

## The Siren Call of a Dangerous God

*Looking for love in all the wrong places?*

GEOFF RYAN, FROM "SOWING DRAGONS", 2001

*Sadly impractical, never conforming,  
Never your spirit to prudence would bend;  
Love's sweet fanatic, untiringly storming  
Ramparts impregnable, young to the end.  
(From the poem "To George Scott Railton" by  
David Guy)*

**M**ore than anything else, prophets are gamblers. They risk all on the chance that it really is God that is speaking to them and through them. A priest is someone different altogether. They hear God as scheduled in the Temple on the Sabbath or during early morning prayer time. A prophet, on the other hand, will pause to cock an ear to a low whisper snaking out to him from the depths of a darkened alley late at night, betting his life that it is God issuing the strange invitation. He knows that God is capable of this. A priest has God boxed in by predictable and unyielding systems of religion thought and practice (is not the very concept of "systematic theology" an oxymoron?) A prophet knows that God is dangerous.

For example, the Bible tells us about God ordering Hosea to marry a whore; Ezekiel to lie on his side for 390 days and cook bread using human waste; Jeremiah to invest in real estate in a city on the verge of being captured and destroyed. Then there was John eating locusts (forbidden food for a Jew); Jesus healing, eating and reinterpreting Sabbath injunctions, not to mention the people he hung out with. You know the rest.

A true prophet is God's extremist, a maximalist, with a willingness to go anywhere and do anything regardless of convention or personal concerns all for the sake of the mission. A prophet is driven by an inner burning message.

What does this mean for The Salvation Army, whose founder was acknowledged by many to be a prophet? Why did he call the Army's first training institutions

"schools of the prophets"? Why did our early ecclesiology define us as a prophetic movement?

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A couple of years ago I first visited the city of Saratov, a city of roughly one million people on the banks of the Volga, about an hour-and-a-half of several million people and borders on the largest Central Asian Republic, Kazakhstan. Someone in that city had been writing to Headquarters in Moscow for months asking for The Salvation Army to come to the city. This in itself is not unusual, we get many requests like that. Because it was in my region, Headquarters asked me to go and check it out. So I flew there, with just the name of the person who was supposed to meet me.

It was a 10:30 on a cold February night when I stepped off the plane and there were two well-dressed men waiting for me. They carried mobile phones and they led me to a brand new, fully loaded Toyota jeep. If you have a cell phone and a brand new jeep in Russia that usually means you are "Mafiya" (In Russia the term "Mafiya" is an umbrella term loosely applied to anything from street level hoodlums to sophisticated organized crime operations). Things were getting interesting.

I soon realised that my hosts were pagans in every sense of the word, materialists with seemingly no sense of the transcendent at all. As the jeep started up, our first conversation went like this:

"Geoff," said Evgeny, "do you want a cigarette?"

"No thanks, I don't smoke", I replied.

"Don't smoke, eh?"

"Nope."

(Pause) "Do you drink?"

"Nope."

"Women?"

"Only my wife"

(Pause) "Yeah, I've been thinking about giving up

*smoking too.”*

I spent four days being shown around the city by these men, and meeting

various people. They took me to a sort of children’s home run by the police, but which in reality was a children’s prison. Opened in 1837, it was still being used. In this huge cavernous building the youngest child was six years old and the oldest 16. There were twelve-year-old girls who sold themselves on the highways to long-distance truckers, ten-year-old drug addicts, eight-year old thieves - and policemen were trying to look after them! I was shown into a room and told, *“There used to be a church in this room in the last century, but we can’t find anyone to come and do something. We need something for the kids that’s lively, that’s interesting.”* He was describing a Sunday-school program, without having seen one. *“If you would like to come you can do this, you can do what you want”,* he said as we left.

Throughout those four days I was baffled as to why these two hoods were interested in hosting The Salvation Army. I tried subtly to let them know that even though I was a foreigner, I was not rich and if the Army came to town they were not going to get any money. I must have said a hundred times, *“We are not a business.”* But I sensed that they listened to me without really understanding.

The evening before I left, as I sat in an apartment on a white leather couch surrounded by expensive European appliances, I bluntly put it to them: *“Evgeny, why have you invited The Salvation Army here? What interests do you have? What’s in it for you?”*

Something special happened at that moment. Jesus spoke to me through the mouth of a bandit. Evgeny, who I was sure had never ever seen a Bible let alone read one, looked up into my eyes and said: *“You know, I was in Moscow for a couple of years in the early 90’s (pause). I was in prison and you visited me (pause), yeah, some little old lady from The Salvation Army visited me. So I said to myself, ‘The Salvation Army is a good organization, when I get out I am going to do what I can to get The Salvation Army into my city’. That’s why.”*

The question: Should we open The Salvation Army in this city at the request of the Mafiya? Would we be prophetic?

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There is a fascinating episode from the life of Elijah

in 1 Kings 17, in which the prophet heals the son of the widow of Zarephath by raising him from the dead. God sent Elijah to this woman in a foreign land that was in the midst of a famine - a strange invitation from a dangerous God. In a humbling act of submission Elijah moved in with the woman.

For Elijah, one of God’s chosen people, to put himself at the mercy of a foreigner, a non-believer, was difficult enough. Compound this by the foreigner being a woman and a widow to boot, this was a real pride-breaker for the devout prophet. The gossip of the neighbours, the whiff of possible scandal, could not have sat well with the man of God.

I imagine that Elijah spoke much to the woman about his God, tried to evangelize her as we would say. There were several months of this with no apparent result. *“What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”* was the question she flung at him on the death of her only child. She figured that her son’s death was a punishment from God for her sins and that Elijah, as God’s representative, was the harbinger of this punishment. She was trapped. He was obviously to blame but he was also the only hope she had.

Passionate person that he was, Elijah flung himself into the fray and onto the body of this young boy, raging against his death and against the hopelessness of the situation. No passive determinism here, no fatalistic, hand-wringing “if God wills”. It is never God’s will that pain and suffering, injustice and sin have the last word.

A.W. Tozer wrote: *“Many of us spoil our prayers by being too ‘dainty’ with the Lord... We ask with the tacit understanding that the cost must be reasonable. After all, there is a limit to everything, and we do not want to be fanatical! We want the answer to be something added, not something taken away. We want nothing radical, and we want God to accommodate us at our convenience. Thus we attach a rider to every prayer, making it impossible for God to answer it. In a world like ours, courage is an indispensable virtue. The coward may snivel in his corner, but the brave man takes the prize. And in the kingdom of God, courage is as necessary as it is in the world. The timid soul is as pitiable on his knees as he is in society.”*

I imagine Elijah yelling, shouting at God, shaking his fist even in holy anger. How does a grown man cover a small boy? Hands on his hands, chest on his chest, feet on his feet, mouth on his mouth, as if to say, “Take my body, take my health, take my breath, take my life. Take it if you need it, but heal him, save him.” Three times he

did it as in the cumulative holy, holy, holy - fashioning a prayer out of pain, an act of worship, “*kicking at the darkness until the daylight bled through*” (words of a song by Bruce Cockburn).

The Scriptures say that if a Jew touches a dead person he is contaminated, made unclean. The boy was not only dead, he was a dead foreigner, doubly unclean one could say. A hot eastern country and a body dead for a few days - the sight, the smell! How Elijah embraced this dead boy to his chest and breathed his breath into his fetid mouth without passing out, or worse, is something I will never know.

But none of that mattered. The instinct to save was too strong in Elijah, the different reality that blazed in his minds eye rejected the evidence of his physical eyes. Charging through the religious, cultural and racial taboos, he would not let his religion, his race, culture, or his personal comfort stand in the way. He was, after all, a prophet.

After God brought the boy back to life, his mother

said to Elijah, “*Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.*” “Now” is the operative word here. What Elijah had been saying for months made sense, came into focus. Now his reputation as a man of God had credibility, his God had been given credibility. Now the words he spoke were made truth, given weight and substance by his actions.

He had accepted the strange invitation of God and when the time came, was prepared to do what was needed, no matter how difficult and dangerous. The message needed to be given, the mission was all that mattered.

For the record, we did open up the work in Saratov, there is now a Salvation Army corps there and each week our team runs a Sunday-school type program for the kids in that children’s home.

*Many thanks to Jeff Lucas for his excellent book, Elijah: Stressed and Anointed (Chariot Victor Bible Character Series, 1998). It is largely his thoughts on the prophet that I have reflected here and expanded on.*