

The Body of Christ could use some sleep (Or what the Church can learn from iTunes.)

Renes Descartes, having mulled over, pared back, savagely pruned and stripped away at the question of existence, finally arrived at what he considered to be something fundamental, a core statement that spoke of the very core of things: *Je pense, donc je suis*. Thinking and existing were inseparable for him. What is perhaps equally interesting is the logical progression that springs from this: the thoughtless are dead. Those who have ceased to think, ceased to wonder, ceased to reflect, have perhaps let a core part of their humanity perish.

Applying your mind to a problem is an attempt to solve it and move on. Indeed, it could be said that the whole sweep of human progress has been about our ability to think and thus effect change. And so, applying the same logic as above, wherever change has stopped, so thought must have done too. This appears to happen in two places: where change is thought not necessary, and where change is thought impossible. Where change is not necessary, everything must be perfect – it is a utopia, a place where everything is settled and nothing needs to be – or can be – debated. No thought is required. Where change is not possible, everything is stuck. It is a place of oppression, a prison where the mind is shackled, a dictatorship where imagination is a crime. No thought is possible.

As Christians applying ourselves to the problem of changing the church, we must first believe that change is both necessary and possible. For many in the church, change is neither. Either their faith is settled, the Scriptures are clear and closed, their minds an eternal, spotless sunshine, or the task is simply too great, the institution too large and the energy required too massive for change to be thought achievable.

We must resist these positions for Descartes warns that they lead only to death. While we still have space to think and dream, we must still believe that change is possible. And while we still believe that it is both possible and necessary, we must urgently apply ourselves to the key question that springs immediately from it: *how does change occur?* It is a question that has taxed the minds of philosophers, politicians, scientists and sociologists for as long as thinking has been recorded.

What is interesting is that over the past forty years or so, the answer to that question has itself been changing. Perhaps it was the double attrition of two world wars, or the growing sense of disenchantment with Soviet communism, but gradually, people have begun to see that *revolution* does not bring effective change. It appears to: it is quick, it is often violent, it often changes the flag, overthrows the powerful and installs new government, but it rarely brings about real transformation for the people on the ground. Instead, people are seeing that perhaps change is better effected through *evolution*. Evolutionary change is slower, it is often happening under the surface, below the radar of the powerful. But it changes the core of people, changes the heart, changes the very fabric of a society and slowly, slowly leaves the powers that be washed up and redundant.

In a recent interview for the BBC, Bill Clinton was asked about the situation in Iraq and the war that had preceded it. In a tacit criticism of the current Bush/Blair regime, and with undoubted rose-tinted spectacles, he said that in all of his policies and decisions he always tried to ensure that *interdependence*, not unilateralism, was at the core. The unilateralist approach is a revolutionary one. It believes that change is there to be forced in, and to hell with anyone who stands in the way. You're going to get democracy, whether you voted for it or not. On the other hand, the interdependent approach is evolutionary. It believes that change can only happen with the full co-operation of all the people concerned, regardless of their status or power.

We have seen that change is linked to thinking, and both modes of change, revolution and evolution, are the results of different sorts of thinking. Revolution is perhaps best described by the rational. It is cold and linear. It sees simple causes and simple effects, almost mechanically linked, so that pressing Button A will light Lamp B and *only* Lamp B, every time. By contrast,

evolutionary change is more attuned to supra-rational processes. It is to do with networks, and sees complex causes and complex effects. If rational revolution is at one end of the scale, then perhaps dreaming evolution is at the other.

There are many theories about the function of dreams. Freud described them in psychodynamic terms as the 'royal road to the unconscious.' Some scientists have seen them as the brain's 'screensavers', keeping neural activity ticking over while the body rests. There is new research, however, that sees dream activity as central to the bottom-up learning processes of the brain.

As a networked organism, the brain has no one 'super-cell' that is in control, telling the others what to do. This has huge advantages: information, memories and knowledge are not stored in discrete places, allowing the brain to recover from fairly serious trauma without significant loss of function. By avoiding a more linear/mechanical style system, whereby given inputs would produce given outputs, humankind has been able to evolve beyond the stimulus/response simplicity of more basic organisms and show amazing adeptness for learning. It is only the 'horizontal', networked nature of our brain structure that has allowed this to happen.

However, with so many experiences, sounds, sights, smells and feelings happening all at once, it is impossible for the brain to satisfactorily process all the relevant connections between them in real time. One increasingly familiar parallel might be with Apple's iPod and iTunes music systems. In this case, each song that is loaded carries with it a number of 'meta-tags' which tell the program or player information about which artist, which album, the year of release etc., even down to the number of beats per minute or the genre of music. Once loaded, the program can connect this piece of music to any other by way of these tags, so it is possible to search for songs by genre, by speed, by year of release... or any other specification the user chooses. This is a significant change to the way we approach music, and this sort of meta-tag based searchable database is going to increasingly transform the way we use information, as the systems will be searching for and suggesting horizontal connections between things that we may never have even thought of.

This kind of information processing is simple for a music system such as iTunes, dealing as it does with perhaps 12 tags per song. For the brain, on-line for hours each day, constantly importing and dealing with huge amounts of complex visual, sound, emotional and sensual information, it is impossible to 'complexify' it – make appropriate horizontal links between things – in real time. So it does it at night. And we call it dreaming.

This is why dreams can appear such a mish-mash of random images and thoughts. It is also why so many 'eureka' moments come during or just after sleep, rather than in the hours of sitting 'thinking'. Not that the rational thinking time should be discarded as useless. On the contrary, it is the vital raw material that the brain needs to process while it dreams, while it connects, while it analyses and networks, asking for good matches, making extraordinary links between sights, sounds, smells and thoughts.

Our ability to dream, then, has been key to our evolution, to our ability to adapt and change, because it has allowed bottom-up, networked processes to take the lead over top-down, hard-wired ones. In fact, this bottom-up mode of being characterises all good adaptive systems, from our cities – which have no need of, for example, a 'bread czar' to ensure enough is imported in each day, without us starving – to ant colonies, which have no centralised command structure yet are highly successful and resilient communities.

Adaptable, resilient and evolving communities. Words that ought to characterise the church, but unfortunately rarely do. But something new is emerging – and I want to suggest that if it is to be anything more than a stumbling revolution, twenty years too late and already out of touch, it must be based on bottom-up, evolutionary principles. Before it happens we must, as already pointed out, believe that change is not only necessary, but possible. Once convinced of that, we must then approach the nature of change in the right way.

We must return to the church as the *body* of Christ, not the machine of Christ. If Paul is saying anything in 1 Corinthians 12 – 14, he is emphasising the interdependent nature of the body of believers, and if what I am proposing is true, then that body can only evolve, can only learn to adapt and begin to emerge if it is allowed time to dream. The problem is that at the moment, when the body meets, its activities are too ‘simplex’. Time is managed very carefully so that not a second is unaccounted for: song | prayer | sermon | slides | song | communion | exeunt... All directed from some central figure, all top-down, all controlled. No time for dreams.

Even in alt.worship, our meetings are far too simplex. When Christ commanded us to ‘not give up meeting together’ he didn’t mean you have to have services all the time. Rather, he wanted us to value ‘useless’ time, time that was not well structured, time that was not ledgered, and not feel guilty about it. It will only be when we allow such time to flourish from the bottom up – not by some command from the powers that be that *we shall all now dream for ten minutes* – that we will see the body begin to emerge as an adaptable, resilient community, perfectly suited to its unique, local, urban environment.

The repercussions of such an approach to our way of being will be enormous. Like a brain, we will see centralised knowledge devolved into networked intelligence. Like a city, we will see strong, centralised leadership become less visible and less powerful, exerting less control but existing simply to resource those involved in communities, economic activity and industry on the ground. And like every one of us, we will see the body of Christ accepting its need to sleep, to wait for things, to dream. As Descartes proposed, if we are to be, we must think. But more than just existing, if we are to evolve, we must dream.

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