
On song: Alastair McIntosh's Thought for the Week

'A prophet sees and names the doom and gloom, but also points beyond it.'

I felt sorry at the news this week that Britain is to shift funding from overseas aid to defence. As a Quaker, committed to nonviolence, you might expect me to say that. But my sorrow is not just linked to Russian aggression in Ukraine.

My sorrow lies in thinking back to 1989, when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. This was also the time when Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, proclaimed *glasnost* and *perestroika*: 'openness' and 'restructuring'. For a brief window of time we could

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talk about the 'peace dividend', and make a shift from funding the cold war towards things that make the world a better place.

As I listened to wave after wave of world news this week, some lines from Leonard Cohen's song 'The Future' came running through my mind:

*Things are going to slide in all directions
Won't be nothing you can measure anymore
The blizzard, the blizzard of the world
has crossed the threshold
And it's overturned the order of the soul.*

Then:

*Give me back the Berlin wall
Give me Stalin and St Paul
I've seen the future, brother:
it is murder.*

The lines run on in driving testimony. I don't know another song from just a little over thirty years ago that's quite so chillingly and accurately prophetic.

But Leonard Cohen, Jewish prophet that he was, doesn't leave us stranded in the misery. For a prophet is a poet who sees and names the doom and gloom, but also points beyond it. And so his chorus:

*When they said repent, repent
I wonder what they meant?*

Cohen would have known that the Hebrew word usually translated as 'repentance', *teshuvah*, means a return to what it is we've strayed from.

As I listened to the lyrics, my once-stray cat jumped up and purred. It made me think how easily we're overwhelmed by things that are outwith our locus of control.

To influence the world, we have to dig from where we stand. To stroke the cat. To cook and share a meal. To not forget to smile as well as cry: for spring is in the air, and if we don't notice that the crocuses are out right now, we'll miss them. ●

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.



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On oath: *Alastair McIntosh's* Thought for the Week

'Truth cannot have a double standard.'



The official presidential portrait, courtesy The White House

Well, that's Donald Trump sworn in as president of the USA. And, as Torcuil Crichton, the member of Parliament for the Western Isles, put it in a local paper recently, 'Like it or not, this son of Lewis is going to feature bigly in our lives.'

Trump's mother, Mary Anne Macleod, had emigrated from the Outer Hebrides to the USA in 1930. She was just seventeen, an economic migrant from hard times, and she married into opulent prosperity.

One of the few remaining marks of her island provenance is that, in 1955, she gave her son a Bible for his Sunday School graduation from a Presbyterian church. Trump took his first oath of office with his hand on both his mother's and the historic Lincoln Bible. Yesterday, he swore that same oath, those Bibles stacked beside him, but held by his wife, Melania. (While it is common for incoming presidents to place their hand on a Bible while taking the oath of office, it's not a legal requirement.)

'When in everyday conversation we slip in expressions like, "honestly", or "to be honest", we're inferring that we might also field a lesser standard.'

It's an ambiguous thing when those who profess the Christian faith swear upon the holy book. Although I'm a Quaker, I have an Isle of Lewis Presbyterian background that I also appreciate. But Quakers don't swear oaths.

Once, Friends would have been fined and thrown into prison for refusing to swear in courts of law. Then, in 1838, the Quakers and Moravians Act of Parliament allowed us simply to affirm the truth.

Now anybody is permitted to affirm, which is a handy gift to atheists!

But why were oaths such a thing for Quakers? The answer is that they're explicitly (and for good reason) outlawed by the very Bible on which the oath is made.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: 'I say unto you: don't swear oaths at all. Just let your yes be yes, and your no be no.'

Why so? Because truth cannot have a double standard. Even when in everyday conversation we slip in expressions like, 'honestly', or 'to be honest', we're inferring we might also field a lesser standard.

We may not be able to influence the ethics of Donald Trump. But we can touch those around us. And we can ask ourselves: how much are we living in the truth ... if we're honest? ●

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.