



Unlikely Hero

As you know, I love listening to podcasts, and in recent times, I have started listening to one particular podcast that is full of surprises. Produced by the Anglo-American journalist Jon Ronson, it is called Things Fell Apart, and is essentially a history of the so-called "culture wars" that take up so much space on the airwaves and in political discourse these days.

I am a big fan of Ronson's work. I first read his book *Them* - an exploration of conspiracy theorist and extremist movements around the world - in the early 2000's, and was impressed by his non-judgemental approach as well as the clarity of his reportage, which revealed how terribly broken and dangerous the people involved in such movements are. Indeed, Ronson is often compared to the prominent docu-journalist Louis Theroux, in terms of their capacity to sympathetically portray the humanity of people living on the margins of society without being co-opted by their malformed sense of the world.

In any event, *Things Fell Apart* is an interesting podcast because it traces the often incongruous origins of the "hot button" issues that pre-occupy so many social commentators, political analysts, online influencers, and people within society generally. For example, did you know that the current controversy around so-called Critical Race Theory began with one suburban American high school's attempt to respond to an act of online racism directed against its students? Or that the mysterious deaths of a number of African-American sex workers in Miami led to the emergence of a racist medical theory which,

although subsequently disproved (the women were the victims of a serial killer), continues to be used as a defence in US courts today - including in the defence of the police officer found responsible for the murder of George Floyd? Or that the QAnon conspiracy theory that the world is run by a secret cabal of powerful paedophiles traces back to the "Satanic Panic" of the late 1970s, when a fringe evangelical radio host became convinced that satanist cults were infiltrating child care networks for the purpose of kidnapping children for "black mass" rituals (and which resulted in a number of child care workers being falsely accused of heinous crimes)?

These are the stories that Ronson traces in his podcast, and it is amazing - and, admittedly, also a little depressing - how these apparently innocuous origins ripple and grow and take on a life of their own until they become something far bigger and far more disruptive than anyone could have imagined. If nothing else, Ronson's podcast is a study in the "law of unintended consequences", and of how what we do in pursuit of our objectives often produces outcomes beyond our wildest imaginings.

But perhaps the most interesting exploration of the unlikely in this podcast is the episode in which Ronson traces a rare moment of solidarity and unity in the culture wars - and perhaps the most unlikely hero of the moment, US televangelist Tammy Faye Bakker.

By way of background, Tammy and Jimmy Bakker were probably the first "superstar" televangelists. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, they built up an enormous following through their Praise The Lord television network. And unlike other prominent televangelists of the time, like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, who were noted for their "hellfire and brimstone" preaching, the Bakkers pursued a more "family friendly" style, investing in an upbeat "feel good" vibe that attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers to their network.

But it was hardly an equal partnership. In keeping with evangelical notions of "male headship", Jimmy Bakker was definitely the star of the show, relegating Tammy to a sidekick role. And even though Tammy had her own show, its title - Tammy's House Party - revealed how even people within the PTL network thought that it was a joke and of little consequence. Moreover, within wider evangelical circles, Tammy Bakker was very much on the outer: other televangelists thought that she was too loud, too brash and showy than was "proper" for a Christian woman.

But this experience of ostracization didn't force Tammy Bakker into complying with the demands and expectations of her peers. Instead, it motivated her to look around and identify with other segments of the community who were likewise marginalised and treated like "outsiders". And so it was that she eventually came to identify with perhaps one of the most unlikely communities of all - the gay community.

At a time when the "AIDS panic" was in full force, when the Reagan administration was refusing to acknowledge AIDS' existence let alone do anything about it, and when other televangelists were loudly proclaiming that AIDS was God's punishment on the gay community, Tammy Bakker decided to use her media presence to send a message of support and solidarity to the gay community.

And so it was that, on an episode of Tammy's House Party, Tammy Bakker interviewed Steve Pieters. He was not only a gay man who had lost his partner to AIDS, he was himself HIV-positive - and he was also not only a Christian, but an ordained Christian minister. They frankly discussed his sexuality and experiences as a gay man and at the end of the segment, Bakker declared: "How sad that we as Christians, who are to be the salt of the earth, we who are supposed to be able to love everyone, are afraid so badly of an AIDS patient that we will not go up and put our arm around them and tell them

that we care."

The impact of Bakker's solidarity with Pieters was enormous. On the one hand, Bakker was overwhelmed by messages from evangelical Christians who had gay children or relatives and who expressed their thanks and appreciation for Bakker's message replacing judgementalism and condemnation with compassion and love. Likewise, many in the gay community came to realise that there was no conflict between their faith and their sexuality, and that it was not the case that all or most or even many Christians were homophobic. Through this most unlikely of agents, a bridge of solidarity and communication had been built between these two previously antagonistic communities.

Today, the Bakker's have a somewhat tarnished reputation - due largely to Jimmy Bakker's conviction and imprisonment in the 1990s for fraud and conspiracy. And while the television empire they built has long since collapsed into the dust, Pieters (who is still alive, one of the world's oldest long-term HIV survivors) and other members of the gay community in the US still remember with profound thanksgiving, the gift of solidarity and hope which Tammy Bakker extended to them.

Tammy Bakker may have been many things in her life - but in this moment, she was most certainly Christ-like, whose compassion for the ostracised of his own time shocked the morally upright and righteous of his day. And as the culture wars continue to swirl around us, we would do well to follow her unlikely example of compassion, paying less attention to the rights and wrongs of the various arguments, and more attention to the humanity that is caught up in, and dehumanised by, the abuse and violence of the "culture wars".

Worship This Sunday

A reminder that this Sunday worship will be held at HUC at 10am. This will be the final of the combined services we have held with our friends and neighbours at RUC through January.

A Reminder About COVID-19

You may have seen in recent weeks a number of news stories about an upsurge in COVID-19 infections and an increase in the rate of hospitalisations that have occurred as a result. There have also been members at HUC who, in recent times, have tested positive to COVID.

It appears that a number of sub-strains of the Omicron variant have emerged, and that these are considerably more infectious than previous variants. In particular, they appear to target the elderly and the immuno-compromised, who make up the vast bulk of recent admissions to hospital.

Please give thought to getting a booster vaccine shot if it's been more than six months since your last shot, and/or to taking necessary precautions in social situations in which there are likely to be large numbers of people in a confined area.

Blessings,

Brendan



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