“I’VE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP” – MUSINGS ON BREXIT AND OTHER MATTERS

By Kelvin Ravenscroft

_The nation is sick, trouble is in the land, confusion all around. That’s a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars._

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

This declaration by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is from his celebrated “I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech which he presented in Memphis on 3 April 1968. This inspiring speech is all the more poignant because it was made the day before he was assassinated. 4 April 2018 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King’s death and, for many people around the world, it will be a time to remember, to reflect upon Dr. King’s life, legacy and vision and to affirm and celebrate the positive values of justice, peace-making, and inclusion to which his life was a testimony.

2018 is a year of other significant anniversaries. For example, from a literary perspective it is the bi-centenary of the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s _Frankenstein_ and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of Antione de Saint-Exupery’s _The Little Prince_. Many people have been inspired and challenged by the concepts, themes, and ideas which these works explore. _Frankenstein_ can be perceived as presenting a warning against human beings’ utilising advances in science and technology to attempt to gain the creative power that has traditionally been attributed to the Divine. Shelley’s updating of the Promethean legend can be viewed as being a text which still has vital contemporary resonance. It reminds us that, as society develops and advances, care must be taken to ensure the effects and consequences of, for example, rapid scientific, technological, social, economic, and political change should carefully consider not only the ways in which personal, social, and global well-being and flourishing are promoted, but should also be clear and open about the ways in which innovation and change can, in some cases, create side-effects that can damage individuals, communities, and their environments and structures.

_Saint-Exupery’s Little Prince_ is a much loved tale, for children of all ages, which has as a major theme the importance of seeing deeply, looking underneath the surface of what we experience to find the profound truth, meaning, and significance in things. The fox encourages and enables the Prince to see the world anew, to engage with it not only with the eyes, but also with the heart. In effect, Saint-Exupery’s novella invites us all to consider new ways of seeing and being in the world in which there can be a creative and dynamic interplay between reason and emotion which can facilitate a holistic dialogue between the experience of how things are and the vision of how things can be.

11 November 2018 will be the centenary of the Armistice that brought the First World War to its end and, in many countries, there will be programmes of events which remember deeply the
ways in which the conflict and the lives lost profoundly changed the lives of many millions. In the United States, 8 January 2018 was the centenary of President Woodrow Wilson’s speech in which he addressed a joint session of Congress and presented his 14 Points which outlined the aims for the Allied war effort and his vision of what a post-war world of peace could be. The vision of a world in which nations co-operate can be regarded as anticipating the development of the League of Nations, the intergovernmental organisation founded on 10 January 1920, as a result of the Paris Peace Conference that brought the First World War to an end and which, in due course led to the development of the United Nations.

New Year’s Day 2018 was the 25th anniversary of the European Single Market which provides for the free movement of goods, services, people and capital. However, in the United Kingdom there appeared to be almost no reference to this anniversary in the media. It may well be that, as a result of the European Union (EU) Referendum which took place on 23 June 2016, in which 48.11% of voters wished to remain in the EU and 51.89% wished to leave, there was no appetite for celebrating this anniversary. Ever since the referendum the country has been divided between so-called “Brexiters” and “Remainers.” There is ongoing and relentless debate, which is often very heated, divisive, and vituperative, about the pros and cons of leaving and remaining. It can be suggested that the United Kingdom has been riven in two, and not necessarily based upon party political affiliation. There has been much analysis by, for example, politicians, economists, businesses, think tanks, and educational institutions about the reasons why people voted in the ways they did. One observation is that it appears to be the case that, ironically, many (but not all) of the people who voted to leave the EU are from what can be described as generally deprived and disadvantaged regions of the UK whose communities have benefitted, in many cases, from significant EU funding for infrastructure and development projects.

Officially, following the triggering of Article 50 during the spring of 2017 and embarking upon, and entering into, the process of leaving the EU, the UK is required to complete negotiations with a view to exiting by the official deadline of 29 March 2019. At the time of this writing, the negotiations concerning the terms of exit are ongoing and there appears to be a growing view that it will not be possible to negotiate and secure a meaningful deal by this date. Indeed, some commentators suggest that the complex, challenging, and fraught discussions might last for several more years.

The centenary of the end of the First World War, with its potential for deep and transformative remembering of what it means to suffer tragedy on a global scale, in which nations remember and commemorate together, is taking place at a point in European history in which the principles upon which the European Union has been founded are actively being called into question, and not only by those in the UK who voted to leave, but by countries who are remain members of the EU. For example, the Visegrad Group, composed of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, are increasingly vocal in expressing their view that, as sovereign independent nations, they are entitled to assert their right to make political, economic, social, and cultural decisions autonomously without being constrained by the structures, principles, and policies of the European Union.
It can appear, therefore, that “Brexiteers” and “Remainers” are worlds apart, that they see things very differently indeed. It can be difficult, at times, to see any meaningful way forward with such division in their ways of seeing and being in the world. It can be suggested that these two different views are actually articulating very different world views—two, on the surface, opposing and incompatible weltanschauungs. It can also be suggested that both the “Remainer” and “Brexiteer” positions exhibit some of the characteristics of fundamentalist ways of thinking in which concepts, themes, and ideas are all too often regarded as being either true or false, right or wrong, good or evil, in which there is very limited nuanced debate and considered, dialectical critical thinking. Such dualistic and binary ways of thinking can be viewed as entrenching people more deeply into their closed positions, like two opposing armies facing each other on the battlefield. In such a context, I am of the view that when Martin Luther King, Jr., made his “I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech in 1968, he was not only commenting upon his times but he was also prophetically drawing our attention to the many and varied ways in which the world of the early 21st century is also characterised by the view that “The nation is sick, trouble is in the land, confusion all around.”

So, what is to be done? What might be a way forward? I believe that Dr. King points us to a way forward. Remember that in the story of The Little Prince, the fox is the one who encourages the Prince to transcend superficial ways of seeing; he points the Prince to a different way of knowing in which the head and the heart, reason and emotion, can work in harmony. I am of the view that this is a profound metaphor for our times. Dr. King recognises and affirms that it is “only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.” It is appropriate to ask where, in these often dark times, can we find the resources, the inspiration and the encouragement to “see the stars”? Where can we find the wisdom which will perhaps signpost a way forward?

I conclude this short article with a suggestion about a way forward. It is a proposal which is not likely to find its way into the manifestos of most political parties and it is also very unlikely to find its way into the thinking of most businesses, corporations, and, indeed, in many of our educational institutions. Nevertheless, the suggestion I put forward can connect deeply with elements of a United Kingdom Government report which has been recently published. Whilst Brexit negotiations continue, the day-to-day business of government goes on, and one element of this day-to-day business of government is the publication of the report which outlines the UK’s 25-year environmental plan. Amongst the plan’s wide-ranging recommendations there is a chapter that explores Connecting people with their environment to improve health and wellbeing.”

It suggests we should “Encourage children to be close to nature, in and out of school, with particular focus on disadvantaged areas. ‘Green’ our towns and cities by creating green infrastructure and planting one million urban trees.” and “Make 2019 a year of action for the environment, working with Step Up To Serve (a registered charity which promotes the participation of young people in social action) and other partners to help children and young people from all backgrounds to engage with nature and improve the environment.”
We should not forget the experience of the young Thomas Berry in his encounter with the meadow of lilies: “A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something, I know not what, that seems to explain my life at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.”

It may yet be that many of our current political, economic and social concerns, including Brexit, are not really about those things which, to use a term from Paul Tillich, are of Ultimate Concern. Perhaps the young people of today, through their participation in educational and social programmes which, quite literally, as Dr. King affirms, “see the stars” might be formulating a holistic ecology which recognises, affirms and nurtures the interdependence of all life forms. Advocates of the Universe Story and the Journey of the Universe, have something deeply profound, meaningful, relevant, and timely to contribute to this transformative cosmic vision. Our young people are the vehicles for the actualisation of this vision.