



THERE MAY BE SOME MIRACLES AHEAD

We are creeping up to Holy Week (April 14–21) which I have always considered a time of hope. No doubt my hopefulness is helped out by the tree blossoms bursting forth everywhere!

Last week the Reflection focused on the March 15th slaughter of 50 people in two mosques in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand and the inspiring reaction of the people of New Zealand led by their remarkable Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. This week I am returning to New Zealand and then taking a very big leap backwards into spiritual history. First to New Zealand.



A few days ago 20,000 people gathered in Christchurch while most of the rest of the nation were at their television sets. Muslim leaders were present and their congregations warmly welcomed. Once again Jacinda Ardern provided the moral leadership. She observed that the world has been "*stuck in a vicious cycle of extremism breeding extremism.*" Does that

sound familiar to you? It does to me. Our national politics encourages extremism and attempts to normalize it — but it is not normal.

I concur with a columnist who fearfully pointed out that a number of politicians rely upon a base that seems to have a *“nostalgia for violence.”* Since those voters keep those politicians in office, there is reason to fan the flames of that terrible longing for brutality. I was about 12 years old when I remember my father saying *“Nazis hurt people because they enjoy it.”* Are we on that brutal path once again? What do you think? How do we break out of this cycle of extremism breeding extremism? Ms. Ardern says wisely, *“The answer lies in our humanity.”*



Farid Ahmed survived the attack in Christchurch but his wife Husna was murdered by the white supremacist gunman. Mr. Ahmed called upon the crowd in Christchurch to walk paths of peace. *“I don't want a heart that is boiling like a volcano,”* he said. Unfortunately we have seen lots of pathetic volcanoes sputtering in our country's seats of power. So what does Mr. Ahmed suggest? He said for himself, *“I want a heart that will be full of love and care, and have mercy.”* Am I just being unduly pessimistic since I believe that such a policy would not gain much traction in the upcoming elections in this country of ours?

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said something to the people of her country that I so deeply wish would be heard by the people of my country,

We are not immune to the viruses of hate, of fear of others. We never have been. But we can be the nation that discovers the cure!

And we here in our own country could discover and utilize that cure as well, if there was a will to do so.

Now let's turn and look far back in history.





If you have been reading my writings for a while, you will know that the Japanese poet Issa (1763–1886) is a favorite of mine. As many have pointed out, Issa felt that he was living at a time of corruption on all sides — spirituality, government, how people treated each other, how they treated nature. As our friend Cliff Edwards of Virginia Commonwealth University points out in *Everything Under Heaven*, “Issa had a recognition of the life struggle of every creeping, crawling, buzzing, bedding, and blossoming thing.”

This worldview is consistent with the branch of Buddhism that attracted Issa. Pure Land Buddhism recognizes several ages in history. The Golden age lasted for about 500 years after the historical Buddha’s entrance into Nirvana and it was an age of Enlightenment. Next came a millennium where there was only teaching and practice. Then came our age, Mappo, which consists of 10,000 years of corruption. As Issa put it in one of his journals,

In this corrupt world of today. . . Those who are rich have no heirs; those who have children are poor with nothing to leave them; if there is a mountain, it lacks water; if there is a village, it lacks trees..

Writing of a once beautiful seacoast Issa laments “a crane lands on the rubbish heap.” Does that sound familiar?



I think there is a fire among the generation we term “millennials.” Many of them are ready to fight for a better world, A compassionate world, one that respects nature, other people and the creatures with which we share this planet. I am impressed by the millennials, and I don't want anything I write to be taken as saying to them, “We are in 10,000 years of corruption. There is nothing you can do about it.” I think there is a lot they can and will do about it. Right now they seem to me as like an emerging army without a leader. They mistrust institutions and leaders and rightly so. But in some way that will probably be quite

unique, they must come together before they can forge ahead. I've seen this before in my lifetime.



For example, in the years of “The Civil Rights Struggle,” those of you near my age bracket will remember how impossible it seemed to bring people and organizations together. Yet individuals like Stokely Carmichael (1991–1948) and his Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who were on the very far left did eventually come to terms with

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1969) and his church based Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). They searched for and found common cause and agenda. Martin quoted the Bible eloquently. Stokely described the mission of SNCC this way — “If we don't have a place at the table we'll cut the f***ing legs off the table!” Despite the differences in approach, they marched together, planned together, worked together, and sometimes died together. A lot of other groups and individuals also managed to come together and accept each other. Many of us thought this was nothing short of a miracle. But it happened. I think it will happen again with our millennials.

But what do we all do in the meantime? Let us go back to Issa.



The question is how do we survive in this long-term age of corruption? Who is “WE”? Well, I'm not sure what to call my generation — perhaps “Generation Antiquus.” “We” is everybody between my generation and the babies being born today.

I will share two of Issa's haiku, which I think reflect his life raft in turbulent waters. This first one is a favorite of Cliff Edwards who translated it this way,

In this world of ours

As we cross the roof of hell

Let's search for flowers.



No matter how bad things are there are always some flowers to be found. I think of Etty Hillesun (1914–1946), a Dutch secular Jewish psychologist, attorney, activist who was murdered by the Nazis in a concentration camp. That is pretty much the roof of hell if anything is. But Etty discovered a little blue flower just outside the fence of the camp. She went there every day. Watching that little flower struggle to live and knowing of her relationship to that tiny bit of existence was all she needed to face what lay ahead. There is always such a flower waiting for us.

The second haiku is one that has meant a lot to me in really bad times. During the AIDS pandemic and at other times of loss I thought of it almost constantly. It reflects an existential spiritual choice that we always have,

How lovely it is

to look through the broken window

and discover the Milky Way.

Right now in this corrupt world there are many broken windows. We can lament what is close at hand or find the courage and the stimulation to look farther beyond and see what is eternally whole and radiantly beautiful.

Brother Toby