase.

At the same time we cannot fail to see the limited political relevance of such an existence, even if it is sustained in purity. Its limits are inherent in the fact that strength and power are not the same; that power arises only where people act together, but not where people grow stronger as individuals. No strength is ever great enough to replace power; wherever strength is confronted by power, strength will always succumb. But even the sheer strength to escape and to resist while fleeing cannot materialize where reality is bypassed or forgotten as when an individual thinks himself too good and noble to pit himself against such a world, or when he fails to face up to the absolute negativeness of prevailing world conditions at a given time. How tempting it was, for example, simply to ignore the intolerably stupid

blabber of the Nazis. But seductive though it may be to yield to such temptations and to hole up in the refuge of one's own psyche, the result will always be a loss of humanness along with the forsaking of reality.

READING: From GardensAn Essay on the Human Condition (University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 71, and pp. 94-95) by Robert Pogue Harrison (b. 1954) :

*What is one to do in so-called dark times, when the world that comes between men no longer gives them a meaningful stage for their speech and actions, when reasoned discourse loses its suasion, when powerlessness rather than empowerment defines the citizen's role in the public sphere? There are times when the thinker, patriot, or individual has no choice but to withdraw to the sidelines, as Plato did when he gave up the idea of becoming a statesman and founded a school on the outskirts of Athens. In her book *Men in Dark Times* Hannah Arendt writes: *Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped.* The same could be said of the sanctuary that gardens have traditionally offered people when their human condition is under siege. A garden sanctuary can be either a blessing or a curse, depending on the degree of reality it preserves within its haven. Some gardens become places of escape that try to shut out reality . . . Other gardens, by contrast, become places of humanization in the midst of, or in spite of, the forces of darkness.*

[. . .]

*Boccaccio was no moralist. He was not a reformer or would-be prophet. He was not especially preoccupied by human depravity or humanity's prospects for salvation. He did not harangue his reader from any self-erected pulpit of moral, political, or religious conviction. If the ethical claims for the *Decameron* which he lays out in his preface are finally extremely modest (the author hopes through his stories to offer*

diversion and consolation to those in need of them), it is because the human condition itself is a modest one. The plague demonstrates as much. To be human means to be vulnerable to misfortune and disaster. It means periodically to find oneself in need of help, comfort, distraction, or edification. Our condition is for the most part an affair of the everyday, not of the heroic, and our minimal ethical responsibility to our neighbour, according to Boccaccio's humanism, consists not in showing him or her the way to redemption but in helping him or her to get through the day. This help takes many modest forms, not least of which is rendering the sphere of social interaction more pleasurable through wit, decorum, story-telling, fellowship, conversation, courtesy, and sociability. To add to the pleasure rather than the misery of life: that is the archaïc first principle of Boccaccio's humanism, which is not the triumphalist humanism of later eras (which saw self-reliant humankind as the glory of all creation) but the civil humanism of neighbourly love. (It is not by chance that Boccaccio begins his preface with the word umana, or human: Umana cosa àver compassione degli afflitti [It is human to have compassion for those in distress]).

—o—

ADDRESS

What else can one do in so-called dark times but offer the civil humanism of neighbourly love?

So here we are on the first Sunday of another New Year and, perhaps as tradition demands, it falls upon me to say something about what we in a small community such as our own might meaningfully hope to achieve in the coming year.

But, I am forced to admit that I begin this year with an almost overwhelming feeling of concern and anxiety quite unlike any I've ever felt before. Partly this is because I

know it's not just me feeling like this. I know it because I'm regularly having conversations with you, near neighbours, friends and ministerial colleagues all of which at some point touch upon some of the following subjects: our deepening global ecological crisis, the various nuclear threats being thrown about by Kim Jong-un and Trump, the slow decline of liberal-democracy and the increasing influence in the mainstream of the far-right, the election of Donald Trump, the vote for Brexit and the ongoing political and social crises triggered by the Europe's difficulties concerning how best to deal with the massive refugee crisis caused by seemingly never-ending war, drought, sickness and poverty in Africa and the Middle-East. Other, more obviously locally orientated conversations centre on the distress we're feeling about the continuing financialization of every aspect of our lives, the rise of fake-news in the increasingly influential social-media, the collapse of funding to all sectors of the NHS and Social Services, the withdrawal of essential in- and out-of-work benefits to the most vulnerable in our society, the ever-upward rise in the number of food-banks and of people finding themselves homeless or living in death-traps like [Grenfall Tower](#), the continuing squeeze on all working people's incomes and the insane levels of personal debt that often come with this -and all of this while the richest and most privileged individuals and institutions around us continue to bag and barn-up massive profits and bonuses for themselves and park them in offshore accounts where they cannot be taxed for the benefit of the common-wealth.

Without much effort I could add extensively to this litany but today I will resist the temptation and simply remind you that, as the English philosopher [F. H. Bradley \(1846-1924\)](#) once wisely said, and which [Theodor Adorno \(1903-1969\)](#) used to preface Part II of his [Minima Moralia](#) :

Where everything is bad it must be good to know the worst."

All the foregoing means that this morning I feel it is my duty to remind to remind you that a complex set of complex situations like this is highly

unlikely to end well and in an ordered fashion and no amount of liberal, sugar-coated, overly-optimistic New-Year preaching from someone like me is going to change this. Things seem to be so completely upside-down that it's almost certainly going to require, not just a little bit of tinkering around the edges to put right, but what the contemporary English folk-singer [Chris Wood has called a grand correction](#)". But the trouble with all such grand corrections is that if and when they once get underway their unfolding becomes highly unpredictable and more or less uncontrollable and in consequence, along the way, all kinds of valuable things which we feel are the salt of our very existence become in danger of being thrown out and trampled underfoot, things such as:

. . . friendship . . . love, affection, tenderness, sweetness, thoughtfulness, delicateness, forbearance, magnanimity, politeness, amenity, kindness, civility, attentiveness, attention, courtesy, clemency, devotedness, and all the words carrying a connotation of goodness (From "[A Hedonist Manifesto: The Power to Exist](#)", Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 49, by [Michel Onfray \(b. 1959\)](#)).

This valuable, salty list helps me turn now to a few positive thoughts and reminders about what I think we might genuinely hope to achieve, not only in the coming year but in the next few.

We'll start with the words by [Hannah Arendt](#) (1906-1975) you heard earlier. For those of you who don't know her she was a highly influential German-born, American political theorist who left Nazi Germany in 1933 whose works deal with subjects such as the nature of power, politics, direct democracy, authority, and totalitarianism.

She, like millions of German Jews in the 1930s, knew first-hand what it was both to be expelled and to be forced to make what she calls 'the inner emigration,' the flight from

the world to concealment, from public life to anonymity.” She also knew that, at times and in certain conditions, this flight was not only justified but was, in many cases, the only one possible. Our situation is clearly not (yet) as serious as the one she and millions of others experienced but, in the face of the list of things with which I began this address, I know many of us have begun strongly to experience painful feelings of impotence and, in all sorts of ways, have also begun to think about making our own inner emigrations, of moving from the world to concealment and from public life to anonymity.

An important question to ask at this point is whether making such a flight at just this moment in time is the only possible course of action available to us? The answer is clearly No.” Painful, difficult and frustrating though it may be, we really do still have both a duty and certain opportunities to be out in the public square making a powerful case for ways by which a gentle, democratic, decent, humane and compassionate civic society may yet still be created. However, the fact remains that many of us are at times increasingly feeling an overwhelming need to retreat from something of the worry and madness we see around us at every turn. It is to this pressing need that I now wish to turn. But, before we go on, the first thing we must remember is, as Arendt notes, that:

Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is constantly acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped.

Any sanctuary we offer here must always be one that remains completely aware of her maxim. To retreat in any other way –even when it is the weekly, temporary retreat offered by our Sunday gatherings –would be merely to engage in a head-in-the-sand, delusional fantasy.

With this important caveat in place, let’s now turn to [Boccaccio’s \(1313-1375\)](#) famous work,

The Decameron The year is 1348 and a terrible plague running unchecked in Florence. As Robert Pogue Harrison says:

In the city, civic order has degenerated into anarchy; love of one's neighbour has turned into dread of one's neighbour (who now represents the threat of contagion); the law of kinship has given way to every person for himself (many family members flee from their infected loved ones, leaving them to face their death agonies alone and without succour); and where there was once courtesy and decorum there is now only crime and delirium (Gardens, p. 84).

To escape this horror a group of seven young women and three young men decide to leave the city for two-weeks and retreat to a secluded villa within a wonderful walled-garden and there 'to engage in conversation, leisurely walks, dancing, storytelling, and merry-making [all the while] taking care not to transgress the codes of proper conduct' (Gardens, p. 84). What could be more different from the horrors of Florence than this garden sanctuary? However, as Harrison points out:

While their escapade is indeed a flight from reality; their self-conscious efforts to follow an almost ideal code of sociability during their stay in the hills of Fiesole are a direct response to the collapse of social order they leave behind. In that respect their sojourn is wholly justified by Hannah Arendt's standards [when she says]: *flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored, but is acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped* ' (Gardens, p. 84).

A particularly striking aspect of this story is that at the end of their sojourn the seven women and three men do not decide to remain safely within the walls of their sanctuary but to return to the fray in

plague-swept Florence. We may take it, therefore, that their temporary flight was undertaken with the aim of restoring to them some real inner and outer strength so as they might be able to continue to uphold and promote the salty values and practices I mentioned earlier, things that were in their own dark times daily in danger of being trampled underfoot.

It is just this kind of environment and activity that in our own way I feel we can consciously be offering ourselves and others, and with this thought in mind I can now begin to conclude with a hopeful, New Year message.

Our religious community's history as part of an extensive liberal Enlightenment humanist tradition – one which includes Boccaccio of course – has constantly served to remind us that to be human means to be vulnerable to misfortune and disaster and this, in turn, means we have remained acutely aware that periodically we all find the need to withdraw and to be in need of help, comfort, distraction, or edification. We have come to know, too, that our condition is for the most part an affair of the everyday, not of the heroic, and we know that our minimal ethical responsibility to our neighbour consists not in showing anyone the way to redemption but in simply helping them to get through the day.

It strikes me that, without shutting out reality, within the walls of [this small sanctuary on Emmanuel Road](#) (as within the walls of the Villa Palmieri in Fiesole) we too can be a genuine place of humanization in the midst of, or in spite of, the forces of darkness that now seem to be surrounding us everywhere. Along with Boccaccio we, too, can genuinely help render the sphere of social interaction more pleasurable through wit, decorum, story-telling, fellowship, conversation, courtesy, and sociability and always be adding to the pleasure rather than the misery of life.

Importantly,
given our history as a non-dogmatic, liberal community, we are also well-placed to offer all this without feeling the need to be moralists, zealous reformers or would-be prophets; we can offer it without being especially preoccupied by human depravity or humanity's prospects for salvation; and we can offer it without any need to harangue people from any self-erected pulpit of moral, political, or religious conviction.

Consequently,
I have some faith that in our own dark times a genuine New Year message of hope – our light on a lampstand giving light to all in the house — may be able to be seen in the modest ways we are able to encourage and display the kind of simple, civil humanism of neighbourly love which is always able confidently to act upon the maxim: *Umana cosa aver compassione degli afflitti* – It is human to have compassion for those in distress.