

Good Religion: Passionate and Intelligent

The Littlefair Legacy,
A Center for Religion and Life Weekend

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is a pleasure to sit here once again in your midst, although, in getting ready for this moment, I realized why I retired. We've had a great weekend. Friday night was a party at Duba's Restaurant, where else? And it was a wonderful, celebrative remembering, telling Duncan stories. Yesterday, Dr. Gary Dorrien of Kalamazoo College, gave two fine lectures, the one about the Chicago School which had a shaping influence on Duncan, and then one addressing more the contemporary situation in a manner in which Duncan would have been proud. Now, of course, this morning, and the session following when we will continue to talk about the Littlefair Legacy.

This has been a weekend sponsored by The Center for Religion and Life which cannot really be separated from this community of faith, and the question might be raised - why are you doing this? I thought perhaps I ought to begin by saying that we are doing it because we want to keep alive the voice and the spirit of Duncan Littlefair who made such a great impact on this whole area, particularly the Fountain Street Church community that he shaped and formed over some six decades, being a part of it as pastor and pastor emeritus, and the area far beyond. But we do it too because, more lately, he became a shaping influence in this community through an intimate friendship developed between us, he becoming for me as one born out of due time, a mentor in my elderdom, a time when perhaps I should have had it all figured out. But I continued to find new horizons opened, particularly by the scintillating mind and passion of Duncan Littlefair. If he were here on this weekend, he would say, "What's all the fuss?" Dr. Lubbers mentioned that at his party Friday evening. What is this all about?

I never knew anyone quite like Duncan, who had an unusual giftedness, brilliance, charisma, force of personality, who was, at the same time, so unconcerned about self-promotion and would not at all have been happy to be the center of this kind of celebrative weekend. Yet, down deep I think he knew that, while he never had it within himself to promote himself or in any way to perpetuate that which he had shaped and created, nonetheless he was not unaware of the value of it. From time to time I had conversations with him about

finding some way to keep that voice and that spirit alive, and he was open to that. I think he would be pleased that there are those of us who are concerned to perpetuate the power and the influence of the religious embodiment that he represented in our midst. We do it here simply because he had come here so often to worship and loved this place, and in many ways, cast his mantle upon me. He was present with us when we brought Ian here for the first time and he was fascinated by Ian and so hopeful and confident for the future of this place with the leadership of him.

One of the goals that we have in a weekend like this, with the lectures yesterday by Dr. Dorrien being what we touted as the first annual Littlefair Lectures, is to establish an annual lectureship, an annual Littlefair Lectureship that will keep alive that vision and that voice and that spirit of Duncan Littlefair, an endowed lectureship that annually can bring an outstanding scholar on the cutting edge of religious thought and study into the West Michigan area, that we might be reminded every fall or whenever it would occur, that we have had in our midst one of the greatest religious thinkers and leaders of his generation. It is my hope that such a thing will be established, perhaps with an endowment at Grand Valley State University, and then a directorship from Grand Valley and from Fountain Street Church where Duncan labored all those years, and from Christ Community. I have met with Dr. Lubbers who will be with us in the hour following, and former Mayor of Grand Rapids John Logie from Fountain Street Church, and we are working on this and do hope to bring it into reality.

But, why all the fuss? What's it all about? And I want to say that we have had a gift in our midst which ought not to be forgotten or not ever to be taken for granted. We have experienced this gift and can relate to the positive value, the impact of that life and, thus, I think that it is incumbent upon us to do what we can in order to keep that spirit alive.

Duncan Littlefair was for decades known as the "Voice of the Liberal" in Western Michigan, a bastion of conservative, evangelical orthodoxy. He was not unaware of the fact that the whole conservative community saw him as a threat, suspected him, and called him by the nickname Dr. Littlefaith. He would simply smile about that. But the very fact that everyone seemed to be aware of him and threatened by him and would denigrate him by such a name as Littlefaith was indicative of the fact that, in this area, he was having an impact far beyond the community in which he was carrying on his ministry. To have met this man and to come to know him was to come to experience religion in all of its fullness, in all of its beauty and all of its positive power.

For me, it is a most remarkable fact of my life, a life that has been given wholly over to engagement with the religious quest and the religious task, one who was warped from the womb to be religious, one who was educated for religious ministry and leadership, one who has done it seriously and responsibly with all of my being, it is most remarkable to me that I should have come in the latter

decade of my life to encounter one who embodied religion that caused me to be "born again," even though I had engaged positively and I think fruitfully in the religious quest and the religious life. But, I suppose, to be honest, I was one for whom religion had also been task and burden. And then to come to encounter one who embodied a religion that was the very poetry of life, that brought forth the deep inner resources of life, one who lived a religious life that enabled him to be fully human and to bring the aroma of humaneness to all of those whom he met was quite amazing. When I met Duncan Littlefair, my life was changed. It was good religion. It was religion that drew from the depths of reality, bringing to expression in a magnificent manner the highest possibility of being human.

The toast at Duba's is famous now. Lifting our glasses around that table, "To the wonder, the miracle, the glory and the joy of life." And that was more than a toast. For Duncan, it was a way of life, and to be in his presence and to come to know him in intimate friendship was to be transformed and changed. I was conscious of it happening. I was conscious of the consciousness with which I began to live humanly when I came to the encounter with this man.

Good religion is passionate. So much of the religious story, so much of the Christian tradition story, of which we have been a part, is a story of a very serious and magnificent religious vision. The whole biblical story born in Israel and coming to full expression in the event of Jesus Christ and the whole grand tradition of the Church - all of that has been a passionate, human adventure and experience. But, that whole tradition came to its expression in a world, in a time, in an age before the modern period with the explosion of knowledge and our scientific understanding of the whole cosmic reality. So, what we have inherited, what has shaped us, our prayers, our liturgies, our hymns, our sacraments, our manner of devotion - all of that derives from a worldview that has been dissolved by the application of modern science. That in which we have been nurtured is reflective of a conception of reality, of a world that is dissolved by the advance of modern knowledge. And so, we live a bifurcated existence and, if we are aware, if we are conscious, there is a dissonance between the practice, the Sunday worship with the forms and the structures that had been given to us and the way we live the rest of the week, with all of the knowledge that we have of this unfolding cosmic drama.

In the ongoing life of the church there have been those who have tried to take seriously the eruption of human knowledge and accommodate the tradition with our present reality. What happens so often is that, before that advance of knowledge in our world today, the religious faith, the belief system, etc. has been reduced and reduced and reduced. Take away this, take away that, give up miracles, give up prayer, give up whatever, bring it down as far as you can, but hold on to the biblical worldview, out of custom or fear or superstition, all while a modern world with all of the knowledge is cascading down upon us. The liberal theological movement tried to lessen the dissonance by reducing the core of the faith. But, what has often resulted is an anemic religious experience, believing a

little less, believing a little less passionately, but knowing the real world is a world that is being opened up to us by the continuing research and probing of the sciences in all of the human disciplines, calling the old faith into question.

That wasn't true of Duncan. Duncan had a robust religious experience. As I said in his memorial service, the man was drunk with God. He was intoxicated with the Holy and the Sacred, and to be in his presence was to be in the presence of a human being that was filled with religious awe and wonder. It was shocking to me. I, who had been prejudiced with the rest of Western Michigan to think of this humanist, this naturalist as one who must be religiously barren, to find one who was so passionately religious in the spiritual quest, to whom the toast "To the wonder, miracle and joy of life" was the center, core and creed of his faith. It was contagious. To see him stand in awe of the flower, of a blade of grass, of a leaf turned golden in autumn, to see the joy in his countenance as he sat in his old wooden rocker by a crackling fire on a dreary, gloomy day, delighting in the heavy, gray clouds; one who looked you in the eye with penetrating eyes and loved conversation, and at our Duba's table would insist on one conversation with everybody at full attention at all times.

This was a human being that was the very embodiment of everything that is divine, and I stood amazed. For me that heavy obligation of religion, that burdensome aspect of religion, that controlling, threatening, condemning dimension of religion, that religious tradition which had weighed heavily upon me, which I had been working at all of my life to resolve, suddenly fell away before the beauty of a human being who was the very incarnation of God.

There was no sacrifice of the mind or the intelligence. There was the eager and ready exploration of every facet of human knowledge, of probing of the depths of every question, the welcoming of every little piece of data, the delight at every favorite theory and canon of science that got overthrown by more exploration and further experimentation in the revelation of new data. The mind was fully free to soar into all of the realms of human understanding, never a threat, always an increase in wonder and awe, because religion for Duncan was not some creedal formulation, not some set of propositions, not some truths deduced from this Bible storybook. Religion for Duncan was not some canon law of the institutional church or the favorite formulations of an ancient tradition for, as my good friend Lester always was fully aware, knowing it in Duncan and, to his distress seeing it happening in me, finally there is no authority beyond the authority that arises from within one fully cognizant of the totality of the possibility of human understanding.

And then reveling in life ...not some kind of abject bowing before some supernatural deity out there, but indeed, as he contended, the whole cosmic process was coming to expression in the likes of us, the emanation of God from the creative center, that ultimate Mystery of Being. I love the quote read a moment ago. Can't you hear Duncan preaching it? It's typical preacher's talk. It's

not carefully honed rhetoric. It's not carefully, philosophically expressed. It's the kind of pulpit talk where the preacher begins to foam at the mouth because there's something within him that will come to expression. We are the intrusions, we are the extrusions. What are we - intrusions or extrusions? One pushes in, the other pushes out. We are illustrations, we are examples, we are God! For God's sake, we are God!

It's amazing. There isn't anything beyond, you see? But, the beyond has come to expression in the concrete, the infinite in the finite, and we, the finite concretization of that Infinite Mystery, have that longing again for the Mystery. It's a longing to go home. And so, in our very naturalness, we're the ultimate expression of that which is Sacred and Holy, that one reality of which we are a part, that one tapestry into which our existence is woven. We are the consciousness, the voice, the storytellers of that unfolding of God in the one reality.

Passionate, intelligent, Duncan loved Paul. Of course, he had no time for Paul's eschatology, the end of the world; he had no time for Paul seeing Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world. He would say, "Well, Paul couldn't help himself. Look where he was coming from." But, he loved Paul because Paul had passion. He loved Paul. Couldn't you see Duncan just like Paul going right into the Areopagus in Athens, right to the heart of the philosophical center of the ancient world? Can't you see Duncan going there and looking those greybeards in the eye and saying to them, "Haven't you heard the latest?"

Paul had a vision, Paul had a passion, Paul was delivered from the burden of religion. Paul was delivered from all of that striving, all of that load of guilt. Paul was released by grace in his encounter with Jesus Christ in that vision he had, and he wanted to tell the whole world about it. Duncan loved that about Paul. Duncan loved anybody that was passionate about something, somebody that believed something and wanted to move the whole world.

Good religion is not some anemic non-controversial pabulum fed to weak people who are afraid. Good religion is robust, full of passion, and it has an open mind to probe to the depths with all of the possibility and potential of human understanding. Why should we keep that alive? It would be a dereliction of our duty if we should allow that which we have had in our midst to fade from memory and fail ourselves and our larger community the opportunity of exposure to that beautiful, passionate intelligent quest for God in that one drunk with God. He was the embodiment of religion that makes the human divine.