

## OUR QUEEN OF HEARTS - TRUE?

Believing that tears are an outwards sign of an inner healing process - from my experience with co-counselling - I let myself, albeit alone in front of the TV, join in with the national grief on the Sunday of Diana's tragic death. It was good to become part of such a groundswell of benign emotion and it made me into a Diana's death junkie for the following week.

It was also an interesting phenomena from the viewpoint of democratic culture - there seemed to be a huge diversity of people who initiated and invented rituals of grieving from the beginning. As they took over public spaces, without asking permission, and brought their floral tributes and messages they gradually fused a new collective cultural identity. This was not a media induced mass hysteria, as was still claimed by some 'dis-passionate' left critics, but a individually thoughtful and passionate 'commune-ist' process. Some of the most creative rituals, such as the night-time tree shrines outside Kensington Palace or the act of strewing flowers onto the moving hearse, spread with extraordinary speed and cohesion.

But what was the subject of our grief? It doesn't seem enough to end with the answer "Di", even if qualified by a version of "I felt I knew her". After all she was not a real relative or friend, to most of us, but a symbol. Many people expressed surprise at their depth of feeling. So what was this symbol and what pain or loss did it access in so many of us? Had we in fact come to rely, often unbeknownst to ourselves, on what Diana represented and now suffered real loss? Or did it remind us of our own unfinished emotional business? My own sister had died of anorexia and I had, at the time, been unable to grieve this awful tragedy. As the week wore on this link became more apparent but did not explain everything that I was feeling. I think Diana may also have struck a deeper chord within our communal psychic histories...

The very core of all forms of oppression, in the construction of the oppressor role, is the control of feeling and empathy for those who are to be oppressed. No one who has not had their feelings turned to stone can coolly coerce and exploit,

routinely belittle and degrade other humans. Diana was important because she refused the 'stiff upper lip' so central to the maintenance of the oppressor role model whether it is upper class, adult, white, able-bodied or whatever.

She also knew the rough edge of being oppressed as a woman. As a national leader and charismatic figure she held up values, that have been almost entirely locked away in the private world of women, and pushed them into the public sphere.

One of the central planks of classism is the denial of the innate intelligence and judgement of the plebs. She, herself, had failed to get any 'O' levels. She had no intellectual standing, and yet she clearly thought for herself and decided as wisely as any intellectual could, what were the priorities of the day. And underlying each of these topicalities were the ground values, not of profit or mechanistic achievement but human caring. It is this non-intellectual but somatic intuitive wisdom that so many people can identify with and which made her 'ordinary' in spite of being a Sloane.

Unlike many of the upper class dames of charity work, who conduct their good works with a good deal of condescension and at arms length, she knew the value of physical contact, and of listening with respect to each individual. But raising money for charities was not her most significant activity.... after all this is what women of her class are expected to do... it's part of their traditional 'duty'.

Admittedly the style with which she did it was radical. But her radicality reached a new level when she got behind the world-wide campaign to ban land mines. This is the point, rather late in the day, when I became a fan. This unglamorous campaign really needed just the high profile presentation she was able to give it.

If we humans are to end war, and I believe we now can, we need allies from the upper classes to turn their backs on the warrior tradition that poisons the thinking of our national elite. The myth of the chivalric roots of the aristocracy have recently been revealed by radical or honest historians as a romantic gloss on a much more sordid reality. The nobles of yore were in reality little more than gangsters who ruled through terror and savagery. They were brutes with an

elegant facade. War was a cult. War was seen to be a cultural necessity. War was a motor of honour. Personal value was measured in terms of its inhumanity.

Thomas Hobbes described the psychic power that could be focused through the image of the of the wealthy sovereign in his book 'Leviathan' published in the 17th century. The subservience of the population could be extracted from the limitations of direct brutality and power could thus be extended over a greater area and the accumulation of wealth further increased... leading to further spectacle and increased mesmeric dominion.

Diana, as a Princess, subverted the mechanisms of this ancient spectacle and put its power, which had anyway long been sidelined as an aspect of an often jingoistic national pride and glory, and redirected the glare onto human frailty... her own and that of all those others she so actively empathised with. In this she broke the cardinal rule of upper class detachment. The meaning of the sovereign spectacle was reversed, reflecting people's power to care for each other rather than the power that a sovereign can exert by not caring. Rulers can only dominate and exploit by being emotionally immune to the suffering and ignominy of those they subjugate.

Just as the glamour of the sovereign can bind a nation in subservience it can also be used to highlight other images of more human relations. Rather than service and duty expressed in pomp and a petrified and haughty definition of human dignity, the spectacle became one of the ordinary frailty of our lives from which comes forth the sweetness of human caring and finally the courage to begin to end humans harming humans.

But this was also a stage too far. The Palace and that sub-section of the upper class that lead the military with their friends the international arms industrialists and dealers may well have been initially relieved at her death only to be perturbed at the scale of mass reaction in which her 'Queen of Hearts' was taken quite literally. She was raised above the Queen in a kind of posthumous peoples coronation. Could Diana be more dangerous in death than she was in life? Britain is the worlds second largest arms exporter and has one of the oldest warrior traditions embedded into its ruling elite.

Let us hope the talis(wo)manic Queen of Hearts has, with her death, sacrificially fractured that aristocratic warrior tradition - which has so poisoned our politics. We need ways to redefine human dignity as openness, vulnerability and honesty, something which the mass displays of creativity surrounding the royal homesteads seemed to be expressing. And to redefine honour and valour as the ability to insistently bring simple human values of caring for each other to the centre of our politics on a world scale.

What was remarkable about the outpouring of grief, from what seemed a truly broad cross-section of an often invisible British public, was in how much it can concentrate values that in her life often appeared, at least through the media, as too dilute and aligned with weakness. The same passion for caring that ordinary people carry too quietly through their lives suddenly seemed, in this unified expression, awesomely powerful. The establishment and press were visibly shaken.

The effect of grief on such a scale may be like a national therapy session in which a people can gain deeper strength and courage in its own convictions and intrinsic worth after having these undermined by centuries of oppression...

The national outpouring of tears in Poland on the occasion of the new Polish Pope's visits and powerfully validating sermons, was one of the factors that gave rise to the emergence of Soldidarnosc. The West had considered such a thing impossible. What will our grief shift? What new thoughts and courage will it release? What might be the sum total of such effects?

The media attempted to accommodate the verbal expressions of grief in phone-ins... which asked for peoples ideas on what form a monument to Diana could take. The establishment formalised and enclosed the need to write in their Books of Remembrance. But these controlled official channels were overtaken by the anarchic display of writings, framed by flowers, that were posted in the parks and on the streets. This flood of direct cultural expression was on a scale which is rare if not unique. Such public expression could create a different quality of popular culture. It could give popular culture an intellectual discourse which is open to all. One that defines itself in terms of such active bottom-up cultural

expression and values rather than in what art 'the great and good' think is best for us to passively consume.

But the results are an ongoing struggle and we can see this in the manner in which the landmine issue was included or dropped from the array of issues to benefit from the new Diana fund or foundation. The rightist Daily Telegraph's 'Diana Memorial Fund' claimed to be making land mine victims its prime target. Their strategy would seem to be to get in and defuse the issue away from banning weaponry. Earl Spencer, in spite of the power of his funeral tribute, talked of the random violence of landmines as if weaponry as a whole were not a scourge. Even the liberal wing of the aristocracy is unlikely to take up support for a campaign which could escalate into a general banning of arms manufacture.

When she first died a world-wide ban on land mines was held up as the most fitting monument to her memory. But as the week wore on the banning of landmines was mentioned less as the reality of a fund came to the fore. In this inevitably public and spontaneous process it is possible to see the establishment regrouping to resist the radical popular will to end humans harming humans beyond the conventional equivocations of a class and capital bound Christianity. Without, in a word, the hypocrisy of history.

Since the Chartists 150 years ago, the main hopeful change in the world has been a low bass groundswell, a drift of geological immensity towards urban democracy... A slow and uneven move towards peoples power world-wide has been inexorable; unmapped by our learned men; unrepresented, and perhaps unrepresentable, in the mass media; it shudders gradually forward.

For democratic change to empower the individual to create channels through which to make a clear collective expression there needs to be the kind of spontaneous and autonomous cultural forms we saw opened up in the reaction to Diana Death. If we are to be realistic and demand the impossible, an end to war and oppression, we must connect the everyday (caring values) with their imaginative expression as a collective response.

The media reportage, I had been glued too, had run out of ideas by Tuesday night so on Wednesday I ventured out into the real world to visit Kensington Palace to 'see for myself'. As an old lady had said on television; "You've got to have been there...", and she was right: the messages, letters, poems, posters, framed photographs, collages, flags, paintings, constructions, banners, teddies, candles... all surrounded by flowers... every flower in the world was there from garden daisies to exotic blooms that must have cost the earth... the air heavy with fragrance. Then the thousands of people reading and contemplating and talking in hushed tones. All sorts of people... more women than men but still a lot of men. But it was in the prolonged reading of this library of death and love, that the popular discourse comes out and hits you like a psychic earthquake... The subtext, surfacing explicitly and at times poetically was something that cannot come through a mass media or an art gallery system, with their inevitable layers of filters.

Intellectuals have heard much about the 'crisis of representation', it makes a very concrete sense here. On the TV you cannot peruse the messages in your own way adding your own poem, nor smell the fragrance, nor sense the scale of passion for the basic and direct values of human love and caring that are so eloquently expressed here. The medias lack of ability to represent what is essential to human survival, the collective complexity of the processes of cultural re-evaluation, is a critical lack in what is supposed to be our main tool of communication.

The communion of a good rave or festival, the euphoria of a football match (even with fixed seating)... has something of the base atmosphere, and feeling together, but perhaps without the ability to express and share personal feelings... So, not Diana but the individual writing and making and then the people reading and listening. All the women surrounding the Greenham Common camp and decorating the fence in the eighties was in the same league but without the personification of goodness and loss which can be so moving and without the urban setting allowing access to so many thousands.

In a way it showed a direct people's publishing... a grassroots broadcasting. People who had taken time to write so carefully could watch TV and see

strangers reading their work... They could see how their work was becoming part of complex and dynamic cultural discourses which would spiral away from the sites. Established power has always been threatened such direct unmediated mass communication...

Many of the messages would have been considered treason in my childhood... it was practically a peoples coronation, Diana was given her HRH back, the Queen was publicly castigated for her stoicism on the railings of palaces and Prince Charles was asked to abdicate in favour of William (on the understanding he would take after his mother!). To my disappointment the land-mine issue was mentioned only rarely. Overwhelmingly the theme was love and death. It reminded me of the content of sixties pop songs but somehow it seemed more radical in this context... It could be that it's my analysis that's changed but there was also the implied challenge to the definition of 'those who reign over us'. After a couple of hours reading at Kensington Palace I was left with a sense of a profoundly caring, magnanimous, wise and morally responsible population - rarely the response of hysterics.

The image of what it means to be British has in this intense week been changed from a reserved and exclusive image derived from those of the ultimate oppressor class - the imperialist rulers - to an warm and inclusive image derived from its commoners. Democracy may have come of age. An old model of what it is to be human has been blown away. It has taken an emotional catharsis that engulfed middle England to make it possible.

Aspects of a minority progressive culture, embodied in Diana, has swept through the population. Like the applause which swept from the crowd outside through the open west door into Westminster Abbey, after Earl Spenser's tribute, the public will can restructure tradition when it finds adequate expression.

Stefan Szczelkun. 9 - 9 - 97.

