

Epiphany (A Dose of Reality)

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N.B.—These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship—supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer—and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.



Epiphany was a fun time in Mexico. By the time the evening of January 5th rolled around, the family would gather for kings' cake around the nativity scene, where we would move the three proverbial terra cotta magi closer to the manger scene. Then, we would cut the cake—a kind of giant donut made with egg-bread—hoping we wouldn't get the plastic figurine of a baby Jesus inside: getting the figurine supposedly meant you were responsible for bringing tamales for Candlemas on February 2... although my memory recalls many baby Jesuses, and an inverse proportion of tamales in February...

The kids would leave our shoes by the door, ready to wake up to them full of good things. Well, candy actually, but in those days that was a good thing. Moreover, right besides the shoes would usually be sets of gifts. No gold, though I do recall getting some myrrh and frankincense. In any case, the toys and goodies meant one thing: Epiphany was, for all intents and purposes, Christmas II.

We knew the names of the three Magi too, and their back stories: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar, riding on their respective horse, camel, and elephant. My favourite one was Balthazar because he got to ride the elephant, and elephants are objectively awesome.

A year ago, my Epiphany was a bit different. I spent it in Cuba, where I was on a mission trip for my last year in seminary—I should clarify that, in reality, it was a cultural exchange. It was an opportunity

to witness and experience the realities of life and faith in a different land, a different economy, a different world.

Epiphany Eve was a late-night arrival at Havana International, where we were greeted by a non-ironic billboard of Che Guevara and taken away by a hand-painted school bus we dubbed the pastor-mobile. We arrived at a seaside hotel, though my room faced the other way, looking directly toward the former Soviet Embassy, which resembled some kind of gigantic LEGO robot with no arms trampling down the streets of Havana.



The realities of a different world took me by surprise. As a Latin-American, I thought I had the upper hand: I quickly found otherwise. My first shock was not recognizing the food. The food was nutritious, if modest. The one dish I recognized was a ground beef platter, that tasted... different from how I remember it. I later found out that the little beef there is in Cuba is often cut down with soy protein.

We visited many communities and heard many, varied stories. The food and souvenirs were remarkably similar all across, but the tales of each of their lives were not. Some had traveled abroad and others never left the island. Some surfed the web regularly, others had never been online. One minister had preached in front of Fidel, with no repercussions; another seminarian told me she is careful about everything she says, including the conversation she was having with me.

The economic realities of the place were similarly varied. We visited the Latin American School of Medicine, which trains doctors from dozens of countries, including the occasional US student. Someone asked what the tuition was. The principal looked puzzled. "None," she said. "How is that?" someone else asked. She replied that it was her nation's mission to offer the best possible training in health care, at home, and abroad.

As we explored around, the reality became more complicated.



The half-century-old cars added an attractive quaintness, but they betrayed the necessity of ingenuity in car maintenance to keep them running more than a drive to aesthetic appeal. There were evident signs of poverty, ranging from unreliable access to food—or at least minimal access to a varied diet—to lack of access to new clothing. The two-dollar waistband elastics we brought to a seamstress collective were treasured beyond our comprehension. Sometimes money wasn't the problem, we learned, it was being able to use it for what was more immediately necessary.

I learned complicated truths about myself around Epiphany in Cuba. The socially-minded visionary in me marvelled: by many important measures, this was a country brimming with wealth in intangibles such as healthcare, education, housing, cultural access, and steady employment. Nutrition was not ideal, but it seemed that people were at least able to subsist on state rations of staples.

The ghost of Adam Smith haunted me in Cuba, which seemed to bring his old script to life in so many ways; it is a place where wealth is evident in ways beyond money, and still, its available money was limited in its ability to obtain other basic kinds of wealth. I gained a new-found respect for the richness that is possible through enterprise.

One of my favourite scriptural sources is the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (a state-run Crown corporation) that occasionally offers neat insights on reality.

I have to say, I've never been much for the reality TV scene. Beyond a season of *Survivor*, the whole prospect has seemed oddly... odd, with gossip and celebrity chatter that offers me a minimal grip on reality.

But there is one reality show that seems to get it right for me: one that is about... reality! For a number of years, *Dragons' Den* has filled that requirement for me. It is more than an unscripted show, it is a witness to real life.

For those of you unfamiliar with the show, it consists of a panel of five Canadian businesspeople—the Dragons—looking to invest in real Canadians with real ideas. Each Dragon is capitalist in more than one sense: fans of free enterprise and also investors of capital to promising entrepreneurs. They also represent a wide range of what a capitalist can look like. There is Kevin O’Leary, a walking caricature of the greed-based investor. His tagline is “Who cares? How is this going to make me money” (I wish I were paraphrasing). He claims to dispense a dose of reality to any pitcher that does not meet his perspective on business; often enough his vision of reality seems limited.

Then there’s Arlene Dickenson, a “marketing maven” whose business thrives on telling stories—and when someone is telling their story, she tends to pay close attention. The roots of a budding entrepreneur—and their direction—are what interest her most; the potential for some positive cash-flow is only one of her requirements. The other Dragons have different ratios of business pragmatism and vision for everything else a successful, responsible business could be.

The pitches on the Double-D also came in all sorts. The stories can be inspiring, enraging, heartbreaking, plain weird, and always eerily real. These are people who have spent years of their lives, money from savings, mortgages on their houses, time from their loved ones, all in the pursuit of a dream—sometimes nothing more than money, and others so much more.

More often than not, the most successful pitches are the ones that offer more than a business strategy, they offer a way to improve life, to serve society, to add value and make their communities—and themselves—wealthier, in all senses of the word. The dragons usually invest in more than a business: they look to invest in people, with a vision, a mission—an enterprise.

I am particularly fond of episode 609—it seems to have everything:

There is the man who built up a company that creates high-quality public space exercise equipment. He looks to make Canadians—and the communities they live in—fitter and healthier. He has competitors, but none meet the safety standards that he has laid out. Dragon Robert

Herjavic, who came to Canada with \$20 and eventually built his own business, is enthralled. They make a deal.

There is the gentleman who pitches what seems like a pyramid scheme. Not one dragon goes for it. Even Kevin O’Leary says he finds it distasteful.

There is the heartbreaking story of the man who invented a new type of golf game. He has lost the house, the farm, and his savings looking to get it off the ground. Arlene looks at him in tears and implores him to stop. There are more important things in life.

There is the couple that pitch a new kind of forearm-crutches. She lost a leg to a drunk driver; dissatisfied with the available accessories and determined to keep her independence and mobility, she and her partner develop a new kind, with an optimal angle, lightweight carbon composite, shock-absorbing design that is far superior to any others and which allowed her to climb Mount McKinley and Kilimanjaro. The Dragons try them out and instantly see that they are far superior. The couple wants to build their business by bringing this opportunity to other amputees—they need some help to do that.

Lavalife founder Bruce Croxon has some connections with product distributors. He thinks they’ll make a good team, adding value to what each other has to bring to their mission. They make deal. Rival Dragons feel the sting of missing out, and state their admiration for the enterprise.

And then, there is Shine, the BC yogi who is looking to expand her raw food cottage industry. After extensive soul searching, she has come to the conclusion that her mission in life is to feed people, with healthy, tasty, wholesome food. The Dragons try out her work and they love her food, but her half-million-dollar valuation seems off to them, and they feel it’s a bit early to invest in a business her size. As often happens in the show, they give their wholehearted vote of confidence and maybe an invitation for a later investment. She does not get any money from them that day. But her energy has a far-reaching effect on all of them, and something odd happens, Kevin O’Leary asks a question that will make him no money whatsoever.

“Do you have a mantra?” The other Dragons look at him as if he needs a medical check-up. She does have a mantra to share: it’s the Adi Mantra. They want to hear it.

She clasps her hands in respectful salute and chants energetically:

Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō

“What does it mean?” they want to know.

She gives an interpretation: I bow to the inner teacher, I bow to the infinite one that lives in me.

Shine thanks the Dragons and leaves them with a blessing. She flashes them an infinite smile of someone who has richness far beyond what she could possibly ever count.

Ostensibly, each Dragon is required to be a self-made millionaire—an interesting notion. I think what they mean by that is that none of them inherited their fortunes and they each took their own initiative in building their enterprises. Admirable enough, though hardly self-made in a country that subsidizes the business degrees and other professional formation that builds our entrepreneurs; that promotes health care; that builds the roads on which they drive or bus to learn their degrees or earn their salaries. It is no accident that economy and ecology begin with the same root; they both relate to the care of one’s home, along with everything and everyone in it, and all that is precious about them.

I can’t say with any certainty what would make the best combination of government involvement and free enterprise in our economies. But perhaps a more fundamental question is what our economies seek to achieve: what and who it values. Behind that question, lies the reality that the wealth of nations is comprised only partially by the money that facilitates its transactions, while its real value lies among the resources that it uses and how it uses these resources—the most valuable of which is the people who drive it forward, who each have the potential to follow their inner teacher, who are at once their givers and receivers of infinite wealth.

So may it be, alleluia,

Amen.