

Young and Unafraid

GEOFF RYAN, FROM "SOWING DRAGONS", 2001

'Give fire that makes men heroes, turns weakness into might,

The fire that gives courage to suffer for the fight,

The fire that changes fearing to pentecostal daring,

The fire that makes me willing for Christ to live or die...

The world for God! The world for God!

I give my heart! I will do my part!

Words of Evangeline Booth with new life breathed into them by a fiery melody fashioned by a young British musician. I sang it with conviction and abandon and fervor along with several hundred other Salvationists at a missions conference for young people a while ago. We sang it very well with enthusiasm and gusto, with eyes closed and faces upturned beseeching - demanding even - satisfaction of our God, some with raised fists and many, many with tears.

But did we mean it? As a friend of mine pointed out to me - Christians do not usually tell lies, but we often sing them.

Were we lying or just it just another terminal case of youthful euphoria, the strength of our convictions being no match for the strength of our emotions? Was our singing not ragged around the edges with a whiff of fear? What if we actually had to become heroes, live lives of pentecostal daring, make the choice between living or dying? What if our hearts were asked of us, our lives?

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A few months prior to this conference I attended the funeral of a young girl in Russia. Her name was Nastia and she was eighteen years old. She was very pretty, a "girl-next-door type" with curly blond hair and a lop-sided grin. The type of girl that a guy would notice. Further, she was genuinely nice. She didn't use her looks as a weapon, to tease the boys or threaten other girls. She

enhanced any company she was with.

On a hot summer Saturday night, while out for a stroll, she was hammered into unconsciousness and raped and her throat was slit. She was thrown into the nearby river Don, like an old candy wrapper - used, crumpled up and tossed away.

In Russia death comes very hard; it is unforgiving and occurs with a disheartening frequency. My wife and I have buried far too many people in our time here - too many young people. There are no funeral parlors, no funeral directors. We do nothing to deny the reality of the event, to pretty it up, to distance it from ourselves as is the case in the West. Death in Russia is up close and in your face. It mutters away in the background of daily life like a low constant hum, ominous elevator music, never going away, never turning off and frequently rising in volume to ear-splitting crescendos - this is what it means to be young in Russia.

In the south of Russia it gets very hot in the summer and so you bury your dead quickly because there is no embalming and the body rots.

Her mother shed no tears, her face was like a stone. In her youth she must have been attractive like Nastia but Russian village life had etched itself into her face and polished her beauty into a weary hardness. I felt that she saw no one and heard nothing that day. Nastia's twelve-year-old sister did not seem aware of what was going on. She clung fiercely to Ira, Nastia's best friend, never letting her go and it was hard to tell who was comforting who. And there was the old grandfather who just rocked back and forth and in his grief muttered curses and imprecations against fascists and Nazis. I suppose the grief mixed it all up in his mind and to his thinking the two events matched each other in awfulness. When the stormtroopers came through in 1942 was the last time something so terrible had happened to him, to his family.

I paid my respects to Nastia as she lay in the open

coffin under a dazzling summer sky. Her mother had tried to cover her face with what looked like a linen table cloth, but it was lace and you could see through it. They had painted her up with lipstick and cosmetics, but they could not close her mouth. It remained open in a silent scream.

We walked through the dusty village streets to the graveyard. In Russia when you bury, you nail the coffin closed, lower it into the ground and everyone takes three handfuls of dirt to throw on the coffin, an Orthodox tradition with some obscure link to the Trinity and a vague superstition about the resurrection. So with everyone else, I took my handful of dirt, and threw it on the coffin of Nastia as we enclosed her in the ground.

I drove home and walked into our yard. I wanted, needed, to see Anya my one-year-old daughter. When I knew my wife Sandra was expecting again I feared having a girl, I must confess. I had two boys and another one would have been fine with me – I was afraid of the vulnerability that a girl would bring into our home and into my life. In Nastia's death and funeral my worst fears had been realised. I found Anya sitting in a chair, a soldier from the corps was looking after her. As I bent over her all I could see was Nastia lying there with her mouth open. I wanted to touch her, to stroke her face but the dirt from Nastia's grave loosened from under my fingernails and left a faint muddy trace on her left cheek. *'My God, what sort of a world have I brought you into?'* I said to myself, to my daughter and to no-one in particular.

Two days later I stood in front of several hundred young people at our Regional Youth Councils. Nastia should have been there. As I looked at them I felt moved to ask that question again, *'What sort of world do we live in? What sort of world have we brought you in to? What sort of world have we left you?'*

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It is an extreme world, in which there are over 40 wars raging right now, with people killing each other even as you read this article. It is a world in which in the space of time it takes us to complete a worship service, 8,000 people will have starved to death or died of hunger-related diseases - 2,000 of those will be children. It is a world in which all too often 18-year-old girls do not get to grow up and do not get to attend youth councils. That is the world my daughter is going to grow up in, if she makes it past Nastia's age. That is the new millennium

and that is your inheritance if you are young. That is the reality.

However, as a Christian I cling to a different vision, a different reality – I believe it is out there, I know it is. The Bible gives fragments of this new, different, better world; a quick glimpse like a burst of sunlight flashing off the crest of a wave, like a few bars of music snatched by the evening breeze and tantalizingly carried past our ears – hints, reminders, clues, promises.

Psalm 144 is such a vision - a painting of a different world and a different millennium. It presents a vision worth living and dying for and tells me how to get there. It constitutes to me, the ultimate challenge for the restless energy and yearning idealism of youth. A battle hymn as song of praise as prayer. A dare.

***"Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants, and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace. Our barns will be filled with every kind of provision. Our sheep will increase by thousands, by tens of thousands in our fields; our oxen will draw heavy loads. There will be no breaching of walls, no going into captivity, no cry of distress in our streets. Blessed are the people of whom this is true; blessed are the people whose God is the Lord."** (verses 12-15)*

A world where our sons and daughters will grow up and grow old. Not like in Russia where young men must go into the military to come back all too often dead, maimed or with their minds destroyed; where they will not have to choose between finishing an education that will open no opportunities to earn a living or joining the 'Mafia' for a flashy, albeit short, life? A world where our daughters will grow up into beautiful womanhood and not end up like Nastia. A world where our barns will be filled and there will be food so that people in some parts of the world will not starve to death while people in other parts of the world are singing praises to God.

A world in which pensioners will not go eight months without receiving their pension and exist on crusts of bread and the handouts of strangers - the barns will be full. A world in which there will be no breaching of walls and no captivity - there will be stability and safety; no crime, no wars ... no cry of distress in our streets. *'No cry of distress in our streets!'* This is the Christian vision. This is the world that we long and work for!

This is the vision... yet the reality, for most of the

world, is Nastia's funeral.

So what do we do with this present reality? We have to deal with it, we know, in our heart of hearts, that it exists? What about the vision we sing about, we preach about, we pray for and dream about? The reality keeps me awake at night but the vision gets me up in the morning. How do we reconcile these two polarities? How do you get from the reality to the vision? How do you transform the reality into the vision? Are we fighting a hopeless cause?

The answer is in David's opening lines: *'Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.'*

How do we change our reality into God's vision? The reality will not change on its own and the vision will not suddenly be born out of nothingness. It will not happen without a fight, it has to be taken by force, forged in battle.

There is a powerful scene in the film *First Knight*. The evil Mordred has burst in upon King Arthur and his knights seated at the round table, the heart of his kingdom of Camelot. Mordred is making demands and uttering threats that Arthur will not concede to. So he is threatened with war – a war that will destroy the peace and tranquility of his life and his kingdom. Arthur fixes Mordred with a steady eye and tells him that if it is war he wants then war he will get because sometimes, *'There is a peace to be found only on the other side of war.'*

There is a spiritual war raging for the souls of men and women; there is a war for a broken, dying world out of which God will make a rightly ordered society. Yes, there is a battle raging and there is a call to commit to the war, to fight for the vision, to fight for a different better reality and the prize is hope.

But wars are fought by people, by soldiers. What sort of soldiers? Who is needed? *'Down these mean streets must come a man who himself is not mean, neither is he tarnished nor afraid'*, wrote the novelist Raymond Chandler. Down the mean streets and alleyways of the world there lives an expectation, a longing, a deep need for men and women who not only do good, but who are good themselves. People untarnished, holy and above the dirt and the filth and the pain through which they walk. People most of all, who are not afraid.

We talk a lot about this in The Salvation Army. We know the gospel imperative to mission, we know our heritage of heart to God and hand to man. We accept the need to be cleansed, the need for holiness, the need to be

above the sin that surrounds us. The need to be a clean, pure and holy people.

But that is not the hard part, is it? The hard part is the fear.

We can admit to unholiness and face up to it. That is what Sunday morning meetings are for, the mercy seat and altar calls, youth councils and conferences. We have ways of dealing with this. But the fear, what to do with the fear?

Many of us are fearful - afraid to give up things, give up people, give up plans and dreams, afraid to go places, afraid to really live an extreme life for Jesus.

We talk of being radical but extend it no further than skateboards and clothing fashions. We talk of life on the edge but live in a comfort zone so far from any edge that the fear of falling over that edge is ludicrously remote. The surrounding culture (both inside and outside the church), its values and priorities, steadily erode our risk potential as our parents and peers urge us to get the best deal out of life. We gradually conform ourselves to everyone's expectations and fears. We exchange the chance to have a life in order to simply make a living. We make peace with fear and content ourselves with what we have been told is to be our life. The world for God? Too big a task, too much a mess, too scary a thought.

To fear is to be human and to fear is not to sin – but to allow the fear to control us, make our decisions for us, run our lives...that is our sin. Love casts out all fear but we do not love enough. God so loved the world, that he gave his son. We love less, a lot less. Our parents will not give their sons or daughters, we will not give ourselves. We are indeed a sinful and unbelieving generation.

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When I think about my Anya I am afraid. When I think about Nastia my fear turns into anger. Hopefully it is a holy anger. When I think about the women weeping, the men going in and out of prison, the girl on the streets, the hungry children, the millions of souls without the light of God, I - like Booth - get angry. Angry enough to vow to fight, angry enough to declare war – in order to find to create the peace that I want for my daughter and that I hope Nastia has found. I pray that I will master my fear.

Phil Wall's book, *I'll Fight*, finishes up with a powerful story of a newscast he saw where a reporter was interviewing the commander of a teenage suicide

brigade in Palestine. It showed ranks young teenagers with explosives strapped to their bodies carrying guns and marching up and down, calling on Allah and ready to die for a country they had never seen and likely never would see. The newscaster was incredulous and said to the brigade commander, “Why do they do it? Why do these young people do it? Why are they willing to go and die for a place they have never been, a place they will never get to? The young leader replied: *‘Lady, none of us have ever been to Palestine, but when the west wind blows we smell it in the air and for that we will live and die.’*

What are you willing to live for – really live? What are you willing to die for?

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I was in the south of Chechnya in an area where the fighting is still fairly intense. We were entering a town that no other agencies had made it to yet. The week before, the Chechen fighters had commenced a campaign of suicide attacks, driving trucks loaded with explosives into the Russian military checkpoints that control the roads. The Russians were tense and jumpy and we should have been more careful.

Our three vehicles drove up fast to the checkpoint outside of the town. We gave the soldiers no warning of who we were or that we were coming. One fired his machine-gun into the air in warning, yelling at us to get back. As we got out of our vehicles to explain things, he started yelling louder, at the same time backing up very fast and lowering his gun to take aim at our cars. The shots sounded like firecrackers.

With some fast talking and a lot of grace we were

able to sort things out and eventually drove off unscathed. Maybe he was simply trying to scare us, maybe he was just a bad shot – I’ll never know, I suppose.

It wasn’t until later that night after we had made it safely back over the border to our field office in the neighbouring republic that it hit me. As the sun set over the Caucasus I sat in our guarded compound and pondered what had happened. As it was happening I was not particularly frightened – more than anything I was fascinated and a little incredulous that someone was actually shooting at me. Now in the cool of the evening, I felt the fear gnawing at my stomach.

How close did it actually come – again something that I’ll never know. Still, it was a close call, a very close call and it could have turned out very differently. This much I knew for sure.

If I had died bringing help to children not much different than my own, would it have been worth it? Would my life have counted, my officership - had I made it count? Had I stayed the course and walked my streets and alleyways in compassion, untarnished and without fear? Had my hands, trained for war, done adequate service for the King, done my part to win the world for God and create the Psalmist’s vision?

Strangely enough at this moment some words came back to me that had been penned by my father as a young man and shared with me years earlier during my troubled teen years: *‘It is not growing old that I fear, or even dying, it is being young and having done nothing.’*

What are you willing to die for? Better yet, what are you willing to live for?