

## **The Promise and the Pitfalls of Idealism**

*Wilf Innerd, May 22, 2016, a talk to the UU Church of Olinda*

Ideals are a necessary component of our civilization, our culture, our world. Without Ideals we would lack direction, inspiration and a moral compass. Ideals provide us with visions and offer us Hope, and we cannot live without Hope. Ideals are created, articulated and promulgated by individuals and groups of individuals. We call them Idealists. If I asked you as a congregation to name the most obvious people who could be classified as Idealists, I strongly suspect that the list would include such names as Tommy Douglas, Albert Schweitzer, Lotta Hitschmanova, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi, perhaps David Suzuki, or even Al Gore, you can add your own favourites. These are the kind of people who we associate with Idealism. People who are apparently pure in thought, dedicated, principled, selfless, firm in their convictions, and to some degree above the fray and immune to personal criticism. They are persons who we look up to, admire and often try to emulate. They are persons who put their Ideals above all else, and are willing to endure discomfort, opprobrium, even danger, in order that their principles come to fruition.

For example, Tommy Douglas had this dream that every Canadian, regardless of social status or income was entitled to the same level of high quality medical care. He stuck to his ideal through thick and thin, even when, especially when, he was attacked from all sides by special interests, corporations and

individuals, who were afraid of losing power and perhaps income. His ideal, however, was such a good one that, despite everything as we all know, he won through in the end. He became The Father of Medicare and by popular vote the Greatest Canadian. He was easily able to put behind him all the insults, for example that he was a Red or a Communist or a Socialist, actually he was a Socialist, so that wasn't much of an insult. It was a designation that he relished. Although a man of peace, he had visited Germany in the late 1930s and was appalled by what he saw of the Hitlerian regime. This led him to speak out in support of Canada's participation in the Second World War. He was attacked for his belief, but he retorted that a Pacifist was an Absolutist and therefore divorced from reality, a reality that required Canada to stand up and fight for human rights and the principles of Democracy. I will have more to say about Absolutists a little later in this talk.

Lotta Hitschmanova was the Founder and Executive Director of the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, an organization that came in to being at the end of the Second World War, hiving off from the Boston Unitarian Service Committee, with whom she had previously worked. Lotta was Czech by birth and was only too well aware of the plight of the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Refugees, former Prisoners of War and Displaced Persons in Europe all of whom were in desperate need of help. She raised money, assessed needs,

organised transportation and shelter, provided for health care and did a myriad other things to help. Perhaps most importantly she helped to establish a permanent structure to solicit funds, organize relief efforts and in general handle the logistics of the whole operation. As things gradually improved in Western and Central Europe, due in large measure to the Marshall Plan, she persuaded the USCC to shift their focus elsewhere, first to Italy and Greece, where she became known as *the diaper lady* because of her efforts to help impoverished mothers, then to India, where there were catastrophic social problems after Partition, and finally to South Korea where she garnered two fresh titles *Auntie Codfish*, due to her efforts to feed the many refugees from the North, and *Mother of a 1000 Orphans*, in recognition of the several orphanages she established to look after the many children who had lost, or been separated from, their parents. Until the onset of Alzheimer's in her early 80s, she remained constantly on the move, either raising money for her cause, or flying post-haste to the next man-made or natural disaster.

Albert Schweitzer famously gave up a glittering career as an organist, musicologist and theologian to found a leper colony and hospital at a deserted mission on the Ogowe River in Equatorial French Africa, after qualifying as a physician and also marrying. He served there, he said, *in a spirit not of benevolence but of atonement*. Schweitzer was of course referring to the brutal racism practiced in Central Africa by the European Colonial powers, in particular

the French, the Belgians and the Germans. As he was himself an Alsatian he was closely connected to all three countries. He rarely returned to Europe and then only to fund raise. Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952, for his exemplary services to humanity and not least for his espousal of the ethical principle of *reverence for life*. He has been recognized in terms of intellectual achievements and practical morality as the noblest figure of the Twentieth Century. He died at the age of ninety in Africa and was buried in the grounds of the hospital.

These brief synopses of three very long and complex lives, and I shall do no more, are meant to give an impression of what it means to be an Idealist. It seems to mean above all else, single mindedness. I recognise right away that this is a caricature, after all both Tommy Douglas and Albert Schweitzer were happily married men, and Lotta Hitschmanova amongst other things was a passionate lover of classical music, which she took everywhere in the form of taped recordings. Nevertheless all three of them had a singleness of purpose which marks them off markedly from the rest of us. There was a price to be paid for this. For Hitschmanova, this meant endless travel and often primitive accommodations, for Tommy Douglas endless meetings and constant political battles, for Schweitzer abandoning the pleasures of a sophisticated culture and society to bury himself and his wife in an isolated jungle community.

Nor, with the possible exception of Schweitzer, were these Idealists necessarily saintly or even wise. Lotta, for example, who made an immense contribution to the relief and resettlement of refugees after the Second World War, also made some puzzling decisions. She had a Ph.D. from Prague University in Languages and had been a successful anti-Nazi journalist pre-War, but made no effort to resume her professional activities after the War, when she could have been a powerful voice with much to say and to write about. When the War started she was in Belgium, quickly moved to France, and was able to stay just ahead of the advancing Germans. Her parents were not so fortunate. They died in a concentration camp. She eventually escaped from Marseilles in 1941 to the United States, but as the U.S. government wouldn't grant her a permanent visa, despite her work with the Boston USC, she moved to Montreal. She very soon took up her humanitarian activities again and when the War ended she headed back across the Atlantic. Because Europe was in chaos in the immediate aftermath of the War, no UN sponsored individual was allowed to travel unless they were in uniform. So she adopted the uniform of an American Army nurse with a Canadian flash on the shoulder. She maintained this dress throughout her career as it made her readily identifiable and, as she said, made packing for travel easier. She severed the connection with the Unitarian Church in 1948, because apparently she thought it best not to be associated with a particular denomination. However, oddly enough,

she insisted that they retain the name Unitarian in their title, which is still the case to this day. The organization is still largely supported by Unitarians, but less so since she refused to support birth control initiatives espoused in the 50s. She said that she was not interested in social action, which is a curious attitude for someone in her position to adopt. However it illustrates very clearly the nature of idealism, the single mindedness, the narrow focus and the unwillingness to deviate from the overarching goal in even the slightest degree.

This is further demonstrated by incidents in the life of Mother Teresa (incidentally Lotta was sometimes described as the Canadian Mother Teresa). I said a few moments ago that the individuals cited were not necessarily saints, but this year Mother Teresa will in fact become a fast-tracked saint. This is despite a devastating expose by the late Christopher Hitchens, who called her a fanatic, a fundamentalist and a fraud. She was ultra reactionary and virulently opposed to any reforms within the Catholic Church. She believed that suffering was a Gift from God and that any attempt to improve the lot of the poor, particularly of women, was wrong. Her hospice in Calcutta was as primitive at her death as it was when she founded it. However, when she herself became sick, she headed for a modern clinic in California. She was a friend and supporter of the Duvalier family of Haiti, because they gave her money and were convinced Catholics, even though their human rights record was appalling. She was also a close friend, her term, of

Princess Diana. Hitchens summed her up as a mediocre human personality who embraced extreme dogmatism and a blinkered faith, although there is some evidence, not least in letters that she wrote, that she came to have significant doubts about the existence of God. Not surprisingly, the Catholic hierarchy disputed every word of what Hitchens wrote. Now, whether his analysis is true or fair is not the point I want to make. What is important is that she embodies to an extreme degree the Absolutism that is always present to some extent in all Idealists. Hitchens use of the word 'fanatic' to describe her is most significant and is a word that we will come back to later. I do want, however, to emphasise the point that the terms Fanatic, Idealist and Absolutist are all closely related.

The concept of the Ideal was first proposed by Plato. He argued that the objects that we see around us are not as real as the perfect objects, the Ideal objects that exist in another dimension, or on another plane. Only philosophers could possibly have access to this other world and even they were likely to be blinded by the sheer brilliance of *to agathon*, the form of the good. The analogy is to the sun which can indeed blind anyone gazing directly at it. He argued that there is somewhere, although he never indicates exactly where that 'somewhere' actually is, an Ideal form of everything, a table, a horse, an olive, a sword, and so on. What we have available to us are mere imitations of these Ideal objects or entities. These Ideals, of course, form the basic notions that describe the Christian heaven, by way

of St. Augustine's The City of God, giving, for the first time, the Ideals somewhere to actually be. Alfred North Whitehead declared that: "...*the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato*". He meant it as compliment, and it may well be a true statement. However, if true, it indicates, in my view, a long and useless preoccupation with trying to identify and describe the Ideals, which do not and indeed cannot exist. This preoccupation was only seriously questioned with the development of Phenomenology and Existentialism in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries under the influence, as you may recall, of Nietzsche, amongst others. I was reminded by Jane of the old tale of the man who spent years searching for the ideal woman to be his wife. He eventually found her and proposed marriage, to which she replied that as a matter of fact she was searching for the ideal husband, and he was not it. This illustrates very well the problematic nature of pursuing one's Ideal at all costs.

One of the problems with Idealism/Absolutism is that the Idealist/Absolutist believes in one idea and that in regard to that idea, they believe that they are always right. Isaiah Berlin adopted an idea from the Greek poet Archilocus who declared that: "*The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing*" and used the idea to make an interesting distinction between different kinds of thinkers. He held that Foxes were naturally adaptive, flexible, responsive people. He cited Aristotle and Shakespeare as classic examples. Hedgehogs were the



opposite, holding tenaciously to their one big idea, which encompassed everything and governed the way they thought about anything. They are Idealists, by definition. It will come as no surprise to you that Berlin identified Plato as the arch exemplar of a hedgehog, the Absolutist *par exemplar*. Now interestingly enough we know the names and something of the subsequent careers of about 70 students of Plato's Academy, who were educated to become leaders in their various communities, their city states. Almost to a man, and of course they were all men, they became tyrants. The term *tyrant* simply meant *ruler* in Ancient Greece and did not necessarily have the overtones of oppressive, dictatorial, cruel, fanatic and despotic as it does today. Nevertheless, tyrannies were not democracies, all the power was in the hands of one person, and as Lord Acton so memorably declared: "*Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely*". It is the adjective *absolute* which interests us today. An Absolutist is, by definition an Idealist, a Hedgehog, perhaps a fanatic, perhaps a tyrant.

I hope you are not too surprised then when I present you with an addition, or an alternative, to the list of Idealists I presented to you at the beginning of this talk. Such an addition might include such names as Stalin, Lenin, Hitler, Mussolini, Pol Pot, Mao Tse Tung, Muammar Khadaffi, again you can add your own. But, you say, they were not Idealists, they epitomise the worst of humanity, cruel, selfish, almost inhuman. But in reality they were as much Idealists as those on the

previous list. It is perhaps easier to understand the point I am making if we call them Absolutists. They are the linear descendants of Plato's students who became tyrants. They had visions of ideal societies which had to be created come what may, no matter who suffered, Kulaks under Stalin, Cambodians under Pol Pot, Jews, Gypsies and Homosexuals under Hitler, millions of Chinese under Mao, during the Great Leap Forward. They all exemplify what happens when you slide from Idealism in to Fanaticism. Unfortunately, we live in a world and in a time when Fanaticism seems to be on an ever increasing trajectory upwards, with no end in sight. This is a frightening and depressing picture but we should not allow such distortions to turn us against Idealism and Idealists, only to treat them with caution.

As I said at the beginning, we need Idealists. Philosophically, Idealism is the opposite of Realism. Realists are prone to say what cannot be done (obviously I exaggerate), Idealists what can be done, and are therefore much more positive in tone. The best philosophical position in my view is Pragmatism. Pragmatism is a position that can be characterised as half way between the other two. As the old saw puts it: *Better half a loaf than no bread at all.* As an example, I would suggest that the best, most successful, politicians are usually pragmatists. Harold Wilson, British Prime Minister in the 1960s, was a master of the political art of compromise, the essential component of Pragmatism. He won three elections,

instituted the Open-University and Comprehensive Schools, ended capital punishment, legalised abortion, and kept Britain out Vietnam, amongst other achievements. But he was not an Idealist and remains the most vilified of politicians because he was a compromiser and more interested in getting things done than anything else, such as reaching for an Ideal state.

The reputation of Tommy Douglas is in many ways the exact opposite of Harold Wilson, although both were Socialists. His historical legacy is assured. Tommy is loved, admired, venerated, justifiably so. He was what I would call a Pragmatic Idealist, combining the best of both philosophical positions. He never lost sight of his vision, his Ideal, but like Harold Wilson, he knew how to get things done, the mark of the Pragmatist. It is a fact that the Canadian Health Care System is the envy of many nations around the world, but it is not perfect. Amongst other things it lacks Pharmacare. Tommy Douglas's Ideal was not quite achieved, but his career exemplifies John Fitzgerald Kennedy's *dictum* that *Politics is the Art of the Possible*. Douglas was what I call for lack of a better term, a Pragmatic Idealist.

To summarise: Idealism holds a great deal of promise. Without the vision of Idealists we would never move forward, never reach the heights, never improve our lot. We need Ideals and Idealism and Idealists. Without them we would still be living in a murky, uncomfortable nether world. But there are pitfalls associated

with Idealism. For one thing, Ideals can be unattainable, impossible to achieve, totally unrealistic, or simply wrong. Your shining vision seems to me to be a nut-brained, half-baked, ill thought-out idea. Even worse, as I indicated, an Ideal may in fact lead to fanaticism, as we see with ISIS, or an evil ideology such as Fascism. In other words, there is a dark and dangerous side to Idealism. To paraphrase an old saying: *Idealism is a good servant, but a bad master*. That means we should embrace the promise of Idealism but must avoid the pitfalls.

So dream your dreams, imagine your Ideal world, create your vision of perfection, live in hope. But remember you exist in the real world, with real problems and real difficulties, which are governed by what is possible, what is pragmatically attainable. As Aristotle argued, we need to attain the Golden Mean, the middle point between excess and deficiency. Or, as the fairytale of Goldilocks tells us, the porridge should be not too hot, nor not too cold, but just right.

Thank you.