

Lead Tenant

It is full-moon: the lunatics have come out. Jason and Tim, despite our pleas, hoist themselves into the roof with the aid of several telephone directories. Apparently they intend to exterminate the rat population that plagues our house.

Suellen, Kylie and I would not normally be too anxious - we knew that being “lead tenants”; to three boisterous teenagers would not result in peace and quiet. However, the landlord is here: the vicar of the church that owns our house is dining with us. He makes a Christian effort to relax in the face of roof antics and the attentions of Nat, who turns on the charm with his best religious jokes. What’s Jesus’ favourite band? Nine Inch Nails. What’s this (shape yourself as if crucified)? A prick of a way to spend Easter. Boom-boom. Plaster cracks in the roof and the vicar’s face tightens visibly. We laugh nervously.

Later that night, Jason and Tim play Limp Biskit full blast and tear palings from the fence that adjoins the church. Luckily, the vicar has departed. Tomorrow night the boys will break into my bedroom, retrieve the confiscated television and barricade themselves inside Tim’s caravan.

Although the above scenes depict a period of extreme behaviour, they are representational of the general tone of life here. The boys’ antisocial behaviour is like background music in a film: always there, though you don’t notice until it swells up to accentuate crucial points of the story.

The story is that of three lead tenants trying to provide stability, love and helpful boundaries in the hope that three frighteningly damaged teenagers will live responsibly and independently. The story also concerns my spirituality and how people such as these boys affect my spirituality, because substantial lessons in my spiritual journey rarely come from thinking about an idea, assenting to it and then applying it. Ideas have been important, but generally only as reflections on action. Substantial lessons, however, have most often resulted from involvement with “difficult” people. That is what I want to reflect on.

A liberal/radical slogan: those from whom we have most to learn are marginal in our culture. This notion manifests in vaguely held beliefs about biblical prophets who preached from the desert and more recently in the adoration of the Zapatista movement in Mexico. It seems common sense that those who suffer hate, oppression and lies have much to teach us about love, freedom and truth.

However, most who identify with a “radical” tradition come from privileged backgrounds. In terms of family, education, career options and economic status, we are not marginal. This inherited privilege bars us from being marginal. I detect a certain degree of guilt in myself and other fellow radicals about our privilege, that drives us to look for meaning and purpose in those who lack such privilege. We may rid ourselves of material possessions, work for just causes or simply refuse to take advantage of the opportunities that privilege affords us.

These are good steps to take, but I wish to add a caveat to our admiration of those who are marginal, speaking from my experience of involvement with young people in churches, schools and in my home.

Most of the stuffed up young people I know have been abused, silenced and rejected. Tim was removed from his family at age three, then shunted around like a train from station to station. Deprived of familial love, he operates intellectually at age 12 though his chronological age is 18. Nat was rejected by both parents - once, to embarrass him, his mother forced him to attend school in pajamas. His relationship with his father oscillated between matey friendship and getting beaten up. It is no shock that the boys I live with are now extremely attention-seeking, selfish, manipulative and abusive. Behavioural boundaries that most people imbibe from the breast are dangerously fragile.

It is difficult to reconcile these experiences with my intellectual conviction that marginal people will teach me about love and justice. I have seen light in suffering people, heard words from them that would sound trite otherwise but from their mouths drip with wisdom. During an Easter celebration, after eating bread and wine, a man who suffered schizophrenia and had almost no family said that “the blood of Christ is thicker than any other blood”. The room was silent, struck dumb by the spiritual power of his words. Nat told me how he risked his safety to prevent a suicide attempt. Though I treasure these surprising moments, they are frustratingly skittish.

I mentioned that changes in my spirituality have most often come through involvement with difficult people. How can I claim this when it seems they have little to offer me? To use a clumsy analogy, their behaviour is tortured music, played out loud. I hear it, and it stirs the same notes within me. As I observe, attempt to influence, am provoked by, and often am the brunt of their broken lives, I perceive my own flaws. They are legion: impatience, bursts of anger, pride, emotional invulnerability, a superiority complex, greed, lovelessness, a controlling nature. My attempts to be a role-model to them reveal how pathetic those attempts are. I am not whipping myself - it is a simple fact that heartbreakingly little of our upbringing (and if we are Christians, our church life) prepares us to unstintingly love those who reject our love.

From them I receive the knowledge that I am an utterly broken person; that I am equal to them. This knowledge of our collective flaws humbles, reducing me to helplessness. In short, an excellent position from which to commence the process of spiritual change.

Dave Fagg, May 2003
Names of the boys have been changed.