



## **The Lisbon Earthquake Two hundred and fifty years on Lord Sutherland of Houndwood KT FBA**

**1 November 2005**

It is the 1st of November, it's All Saints Day, and that will be relevant, but this is 2005. On the 1st of November 1755, 250 years ago, there was a cataclysmic event in Lisbon that really affected in most dramatic ways, I believe, European sensibilities and sensitivities, and that spread to the New World and beyond.

The topic was settled before the terrible year we've had, with its string of catastrophes: the tsunami, the Katrina, and of course now the terrible earthquake in Pakistan. But I suppose the terrible year means I don't need visual aids, I don't need representations, you all know far too well now, and far too graphically from reports in the press and on television, what happens when there's a terrible event of this kind.

The reason for thinking about it, well, it was 250 years ago and I am an academic and I know round numbers, and that all seems to fit, but on top of that, I think there are actually some lessons. One of the most interesting things that will occur to you is that human beings haven't changed very much. The events vary, but the responses of human beings to the event don't seem to be radically different 250 years on. In a whole variety of ways this is true.

But let me start with a marvellous eyewitness account which spells out, in clear prose, just what happened. I'm going to read this, and it'll take a minute or two, but I think it's worthwhile, just to impress on you what someone experienced who was going through the process on that day in Lisbon 250 years ago. He writes:

"It was on the morning of this fatal day between the hours of nine and ten that I was set down in my apartment, just finishing a letter, when the table I was writing on began to tremble with a gentle motion, which rather surprised me as I could not perceive a breath of wind stirring. The whole house then began to shake, from the very foundations, and there grew a strange and frightful kind of noise underground resembling the hollow, distant rumble of thunder. All this passed in less than a minute. Upon this, I threw down my pen and started to my feet, and was instantly stunned with the most horrid crash, as if every edifice in the city had tumbled down at once. The house I was in shook with such violence that the upper stories immediately fell, and though my apartment, which was on the first floor, did not then share the same fate, yet everything was thrown out of its place in such a manner that it was with no small difficulty that I kept my feet, and expected nothing less than to be crushed to death. As the walls continued rocking to and fro in the frightfullest manner, opening in several places, large stones falling down on every side from the cracks, and the ends of most of the rafters starting out from the roof, I hastened out of the house and through the narrow streets, where buildings were either down or were continually falling, and climbed over the ruins of St Paul's Church to get to the riverside [ a sensible thing to do, you might think], where I thought I might find safety. Here, I found a prodigious concourse of people of both sexes, of all ranks and conditions, among whom I observed some of the principal canons of the patriarchal church in their purple robes, several priests who had run down from the altars in their sacerdotal vestments in the midst of celebrating mass, ladies half dressed and some without shoes."

Now, that's the authentic detail about which the interrogator or the reporter says, gosh, this man was looking at this.

"...some of the ladies without their shoes. All these were on their knees at prayers with the terrors of death in their countenances, everyone striking his breast and crying out incessantly "misericordia meu deus"? and in the midst of our devotions, the second great shock came on and completed the ruin of those buildings which had already been shattered. There then followed a large body of water, rising up as it were

like a mountain. It came foaming and roaring and rushed towards the shore with such impetuosity that we all immediately ran for our lives as fast as possible. Many were actually swept away, until a second wave followed, and a third shock.”

To that was added, in ways that maybe will stir your memories, perhaps more of the Katrina response than what happened in New Orleans:

“As it grew dark, another scene, itself little less shocking than those already described. The whole city appeared in a blaze, and thus it continued burning for six days together without intermission or the least attempt made to stop its progress.”

And finally, even though it might seem incredible to us, our witness supposes that that might be so. He says:

“What would appear incredible to you is the fact that, less public and notorious, a gang of hardened villains were busily employed in setting fire to those buildings which stood some chance of escaping the general destruction round about. I cannot conceive what could have induced them to this hellish work, except to add to the horror and confusion that they might by this means have the better opportunity of plundering with security.”

A very precise and accurate picture. His conclusions about the extent of the destruction in Lisbon, the whole number that perished, including those who were burned or afterwards crushed to death whilst digging the ruins, is supposed on the lowest calculation to amount to more than 60,000.

“This extensive and opulent city is now nothing but a vast heap of ruins. The rich and the poor are at present upon a level. Some thousands of families which but the day before had been easy in their circumstances were now scattered to the fields, wanting every conveniency of life and finding none able to relieve them.”

Well, the comparisons are probably jostling for attention in your mind. That’s not the primary point of the lecture, but it’s a coincidental way of emphasising our consciousness and the then consciousness. What struck people dramatically was the sheer randomness of these events. They came unannounced, out of the blue, and although the thought that they were random preoccupied and worried alike theologians, scientists and philosophers, nonetheless it was the randomness that first struck. How do we respond to such randomness is the question. It was raised then, and of course even more so is it raised now, but the clarity of the prose and the sharpness of the eye of the witness quickly revives our awareness of the more recent reports. I have to say, this is a model piece of reporting, and in my bleaker moments I tend to think that the equivalent of reporting would be camera, team, bright young person with a microphone, shoving their microphone into someone’s face and saying, “Well, when this building fell on top of you, how did you feel?”! That tends to be the pattern of reporting now, whereas this report that we have actually tells you in some detail what happened and what it was like.

The extent of the earthquake became apparent over the subsequent weeks and months. There was huge destruction in Morocco, its impact was felt in Algeria, in many centres throughout the whole Iberian Peninsula, in Bordeaux in France, and shocks were reported from Strasbourg right through to the Scilly Isles, so it was a very dramatic, massive event, not just focused, although this was the intellectual focus and I guess the focus for understanding was Lisbon, but it was a very widespread event.

I’m not quite so convinced of the claims from Derbyshire, and I have to say from Scotland, that they felt it a bit too. I just felt there was a bit of climbing on the bandwagon going there, but it is actually certain and well recorded that large waves hit the English and Irish coasts by about two o’clock on that day, and they continued right across the Atlantic and hit Jamaica at six o’clock that day, so it was a massive, massive event.

So much for the description. Why recall it 250 years later? Is this just an act of masochism, self-indulgence of some kind? Well, I can give you three reasons. The first is the remarkable and the widespread populist response throughout the whole population, the response of assertion and counter-assertion as to what such an event means. Of course people do want to know, what does it mean, what’s its significance. The second, beyond the general population of asking that question, what does this mean? is the engagement of the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau, Cant, Benjamin Franklin. The major intellects of the age weren’t struck dumb. Intellectuals seldom are. The words flowed, but they were arrested in their thinking by this event. And the third reason is that the issues debated took a form that is for us I think distinctly contemporary, and I’ll try and show you this as I go through what followed this dramatic event in 1755.

News spread pretty quickly. Maybe they didn't have television and satellite links and so on, but one Rachel Lowe reports of learning of the earthquake in London on the Friday, that is, six days later. She wasn't the first; she was simply reporting that she had heard on the street from friends that this dreadful thing had happened. A chap called Captain Augustus Harvey, who later became Earl of Bristol, was in Malta, nine days later, and the news reached him then, the news of the fateful earthquake at Lisbon. He interestingly, again in a letter and diary, gave one of the commonest of responses:

"These are frightful events," he said, "and ought to inspire reflections that should mend the lives of individuals in order not to deserve such chastisements from providence."

Is that what they were? That was the first thought of many, many, many. A reaction like that, we've got to mend our ways and not deserve such chastisement, would have been greeted with a frowning nod of approval by one Mrs Delaney. I think Mrs Delaney was the sort of character who, even when she was approving, frowned. Anyway, she would have a frowning nod of approval – you get the sense. She hoped that those of pious outlook would be strengthened in their pursuit after immortal happiness. But of those who did not show such piety, she had felt a particular venom, for a whole range of them, but particularly, and this is appropriate here in London, for those wretches at Whites, Whites of course being one of the very fashionable clubs, then as now, towards the West End of the city. She suspected they would just read the newspaper and this would be a paragraph like any other paragraph, what they call these days I suppose disaster fatigue. The wretches of Whites, Mrs Delaney had her knife out for them.

Interestingly, as an academic I can't resist this. I've teased a colleague who is Master of Peterhouse. This was a letter written from Peterhouse College in Cambridge, where the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge, three months later, on the 20th of January 1756, just three months from the date wrote with some satisfaction:

"We have been perfectly quiet here. Nor have I heard any certain information of the least irregularity amongst the scholars. It has rather become fashionable to be decent."

In other words, they did mend their ways, and the Vice-Chancellor was pleased!

Well, we might also note with a smile one reaction. This was from Horace Walpole, and was in 1762, seven years later. Horace Walpole noted one of the changes that have been wrought, perhaps one of the minor changes, nonetheless changes, was in public life and behaviour. He lamented, "We have never recovered masquerades since the earthquakes of Lisbon." All sort of frothy things went out of fashion. Most of them came back in, but masquerades apparently didn't. Since I'm not a great fan of fancy dress, I don't mind that at all.

But from Lisbon to London and across Europe, religious messages were drawn from the various scenes of destruction. Prophecies and visions in Portugal were recalled and given relevance. For example, there was a nun called Maria Joanna. She had had a vision of Christ, who had made it plain to her that he was distinctly displeased with the behaviour in Portugal, especially in Lisbon, and they'll pay for it was what the vision told the nun. This vision became known – she reported it in 1754, and although she died in March 1755, of course when the earthquake happened, people leapt on this story and said, "Ah-ha, we were warned! How awful!" Voltaire, many words later actually, pointed out something a bit unfair about this – what was it about Lisbon? There we were, this was happening in Lisbon, and we were still dancing in Paris – dancing was a slightly risqué thing in those days. Her prayers alone apparently had stemmed the earthquake from happening but when she died in 1755 there was nothing holding them back.

The Bishop of London weighed into the fray. The Archbishop of Canterbury, who was perhaps more moderate in his interpretation than John Wesley. Pombal, the politician in Portugal, was given the job of reconstructing the city, and made a great job of it. He was irritated because of the ways in which a number of the Jesuits were putting about that this was a fate that had fallen on us from God. People don't like randomness. They want to have a story and an explanation to tie the event down.

Of course there were some people who got red faces because they jumped to conclusions too quickly. There were a number of Protestants here in England who were happy and slightly smug, and can't we sometimes be smug in the face of even Katrina? There was a bit of smugness about that occasionally in the British press... But certainly then, some of the Protestants here were rather smug, and pointed out, very self-righteously, that amidst all the destruction and ruin of Roman Catholic churches in the earthquake, the English chapel in Lisbon was still standing, so there! However, it was immediately pointed out that the same was true of several brothels in the red light district of the city! Some sceptics took great delight in pointing out, and this is why I stressed it was All Saints Day, it was a public holiday, and they had a day off, but they were supposed to spend certainly the early part of it in prayer. Of course everyone who

did attend to their religious duties, they were all in one or other of the churches that collapsed on top of them, whereas those ragamuffins who were either lying late in bed, or more likely, were off up in the hills having a picnic, they survived, and this was somehow thought rather unjust of God, or perhaps he hadn't targeted the whole thing very well at all.

Was it luck that settled the matter of who lived and who died? People were very reluctant to think of luck and randomness. I can give you another example from the same period. In 1750, no less than five earthquakes were recorded here in London, in 1750, just five years before, so there was consternation, gosh, this is getting a bit regular, a bit often, how do we explain this? What do they mean? Is it the fact that we've done something wrong? In fact, one of the better attempts at explanation, that reassured people, was, first, it wasn't believed that London was the victim of anything so awful. How could it happen to us? But then when the truth was inescapable, and these earthquakes recurred throughout the year, it was said reassuringly that Sir Isaac Newton had known all along that this was going to happen. That was a way of tying it down and giving it, if not an explanation I can make, nonetheless somebody knew, so there is a rationale – it's not random, it's not luck.

I take that sentence, Sir Isaac Newton had known that this was going to happen, to illustrate a main point I want to make in this lecture: the desire we all have for some kind of explanation, even for the most random of events. Explanation today of course, we always want to be of a scientific kind, but I think that's a refinement of a very basic human desire to de-randomise things, to domesticate them, to bring them into our area of discourse. So that we can say something about it that's not "Oh my God!" which is of course one way of reacting but does nothing to explain or domesticate it. This is a very basic thing in human beings. Scientific explanation is now the kind of explanation that has the highest status, and that really does pull what may otherwise seem random or strange into our area of "we can do something about it" – (a) we can understand it, and (b) we might possibly be able to do something about it. Interestingly, that is possibly true in the case of the tsunami because we can develop warning systems, but it is not so obviously true in the case of the most recent dreadful earthquake. So, if you think of the earthquake in Tokyo at the beginning of last century, they drew very, very clear lines of action from that, and the building of houses and buildings in Japan is on a very different basis as a result of an explanation of what had happened, not just a random event, but a programme of action that followed it.

But for the 18th Century Londoners, even if they didn't know what had caused these five earthquakes, it was reassuring to be able to say Sir Isaac Newton knew that it was going to happen. It was the process of reducing the random and the unfamiliar and the frightening to its place within our conceptual domesticity and we do this all the time. Not a bad thing, but you need to beware. It's a pretty basic instinct, and it may be the case that not all of our explanations are as good as they might be. That's the first point about these five earthquakes in London.

The second point, such an appeal was at least in part scientific. It was still to a source of authority, but think, this is 1750 we're talking about, and the appeal to the authority was not immediately to the church, to the priest, to the theologian, it was to a scientist, and that tells you something about the shift that had gone on since Newton had lived and died, the shift in the place that that kind of explanation now had in the way in which we construct our picture of the world round about us. It's a signpost on the road of human generally, but certainly European intellectual development. People were beginning to think in different ways, and this identified quite how that was.

Of course, the name Newton was by then used in a symbolic role. For Newton, read the power and influence of the kind of rationalism that we associate with his name, and we associate with science. Remember Pope's famous lines: "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night. God said, "Let Newton be," and all was light." So, it's (a) the wish to find a way of domesticating what it is that we're experiencing, bringing it in within our conceptual range, and (b), historically, the key place of scientific explanation that had developed by this time and symbolised through the name of Newton. There are all sorts of other ways of doing it, but that's how it was happening, and that is one good reason for remembering what happened 250 years ago. There was a junction point that this particular event symbolises. I don't think overnight the whole thing changed, but it accelerated a process that was going on.

Arguments at the time surrounded the question of evil. The populist response was really a form of what was God up to when such suffering took place, because if your assumption is in a personal God who protects the individual, you've got a problem. There was a fairly well known, and I hope you haven't heard it too often before, story of a poor man from Scotland called McTaggart. He was actually quite an intellectual, and he died, and he turned up after death at the doors of Hell, and he suddenly realised that his previous

scepticism, agnosticism and atheism wasn't doing him a lot of good, so he addressed God and said, "Oh God, we didn't understand what it was you required of us. It wasn't made sufficiently plain to us. It wasn't apparent to us. There were problems with the minister, the priest and the church. We didn't know what was going to happen." To which God leans down and replies, "Weel McTaggart, ye ken noo!"

Certainly, in the responses of the people, there was a, "Well gosh, we didn't really understand. We weren't quite aware," but some were making the most of these calamities – and they were interpreting them. Now, you may smile, but I tell you, if you look up the web today, and the stuff that's on it about the tsunami, about Katrina, the hurricane, and I haven't had the courage to check on what's being said about the dreadful earthquake in Pakistan, but certainly on those two events, round the religious spectrum, for three or four different religions, including the ones that are strongest in this country and the ones that are strongest in the Middle East, there are those who are taking this line – this is a punishment, and they'll quote from their scriptures, just as they did in the 18th Century. So, smile as we might, this is alive and part of our reality.

The populist cry then was God is vindicated, but of course there are at least two difficulties. The first is that the pious, who were at their devotions, were in the wrong place, and the impious were out having a party up in the hills. The second, more common now than then, is that God is looking after us and there must be an explanation because he cares for us. But that doesn't explain the suffering of innocent children, because although we may be pretty responsible for our past acts, small children are not, which is why images of that kind have such an impact on us when we see them in times of disaster. So there are counter-arguments, but that was the way the argument was going on both sides.

Goethe recorded how as a six-year-old boy this event made a huge impact on his consciousness when he learned about it, and so, again, as today, the impact was there. Kant, before, still writing his great philosophical works, he was stimulated as a good academic, and he wrote three papers on the causes of earthquakes. There was that kind of spinout as well. People were looking for explanations in very practical ways that were scientific. Some of them were a bit bizarre by our standards, but the attempt was there. Benjamin Franklin had the same interest. So major intellectual figures were trying to find explanations that fitted in within their general ethos. Of course Voltaire, from his exile in Switzerland, exploded into words with a poem titled "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster or an Examination of the Axiom "All is Well". His target was Alexander Pope, because Pope had been regarded as the primary expositor of the view that whatever is is right, because this is God's world, so whatever happens must be right however difficult it is to fit it in to that picture. Voltaire continued later with *Candide*, but even in this first poem, which was an explosion of anger: "All's well ye say," and this is directed at Pope and others, "All's well ye say, and all is necessary. Think ye this universe had been worse without this hellish gulf in Portugal?" And in *Candide*, ironically, richly, provocatively, he takes Bishop Pangloss and the others into Lisbon on the day of the earthquake. They'd just been shipwrecked. They thought that was nearly the end of the world, and they'd been saying, "What a relief!" Of course, where did they land up was on the shores of Lisbon, on presumably the 31st of October 1755 and they were there on the 1st of November.

Bishop Pangloss, who was the sort of weak and in some ways pathetic exponent of the view that this is the best of all possible worlds, he tried it on. He said, "This earthquake is no new thing. The city of Lima in America experienced similar shocks last year. The same causes, the same effects. It is doubtless a vein of sulphur underground all the way from Lima to Lisbon." Now, there's a bit of "John Fortune and John Bird's" (constructing explanations that are increasingly implausible) in that, and indeed, this wasn't appreciated either by his companions or by a passing priest. He even suggested, "Nothing could have been better than that this should happen. This is the best of all possible worlds, because if there's a volcano under Lisbon, at least it's not somewhere else spoiling the lives of other people." Now that's really pushing to the limits of rationality, the ways in which you can intellectually front up to this sort of thing! "For if all is as good as can be, there can have been neither a fall of man nor a divine punishment."

Voltaire was rapier-like in his satire, particularly in *Candide*, which of course is now regarded as one of the great works. He was attacking what he regarded as the facile optimism that you find in Pope, and behind him of course lay the figure of Ly, a great philosopher, but Ly very much identified with "this is the best of all possible worlds", that kind of optimism. You know the definition, don't you, of optimism and pessimism? Optimism is the belief that this is the best of all possible worlds; pessimism is the belief that that might be true! One of my favourite Scottish poets defined Scotch pessimism as "through a glass darkly", but you'll get the reference to that.

Rousseau responded to Voltaire, very angry, and said, "Voltaire, what you're doing is you're giving us a

completely negative picture. You're giving no explanation. It's all wholly negative in its outlook and, worst of all, you're depriving us of hope for the future." Rousseau, a great figure in the French Enlightenment, didn't try to justify the ways of God to man and give an explanation for why this earthquake was perhaps all right if seen in the most appropriate way. Rather he said that what we must do, and he changed Christian doctrine here in his approach, is instead of assuming that there was an original sin and a fall and we're all tainted with this, so what happens to us is only our due, he took the view that everyone is born good and potentially with perfection in them, but that we gradually lose that through our own free choices and actions, and that continues through life. This is a big theological shift, and it gave the basis for his whole theory of education and theory of society, that he wanted to retain the idea that there are still choices that will affect our future, and these choices have to do with how we live and the ways in which we develop ourselves.

That was the picture of (a) the populist response, and (b) the major intellects of Europe, taking one another to task. Even David Hume up in Scotland, he wrote to his good friend Adam Smith, who was living just across the water of the River Forth at the time, and Smith was in the backwater of Kirkcaldy – well, maybe it wasn't a backwater, but that's where he was living. Smith kept asking Hume, "Tell me which books are fashionable and what I should read," and so on, and he actually sent a glowing testimonial for Voltaire's *Candide*. So that's the kind of interaction, and he was picking this up as an appropriate way to respond to this major event, though he didn't comment, I have to stress, on the actual earthquake at Lisbon. But Hume raised a very fundamental question, quoting from Epicurus, and this in his dialogues concerning natural religion. The question is this, he says: "If there is evil in the world and if there is suffering, either God doesn't know, in which case he's not omniscient, or if he knows and doesn't do anything about it, he is not omnipotent, or if he knows and could do something about it and doesn't, he is not all loving. What kind of being is this God?" and he thought there was plenty of evidence of such suffering in the world. So there was a huge debate about fundamental belief going on, and much of it was set alight again by the Lisbon earthquake.

What conclusions could I draw from this? I think the conclusions are that in the connection between what happened and the reaction of human beings to it, we still have all the same problems, intellectual problems and belief problems, and we still have certain consonances with the way in which people thought and reacted, down to the fact that some people saw this as a great opportunity for looting, robbery and much worse. I pick out these consequences with four or five different words. I've mentioned these, but I'll just stress them. The first is randomness. We find it very difficult to cope with randomness. One-off events very, very much frighten, worry us, and we need some kind of reassurance. What we tend very widely to go for in the secular parts of our society is explanation that is scientific. So, randomness and the need to domesticate that, as I put it, randomness and the wish to incorporate what seems to stick out like a soured element into our conceptual scheme. Along with that, and this showed itself at the time, and if you look up the web and see reactions of believers and unbelievers to these awful events in our own last year, an incredible certainty that some have in responding to such events.

There's a great example of this in Sinclair Lewis' novel *Elmer Gantry*. Now, you may not have read the novel. You may have seen the film – Burt Lancaster in it, I think. Anyway, *Elmer Gantry*, it was about religion in the 30s in the USA, and Elmer Gantry was one of these super preachers that you get on television on Sunday mornings in the States now. When Elmer was at preachers' college, he came across a fellow student called Eddie Fislinger – now there's a snake of a name, Eddie Fislinger! What Lewis says about Eddie is, "Although Latin, maths, grammar and poetry had all raised problems for Eddie, there had never been a time since the age of 12 when Eddie had not known how the Lord God would act or why the Lord God had done this and not that." A kind of certainty...you've come across it, but the kind of total certainty, which, if you're religious, I would have thought would be a bit impious, but that's what you find. With that kind of thing goes certainty of judgement, and so alongside certainty, can I float a phrase from David Hume? David Hume's great phrase for what he was offering that what people have picked up is "moderate scepticism". He wasn't an excessive man, even in his scepticism – he said "moderate scepticism". But of course what that is doing, if you turn it on its head, it is saying, just consider whether all your certainties are as well justified as they might be.

This in Lisbon focused on blast and counter-blast. Voltaire was pretty certain. This is not confined to believers. Unbelievers shoot back with huge certainties. In the same way, there were people who were producing quasi-practical explanations straight away. In fact, Rousseau, just to give you an example, said, "Well, actually it is partly your own fault, and that's for living in cities." You can see why – because the bricks fell down, the stones fell down, but there's a hint of a certain kind of green excessivism there, isn't

there? Some of the things that are said about what happened in New Orleans, you would think your last car journey was personally responsible for the global warming that had brought this about. I'm sure it's relevant, and I'm not against looking at global warming as a major, major issue, but sometimes the certainty of the one line explanations and solutions do worry me, just as the certainty of some of the religious fundamentalists' responses equally worry me.

Hume's reaction, his moderate scepticism, had various elements to it. One was that he was very critical of the idea of a personal God. He said, "Some of my best friends are believers," and that was true. But what he was critical of was the assumption that you could find evidence for a belief in a personal god who would look after you, whatever befell, and that that gave you the right to draw ethical rules about how other people should live. This is one of the fallouts from the huge debates going on at that time in the Enlightenment, and the focus they were given by this event, that a separation of ethics and religion began to take place. Folks started looking for other ways in which they could begin to derive moral principles, moral views, moral values and so on, that were perhaps a little less certain, direct and assured. I think that's one of the things that a random event does to you, it upsets your way of thinking. One of the things that it should do to us, and I'm sure it does, is say, well, where in our conceptual scheme, where in our way of assuming we understand the world, does this fit, and what does it do to planned, ethical living? Because of these things, the rain falls on the just and the unjust, that's one of the colloquial sayings, and if that is true, does that mean you take the view of Ivan Karamazov and there are no moral values that are sustainable throughout life? His solution was to live life to the full and dash the cup to the ground at the age of 30. That was a conclusion that some drew from the series of arguments, discussions and intellectual developments that took place.

My conclusions I suppose are slightly more modest, and modern scepticism is certainly one of them, but I'll just leave you with a Latin phrase: "Sub specia eternitatis". Now, if you want to know what that means, I've written a book about it. I don't think this is the time to start telling you what's in the book in detail, but I think I can sum it up in a very nice story, which one of my great mentors used to tell, and I could imagine it was about him. It was about a rather awkward bachelor, grown up, visiting his sister and brother-in-law for lunch one Sunday, stumbling into the family sitting room. Sister and brother-in-law had to go and finish preparing the lunch for the other guests who were coming, and he was left with the three kids. Now if you're not used to kids, and you sit down, and they're eyeing you, what do you say? What do you do? Well, he ran an old line. He turned to the 12-year-old girl, and he said, "Jane, when you grow up, what would you like to be?" It's a good conversation opener... She said, "Oh well, actually I've been thinking about this. I think I would like to be a doctor or a nurse, and this is because I want to help people be well and I want to allow them to live life to the full and when they're sick, to tend to their needs." "Oh yes, that's terrific." And then he turned, and there was Cedric, sitting in the big chair in the corner, but not visible because he was behind the Financial Times. "Cedric, what would you like to be when you grow up?" Cedric put the paper down, tipped down his specs, and he said, "Well, I want to go into the Stock Exchange and make lots and lots of money." Up went the paper, "I don't want any more of this conversation", and that was Cedric. Four year old Cathy was in the corner. In his last attempt at conversation, he said, "Cathy, have you thought what you would like to be when you grown up?" Cathy said, "Well, I'd like to be God, but I think it's too late to change now." Now, that was a child who understood completely what it means to live sub specia eternitatis. You do not assume that you have the standpoint and the vantage point of God. A great deal of what comes out as total certainty, and indeed some of the world views we have to deal with, religious fundamentalism round the clock, whether it's the New Right in America, whether it's certain forms of Islam, or whether it's to be found in the wars between Sikhs and Hindus, whatever – it's because people assume that they see things from God's point of view. But the wee girl Cathy, she had it right. Well, I would like to be God, but it's too late to change now, and I have to get on with, provisionally, being as good a human being as I can.

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