

At the Service of the Future

The great Finnish poet, Edith Södergran, born in 1892, said that she looked upon "the old society as the mother-cell which must be sustained until individuals construct the new world," and she exhorted us to put ourselves at the service of the future. This was a remarkable insight for her times—it would seem to speak directly to us today. What she meant by the 'old society' I take to mean 'the old order' as it might be called now, this order which has been the subject of so much change. Almost every day we learn of some new undoing in society, some new threat in the shape of global warming, of old conflicts persisting, of rising crime rates, of terrible poverty and the growing gaps between rich and poor. The mother cell is receiving a battering, but there is also a wealth of the good, the beautiful and the true in that mother cell. So how can one put oneself at the service of the future? What does this mean? (By the way, Edith Södergran died in poverty at the age of thirty-one and was dismissed as mad by most of her contemporaries, but is today regarded as one of Finland's greatest modern poets.)

We live in times of rapid change. Many are confused, worried, anxious and almost overwhelmed by depressing news bulletins as well as the strains of modern living. Borders are going, both inner and outer ones, so even the sense of who one is seems blurred. All these are effects of the energies of change in our world. People want to know what is happening, what it all means. Or they might look for 'ways out'. Religion answered these needs in the past but today, as people have become more sophisticated, they have felt that religion offers only platitudes and they question its beliefs and doctrines. On the other hand, the superficiality and materialism of our age has turned some more ardently toward their religion, in search of what they think is its original purity. This has resulted in an upsurge of fundamentalism. Others might say, there are no sanctuaries any more, where do we turn? Yet others will say, we need something more than that which satisfies our feelings, we need something of the mind.

'Society' is a whole organism and all effects all within it. If the world is in conflict, as it is, this conflict is mirrored within each society and it is the most vulnerable who are its victims. We are created equal, but at the same time, people are at various stages of development, just as they are of different ages. So although everyone bears responsibility according to his or her ability, those who are aware of such things bear responsibility in that very knowledge. It is this last group of people who are conscious of the opportunities offered in these transitional times. They know that the quality of their thought, in particular, has impact on the environment and that to understand what is going on in our changing world is highly relevant to their service. This group is part of a vast group of men and women in our world today, all over the world, who are consciously or unconsciously aspiring to spiritual values and the realisation of the good.

The old is going, and the new is in the process of being realised, of being built—it happens in nature, it happens psychologically, and it happens spiritually. We have reached a point when an old age is passing away, and a new is being built. But humanity is not alone, and we don't struggle alone. The 'Gods' are with us, and involved. Most

religions have names for 'the Gods'— they are called by Buddhists the Compassionate Ones, and by Christians those of the Kingdom of God. There are many names for them. It could be said that the heavenly soul, the human soul and the earthly soul are today all players in the drama, hence the complexity of our times, and the opportunities for all of us.

Since Edith Södergran's times we have, I feel, moved to a place which is almost like 'no-man's land', except that it isn't no-man's land. For here we are not simply waiting, I think that here, in this strip of land which might be called 'transitional', changes are being made which are the result of changes in consciousness. That large group of men and women mentioned above are part of this process. There are changes initiated by this group and there are changes happening because of these very changes. For example, the psychologist and writer Oliver James, who was influenced by books such as *Fear of Freedom* and *To Have or To Be*, by the brilliant thinker on psychological, philosophical and social issues, Erich Fromm (1900-1980), has recently written a couple of books— *Selfish Capitalism* and *Affluenza*— which are critiques of the West's materialism as it catches on globally. This is a direct follow through from 20th century thought to our own times and today, also as a result of the global economic crisis, a glamorous thought form of materialism is perhaps being broken.

Because of the outer conflicts and the blurring of borders—both psychological and physical—which has caused a sense of displacement, nations, groups and individuals are facing profound crisis. This can be acknowledged even while one may be participating in the processes of transition. The religions may not be answering our questions, but there is a great deal of information we can draw on, and there are many religious traditions that may speak to one. And we are free to search. The arts may not be answering any of our questions either, for everything is in crisis, but that doesn't mean we aren't free to search for vision ourselves, and to attain it. After all, different groups all over the world, whether in the arts, or in education, or in the political or scientific field, have all contributed to our understanding, and one can draw on their energies. This is where the past comes in.

In its highest dreams and aspirations, humanity has been concerned with images of transcendence and purity and it is important to have these images. There is, however, also darkness in the world and perhaps in the emphasis on the light, the shadows can be forgotten. These shadows exist, and perhaps for too long the West has divorced this darkness from spirituality. As Victor Frankl said in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* "... human life, under any circumstances never ceases to have a meaning and ... this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death." All these factors, including pain, are catalysts during these times of transition, and result in the upheavals and crises we are witnessing today.

The future depends on us, now. Perhaps the task is to hold a vision—without a vision the people perish. There are many names given to describe the inner self, the God within. Here I'm calling it the soul. Meister Eckhart said, Christ is as close as yourself. In other words the soul, which is love, wisdom and insight, is as close as oneself. And when the

eye of vision, the eye of the heart and soul, and the play of the imagination touch the inner worlds there is the promise of creation.

I would like to end with the larger quotation from Edith Södergran with which I began. She wrote:

The inner fire is the most important thing that mankind possesses. The earth belongs to those who bear the highest music within them. I address myself to the exceptional individuals and exhort them to heighten their inner music, and build the future.

I myself am sacrificing every atom of my strength for my great cause, I am living the life of a saint, I am immersing myself in the greatest that the human spirit has produced, I avoid all inferior influences. I look upon the old society as the mother-cell which must be sustained until individuals construct the new world. I exhort individuals to work only for immortality (a false expression), to make the highest possible out of themselves—to put themselves at the service of the future.

The exceptional individuals she speaks of, are of course, each one of us.



Angela Lemaire is an artist-printmaker, painter and writer who lives and works in the Scottish Borders. She has exhibited widely and her graphic work, prints, drawings and books are found in both private and public collections in the UK and abroad. In collaboration with the internationally known Old Stile Press she has produced five fine press books, all of which contain relief images, either wood-engraving, wood-cuts or linocuts, and all are printed direct from the blocks. Late in 2008, Old Stile Press will publish *A Christmas Sequence*, a book based on the work of Benjamin Britten, containing over 60 woodcuts by Angela.

Angela has had solo shows in Durham, Edinburgh and Sydney and receives many commissions. She has been involved with World Goodwill and currently with Intuition in Service and has given many talks on these and related subjects.

www.angelalemaire.co.uk