

The 2019 Castlefield Manchester Sermon

Different Drummers

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The greater part of what my neighbours call good
I believe in my soul to be bad,
And if I repent of anything,
It is very likely to be my good behaviour.
What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?

So said Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau who died in 1869 was an essayist, poet, philosopher, abolitionist and environmentalist who, as his day job, worked in his father's pencil factory and invented a grinding machine to make better graphite by mixing it with clay.

Quite the all-rounder.

But Thoreau's legacy lies not in his plumbago but in the books he wrote and in his philosophy which influenced many of the twentieth century's heroes of civil disobedience: Martin Luther King first warmed to the idea of non-violent resistance after reading of Thoreau's going to jail rather than pay taxes that would have been used to fund a slave war in Mexico.

Having written of the likelihood of repenting of his good behaviour Thoreau continues:

'If a man does not keep pace with his companions,
Perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.
Let him step to the music which he hears,
However measured or far away.'

I'm going to use this occasion – and thank you for inviting me, it is really a privilege to be here – to talk about some of these different drummers and to reflect on what their activism says about hopes for the continuation of our democracy.

I will begin where this chain of thought began for me – with the fire at Grenfell Tower.

I can't imagine there is anybody here whose mind's eye wasn't in some way affected by the images of the flames that consumed the Tower.

The first call to the emergency services was at six minutes to one. Twenty minutes later, at 1:14 the fire took hold on the outside of the building and twelve minutes after that it had reached the top floor and begun to travel along the architectural crown. By then, according to the fire expert, Barbara Lane, the whole building was already lost. And it was this speed, combined with the ferocity of that fire that caused so many deaths.

It was Britain's biggest post war disaster made more bewildering because it happened in London, and in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, one of Britain's smallest, and, richest boroughs. 72 people died, leaving the bereaved, the survivors and a community that witnessed the fire, traumatised.

The fire itself was shocking but one of the things that kept Grenfell on the front pages in those early days was the inadequacy of the official response. The council seemed to have evaporated – in their absence survivors, with the help of the local community, compiled their own lists of the missing, and banded together to give each other support.

The government, on the back foot about its initial response, promised to rehouse all the displaced within three weeks but given the shortage of housing in the borough and in the city, such a target was unreachable. The government did agree to a public inquiry. Phase One of the inquiry concentrated on the night of the fire and is due to report soon, while phase 2 – which will look at the detailed reasons for the fire – will begin next year.

I'm a novelist by trade but I also create verbatim plays (with all the words taken from interview or from the public record). After the fire at Grenfell I was commissioned, along with my fellow writer, Lee Hall, to produce a play on Grenfell. We've been working on it for 18 months and it will still be some time before we are done: so far this has been the single most upsetting and at the same time interesting and enlivening project with which I have ever been involved. I say enlivening because of the people we have met in the course of collecting the raw materials for our play: ordinary people many of whom have seen and faced death, and who, having been so let down by the state, managed to organise themselves into a truly democratic organization that they call Grenfell United. (GU for short).

I will talk more about them in a moment but first of all:

As I listened to the Grenfell inquiry I was drawn to the re-reading of a book that meant something to me because it had been recommended to me by my maternal grandfather Julius First. A quiet man (made even quieter by my grandmother's frequent exhortation to 'shut up Julius') Julius was one of those different drummers. He had been born in Latvia (one of his early memories is of Trotsky speaking to a small crowd) and lived there until his family was driven by pogroms to emigrate to South Africa. There, since he was white, he could have, like most other white South Africans, enjoyed the fruits of apartheid: instead he became one of the early founders of the South African Communist Party, choosing to put his energy into the struggle against apartheid. Which he did until he had to flee the country.

Julius wasn't much of a reader – and he had little time for fiction - so when he expressed enthusiasm for Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, I had a go. But my teenage self, intent as it was on racy plots (I confess that I was a Georgette Heyer fan – you know the men in tights kind of book)... anyway, getting over that embarrassment... as much as I loved my grandfather, I found the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* worthy but somewhat tedious. Until, that is, I listened to the Grenfell inquiry, when I found myself drawn back to the book.

I soon realised why. Set in Mugglesborough (an ill-concealed Hastings), the novel opens in a house they called *The Cave* and follows the lives of a group of building workers. But doing this, Tressell takes an unblinking look at the privations suffered by ordinary people at the turn of the twentieth century: it gives the lie to nostalgia for the past, or at least the one experienced by workers in Edwardian Britain.

On my first teenage reading of the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, I had been defeated by the political insistences that run through the novel. But on this second reading, the description of what Tressell called 'scamping', rang loud bells for my understanding of the disaster of a Grenfell Tower. Here, for example, is Tressell's overseer who - and I'm quoting now -

'schemed how to scamp it, where possible, using mud where mortar was specified, mortar where there ought to have been cement, sheet zinc where they were supposed to put sheet lead, boiled oil instead of varnish and three coats of paint where five were paid for.'

And later on, writing about the decorating of the Cave, Tressell, who was himself a painter and decorator, describes the scamping of every coat of paint that, hastily applied 'destroyed the sharp outlines of the beautiful designs.' And then Tressell writes, and this is where the bells grew louder for me:

The architect didn't notice it, because he knew that the more Rushton and Co made out of the 'job', the more he himself would make. The man who had to pay for the work didn't notice it: he had the fullest confidence in the architect."

Reading this, the similarities with Grenfell hit home.

From the outset it was clear that the cladding was responsible for the speed and spread of the fire (a "scamping" that saved a tiny proportion of the million pound refurbishment budget) but what the Inquiry has so far revealed is the many other things wrong with the refurbishment of a previously fire proof concrete block. To name but a few: the absence of adequate fire doors or of a working fire lift (both statutorily required), windows that didn't fit, window frames that melted in the heat, a ventilation system designed to suck out smoke that might even have sucked it in, and the use of combustible plastic throughout the building that fed the flames.

It came as no surprise to the residents of Grenfell Tower that the refurbishment was that shoddy. They complained about it while it was going on. The Grenfell Action blog, written by two residents, went into great detail : And yet when the Council, was met by criticisms of the Tenants Management Organization (TMO) that ran the building on its behalf, the Council labelled the complainants as agitators and whiners and pointed to the excellence of the TMO's performance indicators (which, incidentally, were compiled by the same TMO).

Here is the world we are living in – where performance indicators, bogus or not, have more value than the voices of people who can see what is going wrong.

When Robert Tressell was writing there was no Labour Party, or trade union movement or welfare state: his book is in fact a rallying cry for workers to band together against capitalists (that's why my grandfather loved it so.) But, thanks to the social reform movements of the twentieth century we were

living in better times - or at least we assumed we were. I know I came to adulthood secure in the knowledge that our state, given legitimacy by our votes, would, bottom line, make sure we were safe in our beds.

Grenfell disproved that and Grenfell isn't alone: in England and Wales there were 421 high rise residential and publicly owned buildings with aluminium composite material – the cladding that set the tower alight. By August of this year only 107 had been changed. And the danger does not lurk in the ACM¹ cladding alone. In June of this year, a fire swept through a low-rise Barking block because of wooden cladding: and this despite that earlier in the year an independent fire risk assessment had warned of the dangers to that building. And here, in Manchester, apart from the 31 towers clad in Grenfell style combustibles, there are risks to 14 other blocks due to timber cladding, missing fire breaks, and defective insulation. Meanwhile the company, Landlease, that had refused to pay for the replacement of dangerous cladding that they had installed on tower blocks here, has been awarded the contract to repair, refurbish and partially restore Manchester Town Hall.

Building regulations have as their primary requirement that buildings should be fire safe. So how come so many aren't?

The government insist that the regulations make it clear that combustible materials shouldn't be used: industry responds by saying, on the contrary, that they have stuck to the letter of the regulations.

How can there be room for dispute over something so important? To understand that, you need to read the building regulations. I've tried (I did think about including an extract, to give you a flavour but the language is so clotted it risks inducing sleep). The relevant part of the regulations, known as Approved Document B, is so badly worded that it seems to allow companies to argue that wrapping a building in a material as flammable as petrol, was not against the law. You might not be surprised to hear that the current regulations were drawn up after a bonfire of regulations during which the Thatcher government scrapped the London Buildings Act: and that the last act of the Conservative government that came before Blair was to privatise the building regulatory body.

There are two options here: Either the cladding turns out to be compliant with current regulation, which means the regulations are not fit for purpose: Or

¹ aluminium composite material

the cladding was illegal, which means big corporations are playing Russian roulette with our lives and that oversight by the state, by building and fire inspectors and the fire service, has failed. Whichever it is, what Grenfell has exposed are failures in our democracy. The attack on the nanny state of recent decades, and the privatisations of each successive administration, has brought us to this pass: and to add fuel to this, local councils and governments seem to have lost the ability to listen to ordinary citizens who are trying to warn them about the dangers.

So, what hope for democracy?

Well, that's where I come back to Grenfell United – the organization of the survivors and the bereaved. They looked after each other when the state slipped up. In the immediate aftermath of the fire they focussed on their collective survival, making lists of who had escaped the building, helping each other with immediate housing needs and the emotional fall-out. Three years later they are still together as an organisation but now they campaign to put pressure on government so that other people do not suffer as they have.

It wasn't an easy start. Here is Ed Daffarn (the man who co-wrote the blog that warned of imminent disaster)

'We didn't have that capability of forming a group among ourselves,'

Ed told us.

'Everyone was just so traumatised. Everyone wanted their voice to be loudest. So, we understood we needed someone else to come in.'

The someone they chose was Oliver McTernan – a former priest turned conflict resolution expert. Oliver took us through the process he used to help the Grenfell survivors listen to each other and to allow a diversity of feeling to flourish. He told us about that first meeting.

'Someone got up,'

he said

'and raised (the issue of) money, and compensation. And this elderly gentleman who could hardly stand, at the back, got up and he said, I am

just horrified that in this setting, we have dishonoured the memory of the dead by talking about money. It was that wonderful moment when somebody brought us right back on track. I just instinctively felt then that the only response to this was silence. So, we had the whole group stand and we stood for a couple of minutes, 2 or 3 minutes in absolute stillness and silence.'

Which Oliver added:

'... then became the key to all of the Grenfell United meetings so that people could deal with these inevitable at times, tensions, by just rooting back what the purpose was.'

Since those first days GU's aims have expanded: they are now campaigning for change. And they do it on their own terms. Here is Bilal Elguenuni, a member of the GU board, talking about meetings with the Council and the Government:

"I am me,'

he told us:.

'I wear a hoody. I wear a cap: I speak the way I speak. Like it - good: don't like (it), that's your business, innit? And,'

he continued.

'I have said to (the authorities): look I am under no illusion that had this been pre-Grenfell, had 72 people not lost their lives, you lot ...wouldn't have given me a second of attention... But 72 people have died, and Grenfell has happened and you will sit there and you will listen to me as much as it hurts you..."

which Bilal, who speaks the way he speaks, which is always laced with humour, added:

"I wind the life out of them."

Despite his tongue in cheek asides Bilal is serious about GU's aims.

‘We have asked for culture change at the Council,’ he said” ‘in the way they treat people, the way they see people from poor backgrounds,’

and, he went on:

‘You get councillors that want business to kind of resume as usual, not understanding that business will never continue as usual because it’s not about a fire in a house. It’s (about) a culture that’s been going on for decades. In order for this never to happen again, things have to change drastically... and that is not an easy job. But one thing I have come to realise ... is you cannot change the culture or ...peoples’ way of dealing with things ...if they don’t see what they are doing is wrong’

Which brings me back to where I began this talk: with Henry David Thoreau and another of his sayings:

‘It’s not what you look at what matters,’ Thoreau wrote, ‘it’s what you see.’”

Grenfell has made us see something about our democracy. If we choose to see it. If we choose to listen.

We are living through disruptive times where the old norms of political behaviour are deliberately ditched. In America, the accusation of fake news is used by a President to silence those who might question his policies or expose his wrong doings. And here, in Britain, we are fed untruths by a government who are bandying about the will of the people as a way of keeping themselves in power.

But riding alongside this cynicism has come a different kind of disruption - the disruption of the organisation that is Extinction Rebellion. They are not interested in behaving well. They are doing what their name says: they are rebelling. Their target is another fire that is burning on our watch which many people do not want to see – and that is the ecological disaster facing the whole of humankind. They are rebelling on a global and also a local scale. In early September of this year, for example, the Northern Rebellion occupied Deansgate for four days, turning a polluted road into a ‘giant, family friendly zone’. So popular was this, that Manchester City Council is now considering

permanently closing the area to cars. And, as I speak, XR's two week long international rebellion has just come to the end.

Extinction Rebellion is a decentralised association of concerned citizens which, in a time of duplicitous politicians, bring a huge pink boat to their demonstrations bearing the slogan: Tell the Truth. It's a Utopian movement that uses disruption to refuse the Mad Max future they foresee if our overuse of the earth's resources is allowed to continue. 'We act in peace with ferocious love of these lands in our heart,' this Rebellion declares.

'We act on behalf of life.' And although they act peacefully, they are also, like Thoreau, prepared to break the law.

They have been met by condemnation and water cannons in many different capital cities throughout the worlds: and in the last ten days our state has become increasingly punitive in its response. In London, a section 14 order (currently being legally contested) has banned any assembly linked to the autumn uprising. To cross Lambeth bridge these days, you have to show ID so the police can check you are not going to demonstrate: a few days ago XR supporters who had gathered in St John's church (which supports XR) were told by the police that they could only leave if they went home rather than to demonstrate.

Extinction Rebellion says that they will not let this punishment stop them. Amongst their number are the people they call 'arrestables'- those who disobey the law in order to draw attention to all of our plights. Like Grenfell United, they eschew business as usual. With their strange (to those of us new to them) hand signals, their determination to tolerate difference and with their de-centralised planning, and peaceful protests (when have you seen deliberate law breaking by people who chant - we love you - as the police carry them off to jail - a slogan that, incidentally, they have begun to discourage given the problems it causes for people of colour) they refuse to close their eyes to something that is so painful that most of us wish we could to turn away from it. And what they also have in common with Grenfell United is that their whole way of operating is to allow differences and divergences to be heard without rancour. Deriving inspiration from the Occupy movement, they are modelling a new way of political organising that is tremendously emotionally literate and takes into account the centrality of people's grief and their creativity, their frailties and their strengths. In doing so their actions empower individuals.

In a similar manner, it was the people of Grenfell and the community around them who did the heavy lifting. And they continue to do work on behalf of us all. Here is Natasha Elcock, Grenfell United's current chair, speaking about what the fire has done to her.

'I feel like I've got a purpose,'

she said.

'the biggest purpose is that those, the people that died, haven't died for nothing. Because every single one of them, I can tell you, I have a memory of.....'

and then she says

'I want the truth to be found and for change to happen.'

Here, I would argue, is where hope for our democracy lies. In the eloquence of ordinary people and in their actions. People like Natasha Elcock, or Ed Daffarn or Bilal Elgueneni, or the many individuals, from school kids to pensioners, who are rebelling against those forces that threaten our planet. People whose power comes not from money or status, but from banding together to protect their whole community, and ours as well.

There are undoubtedly challenges to this 'post consensus' organising model, one of which was starkly illustrated recently when members of a grass roots XR group disrupted London tube services, against the advice of many XR affinity groups. Two of these disrupters were pulled off tube rooves by furious commuters and then had to be protected from further harm by transport staff and onlookers. The discussion continues as to how a decentralised movement can work when local groups take action with which the majority might disagree. But that's the point: at least they are discussing this together and trying to find a model that works.

'Being human is not about individual survival or escape,' writes Douglas Rushkoff in the XR handbook: 'It's a team sport. Whatever future humans have, it will be together.' And alongside this idealism comes a determination to disrupt and resist because as the XR slogan goes: 'Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.'

So many different drummers. And on that last note: amongst Extinction Rebellion's many groups there is a drumming group. All people, all abilities, welcome. Listen to it if you dare.