

LIFE WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE EASY

The sermon for York Unitarians on Sunday 16 March 2014

Life was never meant to be easy:

- order contends with disorder;
- uncertainty competes with certainty;
- the fit skirmish with the unfit;
- the dependent struggle with the independent;
- death challenges life; and
- whatever seems right tussles with whatever seems wrong.

Being human is difficult work.

It will not have escaped your notice that this year and this July marks the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the so-called *First World War*: that long, drawn-out and devastating conflict in which altogether, friends and foes, combatants and civilians, thirty-seven-million people lost their lives. Already the broadcasting and print media are cluttered with commemorative articles and programmes, many of them raising difficult and awkward questions about the rightness and the wrongness of that conflict. Could any good have come out of such evil?

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The anniversary also raises our curiosity about the involvement of members of our own families. There can hardly have been a family untouched family

amongst us. So I'd like to tell you, briefly, about my own father since, at the time, he was a young man of fighting age who quite clearly survived the conflict. Born in 1893 he reached twenty years old in November 1913 and, was approaching twenty one, when the war eventually broke out the following July. A final year undergraduate student at Liverpool University, in the summer of 1915 he would graduate B.A. honours in philosophy.

That autumn, he migrated from Liverpool to Oxford to prepare at Manchester College for the Unitarian ministry only to find six months later, in March 1916, that conscription would be introduced and all unmarried men aged between 18 and 41 would be deemed to have enlisted in the army. I simply cannot imagine the mental torment which this must have caused for a thoughtful young man with a philosophic turn of mind and especially for one one who had only recently submitted a dissertation on *Intuitionial Ethics*.

So what did my father do? He clearly had no wish to contribute directly to the military conflict either in defence or attack because my friend, Alan Ruston, has told me of finding a letter in which my father inquired of Unitarian Headquarters in London as to whether theological students would have the same automatic exemption as clergy. The answer turned out to be 'No'. So my father decided to appear before a special tribunal in order for the sincerity of his exemption claim to be assessed. It was granted and he was assigned to "Non Combatant service only on conscientious grounds".

So, according to official records - on 20 April 1917, "Edgar Hill, a theological student aged 23 and a half years old, 6 feet tall and in good physical health" presented himself, at the Cowley Barracks, of the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry where the approving officer assigned him to the No. 5 Southern Company Non-Combatant Corps. At some future unknown date - but it can

only have been months - he was transferred to the Royal Army Medical Corps as a stretcher bearer. So, after little more than eighteen months of non-combatant service, my father was signed-off just before Christmas 1918 with the proviso that he could be recalled, if necessary.

When asked the "What did you do in the war, Daddy?" question my father would reply that he loaded ammunition trucks at Weymouth and served on the west front - at Blackpool; and also, there was something about graduate 'soldiers' being used to educate the troops for their return to civilian life; but the government, apparently, gave up on that.

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Now, until recently, when an Australian cousin showed me copies of the - now accessible - official military records, consigning my father on 'conscientious grounds' to a non-combatant corps, I had never really thought of him as 'a conscientious objector'. But it seems he was - at least in a technical sense. Like most people, I imagine, I have assumed that CO's or 'conchies' were confined:

- either to *the absolutists* - opposed to all war and unwilling to perform any alternative service such as the famous group imprisoned in Richmond Castle;
- or to *the alternativists* - who would perform alternative work outside of military control such as join Friends Ambulance Units.

But then there was also this third category - the category which was chosen by my father - of those who agreed to accept military discipline and perform essential tasks so long as they were not contributing directly to the conflict.

My father returned from his non-combatant duties - first to Oxford - and then back to Liverpool for two years as "a missionary fellow" at the Unitarian sponsored Domestic Mission settlement in Liverpool 8 where Margaret's Mum remembered him as a handsome young man! He then removed here to Yorkshire as Unitarian minister first in Huddersfield and next, after marrying my mother, at Mexborough. Both churches are now closed.

In 1921 he earned his M.A. degree from Liverpool University with a dissertation on *The treatment of the idea of value in recent philosophical literature*. I wondered what this dissertation might have to say about the notion of value in relation to the recent military conflict which had engulfed his life and the lives of so many of his contemporaries; but it seems that 'recent philosophical literature' hadn't yet caught up which is somewhat disappointing. However, my father did develop a deep interest in international affairs and would give annual talks on international matters to his local Rotary Club, of which he was always a loyal member; and for which talks he told me that he gained something of a *Job's comforter* reputation because of his regular and repeated warnings regarding the rise of European fascism and the dangers of ignoring it.

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I don't wish to discuss the rightness or the wrongness of my father's decisions because I'm quite sure that it involved for him a great deal of tortuous thought and heart ache; and it is that mental pain and anguish which I prefer to recognise. Indeed, I prefer to recognise that vast majority of moral and ethical decisions about what's right and about what's wrong are difficult and painful; and that rarely, if ever, are they so simple as being either wrong or right. Life was never meant to be easy . . .

Morality and ethics do, of course, involve right and wrong; but most moral and ethical decisions which we have to make - rather than being simple 'yes and no' either/or decisions between 'good' or 'bad' - take place in areas of ethical mud and require finely balanced judgements along a sliding scale between the 'worse' and the 'better': *fifty shades of grey* - to borrow the title of a recent best-seller which I hasten to add I haven't read - *fifty shades of grey* rather than black or white. But unlike *fifty shades of grey* - if I understand what the book is supposed to be about - morality and ethics are as much about the public sphere as they are about the private; about the market place and the stock exchange and the battle field as well as they are about sexuality and individual conduct.

There were no easy answers then; and there still aren't now a century later. Life was never meant to be easy; and similar questions, no doubt, will be troubling us even now regarding the situation in Crimea and the Ukraine; and there never will be easy answers to such questions because this is how it is and how it has to be; and because 'my country right or wrong' is a simplistic law of the jungle morality.

But, as no doubt you will have noticed, we have actually left the jungle and to our animal nature we have added the capacity of reason such that in the words of Wallace Tavener, my father's colleague in Unitarian ministry and among my predecessors at Edinburgh:

[humankind] is the only animal that has hit upon the idea of condemning its own way of life and its very nature.

[*Faith and Freedom* 1947 and *Waymark* July/August 1993]:

We are reasoning, thinking creatures:

- we have the capability of seeing different sides of an argument;
- we are able to comprehend another's point of view as well as our own;
- we have the capacity of feeling someone else's pain;

Life was never meant to be easy . . .

That is our burden . . .

. . . and it is also our glory.

Amen (1509 words)