

By LYNNE MELCOMBE

I know you. We haven't met before, but I know you well. At least a part of you.

We grew up together, that part of you, and I. Waded through childhood and adolescence side by side before following diverging paths, paths which would cross, periodically, reminding us of where we've been and where we're going.

You are an extremist — an angry terrorist, a righteous fundamentalist, a religious zealot. You are the omniscient being who sees things in black and white. You have taken your pain and converted it into anger against ... whatever. You know with god-like certainty what must be destroyed, and with what it must be replaced.

It doesn't much matter whether you declare yourself against abortion or patriarchy, whether you would condemn all pick-pockets to the gallows, or replace the tower of Western medicine with a healing place. All that matters is that you have all the answers in a way that the rest of us cannot have — unless we agree with you.

This is not to say that you are ignorant. On the areas of your zeal, you can cite chapter and verse. Your information is sound. And to those who will listen you offer it abundantly, earnestly, and for free. Evangelists do not expect payment for spreading their gospel.

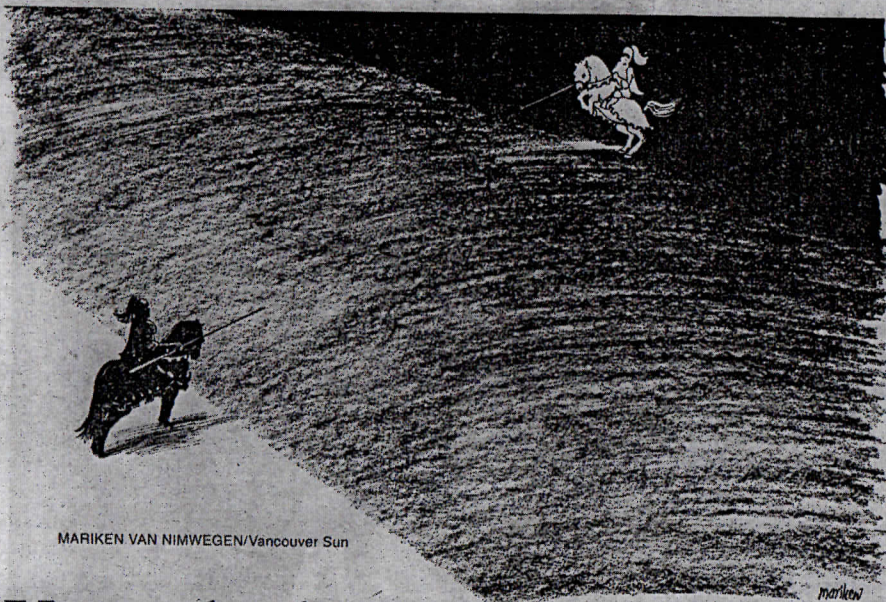
At least not in cash.

But you do exact a price. All of your knowledge comes with the expectation that, once your disciples have spent adequate time absorbing your parables, they will share the fire that burns in your gut.

You wait for this, sometimes patiently, other times not. If they resist passively, you see hope in continuing to educate them. If they resist actively, or accept what you offer discriminately, you shun them.

You are not a crazed cultist who leads his followers into mass suicide, leaving the rest of us asking: How? Why?

You are my brother, my aunt, my friend. You truly care about me and wish for me the



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We each choose our sides, but balance is what really matters

same peace that you have found.

But, for me, the path to destroying anything is not the path to peace. It's a road I've been down, and retreated back along. But it was a journey on which I learned.

On that trip, I learned that good and bad are not personified in things and systems, be they social customs, approaches to health care, forms of governments, or economic systems. These things are inanimate. They have only the qualities we give them by the way we use them.

Eliminating money or censorship, criminals or abortionists, will not eliminate evil. Evil does not dwell in things or systems, it resides in people. Even saints can be totalitarian, while the most irredeemable sociopath carries the germ of good he was

born with buried in his core.

Neither does good live in the things and systems people create, or in the professions they choose. Con artists sell snake oil equally as often in pharmacies as in health-food stores.

It's your inability to see this that frightens me — your insistence that all loggers are tree-killers, each death criminal unless chosen by your god, all censorship an open door to repression, every condom a free pass to purgatory.

It scares me because no matter how reassuring the structure of zealotry can be, no matter how seductive fundamentalism appears in its simplicity, no matter whether the roots of extremism are planted to the left or right of the line that you perceive dividing black from white, choosing sides

without ongoing consideration for the changing factors influencing every game is an abdication of responsibility.

There is no greater responsibility that humans have, I believe, than seeking balance. But balance is not constant. It shifts with the wind and the time of day. It lives in the middle of a thick fog through which we sometimes see — clearly, briefly — before the mist rises again to obscure our view. It's neither easy to achieve, not to know, in any absolute sense, whether what has been achieved is right or wrong.

I wish that I could make you see this. But that's simply the voice of my own fundamentalism. It's a voice I tried to leave behind when you and I parted company, a voice that makes itself heard each new time I encounter you.

If I've truly learned that there is no way for any of us to know if we are right, then I must reject that voice and accept that my path is no better than yours. It's just different.

Before we go our separate ways again, though, I feel a need to thank you. Because, although I resist your fanaticism I know that, in a broad sense, it's useful and important.

Without those of you who would drag the rest of us, kicking and screaming, into the future, we would stand paralysed, unable to move forward because none would run the risk of riding point.

Without those who would lock our feet in chains, perhaps we would never stop and consider what those risks are.

Without those who pioneer the frontier, as much as those who pull up the rear, how could any of us ever define the boundaries of our beliefs for ourselves?

It's been nice running into you again. You've reminded me of places I've been and never been, reacquainted me with a part of myself that I deny sometimes. Despite the areas on which we argue — on which you bait me into choosing sides as I insist I won't, on which I take a position simply to prove I won't be bullied — I believe that you have a strong mind and a good heart, and that we share common ground.

Perhaps some day we'll figure out where that ground lies and stand there for a while together. ♦

Lynne Melcombe is a Port Moody writer. (Douglas Todd is on vacation.)

RELIGION/ETHICS