

## Spiritual Essay

# A live coal

## Isaiah and initiation in The Tenderloin of San Francisco

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*Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' (Isaiah 6:5-8)*

### **Introduction**

**I**NITIATION' MEANS TO BEGIN SOMETHING NEW, to be admitted into membership. It implies ritual. It is an odd word to be used in combination with Isaiah's prophecies and mixed with descriptions of destitute people and the ghetto in which they live. But it is the best word to use to speak of the spiritual experience of being admitted into the fearsome places of homelessness. 'Conversion' won't do because this experience has less to do with beliefs than with courage. It is not solely 'transformation' either, because such courage is required *now*; it cannot wait for gradual change to an ideal state. Yes, 'initiation' is the right word: to be ritually seared by God's challenge to love; boldly to answer, 'Here I am; send me!'; and courageously to step into a living contemporary prophecy that reverberates with a presence as powerful as Isaiah's words.

Like the people of Isaiah's time who 'rejected the instruction of the LORD' (5:24b), most of us prefer not to see or touch the prophecy of The Tenderloin and its people. We want it to disappear and leave us in peace.

Unlike similar ghettos in other major cities, however, San Francisco's Tenderloin cannot easily be hidden away and dismissed. It insists on creeping out of its boundaries. It lies within sight of City Hall, nudges at the edge of the financial district, and mingles with the theatre

district as The Tenderloin's people – God's people – sleep on sidewalks, urinate on corners, and beg for spare change day and night.

I have come to believe that under this in-your-face presence lies a hidden divine purpose; there is more going on here than homelessness and the need for a handout. I propose that the people of The Tenderloin are actually *offering* something of great value: they are God's invitation to spiritual initiation. They are a 'live coal' poised to touch, to burn away resistance, to 'blot out guilt', and perhaps even to help make the connection with divine love sought by yearning human hearts.

### *The Tenderloin district*

The Tenderloin district is a roughly triangular-shaped collection of two dozen city blocks in downtown San Francisco. Many of the buildings that make up The Tenderloin are old, dilapidated hotels and have become living spaces for the homeless. There are a few porno-film houses, a sandwich shop or two, and an occasional corner store. Most of the remainder of the buildings is taken up by storefront agencies that struggle to serve the unending needs of the thousands who live there.

The 'colour' of The Tenderloin is dirty and peeling, cement grey covered by unrecognizable-organic brown. Even the small park where the hookers take a break is mostly cement and squalor surrounded by a wrought iron fence as if protecting a palace garden.

Sometimes the lobbies of the residential hotels look more hopeful than the streets, but that's a sham. Everybody here knows better than to hope. Beyond the lobbies, up the six, ten, twelve flights of stairs, down the dark and airless hallways, and behind the tightly locked doors, lies the reality of The Tenderloin: piles of old clothes that serve as beds, foam pillows now crunchy from years' worth of sweat, cockroaches racing across the walls and over dirty dishes. A resident of such a room may well have lived here for twenty years, trapped by poor health, a justified fear of the streets, and the mixed blessing of rent control that makes this the only place they can go other than the streets.

The picture Isaiah paints looks remarkably like The Tenderloin:

Instead of perfume there will be a stench; and instead of a sash, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame . . . And her gates shall lament and mourn; ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground. (3:24, 26)

### *Isaiah in San Francisco*

At the time of 'First Isaiah', Jerusalem was a powerful city, seat of the Davidic monarchy. Contemporary San Francisco is but one city in a huge federation of states that form what is arguably the most powerful country on the earth. Jerusalem was the centre of the orthodox religious practices of the people of God. San Francisco is known for its acceptance of (and creation of!) diversity in lifestyle and religious practices. Jerusalem's walls protected it from invasion, but made it vulnerable to siege and limited its potential for expansion. While it is not walled like Jerusalem, San Francisco has its own permanent boundaries, the waters that surround its peninsula on three sides. As in Jerusalem, this leads to making the outcast poor and destitute more visible than they might be in other places. As their numbers grow, and the general population increases, like a full sponge under growing pressure the poor begin to seep back out into places from which they had been banished.

While the leaders of Jerusalem were concerned with holding off invading armies and accumulating more land, the powerful of San Francisco have different concerns. The anxious shadow cast on this city is symbolized by the literal shadows that fall on the streets of The Tenderloin, those made by the financial district buildings that prevent the sunlight from reaching the pavement below. Here an 'alien god' is worshipped, and these buildings are some of its temples. Here, for this god, money is planted, protected, nurtured and harvested. But the fruits of this worldwide harvest seldom reach those who live here or in the slums of any other city; for it is seen as a good in itself, as a god in itself: power. Its bounty is hoarded and sowed back in order to reap even more.

For you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge; therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and set out slips of an alien god, though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow; yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain. (17:10-11)

### *The vortex*

As I walk the streets of The Tenderloin, and try to understand how its squalor came to be, a striking and frightening image recurs: a cyclone or whirlpool, a vortex. I see it starting as one person takes power from

another. The weakened one is pushed down; then the more powerful one takes power from another, and another, or perhaps is himself overcome by one more powerful than he. The upward movement of the increasingly powerful and the downward movement of the disempowered begin a torque, a twisting surge that, as it gains momentum, becomes a whirling vortex. I see the downward pull grow stronger, making it necessary for a person to use more energy – more power, more money – to keep from falling back and being sucked down into the swirl. What might have begun as someone's lack of charity eventually takes on a life of its own, threatening everyone, especially those trying desperately to remain above the terror of its surge.

Some will escape, for now; some who abuse power may make it through this lifetime without themselves being touched by the vortex – life is like that sometimes. Still, there are Isaiah's dire prophecies. And there are the people who once were powerful, but now,

terror, and the pit, and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth! Whoever flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit; and whoever climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare. For the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken, the earth is torn asunder, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunkard, it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again. (24:17–20)

Like those who once made human sacrifices to ancient gods, the powerful still seem willing to sacrifice others to appease this 'terror' – others who are expendable 'enemies': those who threaten to take power; or those who are 'enemies' because they obviously profane the contemporary idols of power and money by exhibiting helplessness and poverty. The very thing the powerful fear is what the powerful are creating and strengthening: 'The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the LORD alone will be exalted on that day' (2:17).

No one, it seems, is immune to or exempt from the 'day' of God. 'That day' has clearly arrived for those who inhabit The Tenderloin. And 'that day' is just a failed business deal or an abused substance or a serious illness away for many of the powerful now sitting securely in their offices overlooking(!) The Tenderloin. The people who live in The Tenderloin are a surprising microcosm of the whole spectrum of the city's residents: not just drug dealers and prostitutes and alcoholics, but

a full range of 'doctor, lawyer, beggarman, thief . . .' There is Ted, who once owned a furniture store; McIvan, a fundamentalist preacher with no congregation because he is so crippled he can't leave the room or the chair he lives in; David, a law professor who has Alzheimer's disease, and doesn't recognize the books that bear his name as author; Marjorie, who, among other things, was a marine who was injured in active duty. John was fairly recently a professional athlete; Diana was a model in the 40s; Fred was an engineer who helped to design airport control towers in the 50s; 'Pops' went to sea eighty years ago, saw the world, then came back to sing and dance in nightspots. These are not descriptions of those one would think of as 'street people'. Each of them was powerful in his or her own way and time; yet, for a variety of reasons, they all are trapped now in The Tenderloin.

Those already caught in the vortex no longer know how to get out; most, in fact, no longer care. Therefore Isaiah speaks not so much *to* The Tenderloin as *for* it; and he speaks the only message that really matters: turn back to God. This is the oracle *from*, rather than *to*, those for whom it seems to be too late. Like the rich man in the Lazarus parable in the Gospel of Luke, who desperately wants to let his people hear what he has painfully and too late learned, Isaiah and the people of The Tenderloin beg us to understand that turning back to God means also turning towards one's neighbours and re-empowering them.

And so the people of The Tenderloin say,

We accuse you! 'Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness . . .' (5:20); 'ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who . . . rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!' (10:1-2). Do you do this intentionally? Of course not. You are good people, you in the tall buildings and in the domed places of government. If we asked you whether you personally had deprived an orphan today, you could honestly deny it. But it's the bigger picture – or perhaps the smaller one – that matters.

And you, in your high office, playing with cash economies all over the world: 'To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth . . .?' (10:3b).

And you, fur-bedecked theatregoers, enjoying yourselves just a few hundred yards away from our mangy existence: you say to yourselves, 'There, but for the favour of God, go I', and then get on with your insulated lives.

All you powerful people: '[you] say to the seers, "Do not see"; and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel"' (30:10-11).

Sometimes we almost agree with you, because so far God's track record with us has not been admirable. Oh, God promised ruin, and delivered on that. But the other promises, of joy, gladness, clear sight, sound judgement, peace – well, maybe those are not ever coming. But of one thing we are certain: the downward surge of this vortex can be slowed only if you reverse the direction of your attention. Do not think that if you move fast enough you will avoid our fate. Look us in the eyes and know: WE, some of us, were once YOU. And 'you' could, tomorrow, be 'we'. And when the whole of the city succumbs to the vortex, 'they shall name it No Kingdom There, and all its princes shall be nothing' (34:12).

### *Initiation*

It is my belief and my experience that there is a radical alternative to being sucked into the vortex: we can stop fleeing, and go into the vortex voluntarily.

We can choose to be among the people there. We can do it while there is still the freedom also to leave voluntarily.

It is not necessary to take offerings of money or food; we needn't go intending to change or fix anything. Our presence is the required tithe, and our full attention.

Being fully present to one or two people acknowledges that their dignity is worthy of our attention. We acknowledge that our attention has long been distracted by false idols. We admit that, until this moment, our sight had been impaired, and we neither saw nor remembered the divinity in each human person. We confess that perhaps our hearts and our hands do wish to be touched by the 'live coal' of destitution in the midst of the vortex caused by greed and power.

This is the spiritual initiation offered in The Tenderloin. This is one way to turn back to God: God is intimately present in the marginalized, in the fear, in the touching, in the burning of the coal. And each time this connection of initiation happens, the energy of the vortex dissipates by another fraction of its power.

This concept of initiation is not explicitly found in Isaiah; while he was an advocate for the oppressed, he seems to have exercised his calling primarily among the powerful. We have no records of his direct

interactions with the poor. But such an initiation is foreshadowed when his failings were healed by the 'live coal' touching his lips at the beginning of his ministry.

Nor do we learn about this spiritual initiation directly from marginalized people themselves. These are not holy, innocent people; they most likely are not aware of a sacred call to pronounce God's words. They are not so much prophets as they are prophecy, ignorant of their part in transforming those who seek to hear God clearly. Nor do they necessarily make the initiation process an easy one for those who choose to come for it. Why should they?

The one who taught me to seek such spiritual initiation did so innocently. She goes daily to the people of The Tenderloin and touches them, simply because she must, because her God calls her there in a ministry of presence, and because she cannot not go into the centre of the vortex. Her name is Mary Ann Finch, and I foolishly agreed to go along with her one day as she made her way among the destitute, touching them with compassion, attention and intention. In spite of myself I was, on that day, initiated by Marjorie. I was afraid of the menacing streets, I was afraid of physical violence, I was afraid of being afraid; yet on that day, I faced my fear and stepped over it. I was afraid of the different 'other', I was afraid of mental illness and dirty bodies and a dozen other nameless unknowns; yet on that day I looked some people of The Tenderloin in the eye, and experienced a huge upsurge of love and desire. I felt totally inadequate to the task; yet on that day, as I held Marjorie's severely damaged knee, she touched me with the 'live coal' of her pain and her trust. On that day, as my resistances were seared away, God and I made a connection that affirmed my being. On that day I was initiated; and I believe that somehow, in the wonder of God's economy, that initiation erased a few minutes of the other 'day' of prophesied terror.

### *Touching prophecy*

We are invited to approach the 'live coal'; we may touch and we may be touched (and I believe the touch must be literal – if we don't touch, the 'coal' can't do its work). Talk is cheap and words are frequently off-putting. More important and more profound is human touch that speaks volumes; human touch that contains the voice of God.

It is difficult to communicate in settings like The Tenderloin, with all its competing sights, smells, sounds and voices; here well-intentioned touch is a powerful universal and holy language. But how does one do

this? Where does one begin? The task far outstrips our spiritual resources, and so we are left to petition the God who helps the helpless on behalf of ourselves, that we may touch the destitute as God might touch. This requires that we rewire our sensory anatomy – that we hear with our eyes, see with our hearts, and don't let our ears and our noses get overwhelmed by chaos and stench. It requires that we use the largest sensory organ of the human body, the skin, to connect with the ones who will, if we are worthy, offer us initiation.

The people of The Tenderloin are an oracle to us: '*This* is who you are, San Francisco, or Zion, or London, or Jerusalem – you are killing yourselves, and we are here to warn you, to show you. WE are YOU. If you do not come to be initiated, we cannot save you. If you do not come to the core, if you do not reach in and touch us who are your most wounded identity, then we – and you – shall continue to die our slow and untimely deaths. Until we are healed and released, you will be wounded and captive.'

Can we listen to our brothers and sisters there – our peers – to hear their experiences and wisdom? Once the listening begins, and once we dare to respond to the voice and image of God in the destitute, the mysterious formula of transformation is launched: by that amount of response is the vortex slowed. Each time an anonymous suffering person becomes a dignified member of the human family again, we buy a little more time for ourselves, for humanity, to come to our senses.

Can we forgo judgement and discomfort; can we foster genuine relationship? If there can be such a response to the other, it is possible to begin to see the other as self, to see the essence of the other as equal.

And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. (24:2)

This identification with the oppressed does not have to be total. There is nothing wrong with breathing a sigh or relief when leaving The Tenderloin. It's OK to get home, immediately strip off clothing and throw it into the washer, watching carefully for any hitch-hiking cockroaches. It's OK to thank God that we don't have to live in The Tenderloin. It's good to be desperately thankful for doors that close, for toilet paper, for clean sheets, for fresh hot tea in a clean cup. What's not OK is to believe that because we are not trapped, we are somehow more deserving, invulnerable and superior. 'Superiority' is what created the



hideous vortex in the first place. If we ourselves can feel the pain that oppression has caused, if we can sense our part in it, then a power of release can begin.

### *Hope for all (even the powerful)*

I believe there is hope for escape from the vortex of misused power; I confess that my hope is tenuous. The postulate seems obvious, if not simple: if the abuse of power is creating the vortex, and the vortex threatens even the takers of power, then to let go of abusive power is the only reasonable move. Unfortunately, it is seldom in the character of the powerful that we willingly give up our power, not even to save ourselves. That is why *initiation*, facing that which one most fears, and being transformed by the encounter, is essential. Over and over again Isaiah told the kings he advised not to fear obvious appearances but to have courage and 'stand firm'. If we are to take the words of Isaiah seriously, we shall look not to appease God, but to dignify the poor:

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile . . . cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (1:12, 13a, 16c, 17)

[Then] the enemy shall not stand, and [your destruction] shall not come to pass . . . [But] if you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all. (7:7-9)

All around us are evidences of the truth of Isaiah's prophecies, especially in places like The Tenderloin. Yet if we believe his prophecies of doom, can we also believe his prophecies of peace?

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it; they shall not be found there but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (35:8-10)

Will we ever see this part of Isaiah's prophecies fulfilled? Perhaps, if we can begin to let go of power, pride, fear. Perhaps, if we can accept

the invitation to spiritual initiation, whether in The Tenderloin or anywhere else.

And if not . . .

### *Postscript*

The Tenderloin and its people are a (mostly) silent icon of Isaiah's prophecies. The invitation of this icon is to initiation, in the profound hope that the face of the icon will gradually change from reflecting the prophecies of doom to reflecting those of peace.

Can one be initiated only in this way, only in this small slum in San Francisco? Of course not. There are many ways and places to be initiated into spiritual relationship with God.

Shall we learn from only this prophet, only these texts of Isaiah? Of course not. It is clear throughout all great Scripture that whatever distracts from the path to God is to be avoided as a false idol.

The idols of money and abusive power *are not* God's chosen way. Marginalized people symbolize the antithesis of money and abusive power. It is possible, therefore, that they are an important theophany for us, to be approached in reverence and awe.

May there be many who do so, asking humbly to touch, to be touched, to be initiated, and to experience the joy of this way to God.

'Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal . . .'

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