

The Man on the Hill: Working for Social and Political Change

Liz Crow

Context

The Man on the Hill is a story of a man who wants to be useful and sets out to collect the sorrows of the world that he might set the people free.

In my work as an artist-activist, I use creative work for social and political change. During an extended performance set in a converted church (Crow 2012), a stream of visitors told me their sorrows while, in stained glass soaring above me, a tall, benign figure stood, steady and steadying, his hand raised in blessing, to his side a rounded green hill and sturdy tree.¹ Intrigued by the way the images held me, I turned to writing as inquiry (Richardson 1994) to explore their meaning, recognising them as a metaphor for affective aspects of social justice work.

The rhetorical parabolic form, with its intention to impart moral lessons (Burchfield 1996) and subvert the status quo (Champion 1989), became my genre of re-presentation. In its magical-realism, *The Man on the Hill* is yet rooted in human experience (Spindler 2008), using the concreteness of story events as a bridge to abstract ideas (Boucher 1977), to tell a story of how best to be, and to be effective, in working for social and political change.

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¹ For more on the performance of *Bedding Out*, direct your web browser to: <http://www.roaring-girl.com/work/bedding-out/>

The Man on the Hill

Long, long ago, when the world was a dark place, a man looked around and all he could see was war and famine, wrath and greed, and the people cowed and blasted by all the sorrows of the world. “The world is a place of darkness and its sorrows are wide,” said the man. “If I could only collect the sorrows to myself, then I might set the people free and they would be filled with light.”

And since he was a good man and wanted to be useful, he left behind him the everyday of his life and climbed long and hard with the vigour of youth to the very top of a grassy green hill where the sun shone warm and scented breezes blew and the ground was dusted with forget-me-nots. And there before him lay the whole wide world and the man cast his gaze across marshlands and desert sands, mountains with snow-topped peaks and wind-swept canyons, over forest and tundra and all the places of the world where people came together to create their sorrows.

And he watched the people buffeted by storms of greed and the lust of nations, of governments gone bad and turned upon their people, of borders springing up to contain and expel, and neighbours turned into strangers. And he saw the whole foolishness of humanity, of lives lost and lives shrunk to a wisp of what they might have been, and all the sorrows of the world laid out before him.

And from his place on the hill, he put out his hands and he received them, breathing the sadness into the very heart of him, so that others need not.

The people of the world looked up to the man and were thankful for his sacrifice. There was great rejoicing and people embraced across borders, holding the light in their faces and each other in their hearts. They saw that he must be a very wise man to give up his chance of joy for them. And so they set out from all across the world offering up their sorrows and setting down their gifts of gratitude at the base of the hill, until the man did not want for fruits of the forest and cool spring water, firewood for the cold nights or the softness of robes to shelter from the heat of the noonday sun.

And the man felt useful as he saw the people filled with light and so he stayed sitting upon the hill beneath a dome of sky, cradling the sorrows of the world in his hands and hoping the people of the world might find better ways of living.

And when the sorrows overwhelmed him, as sometimes they did, he sang them out from the top of his hill and they rippled across the land where they filled the ears and the minds of the people of the world. But the people could find no beauty in his lament, only the deepest of sadness, and so they beseeched

him to silence for fear he might sear the sorrows into their souls.

And for a time, the world was a lighter place and the people lived better for it. But just as old people die and babies are born, stars light the night sky and the world keeps turning, the years passed, and the man's robes wore thin and his hair turned long and white and tumbled as water down the hillside, and the people of the world began to notice that their sadness was replaced not by joy, but emptiness. In time, texture slipped from life and great art faded from canvasses, food became dust upon people's tongues and stories from the ancestors stuck in throats that had become dry.

And people complained of the man on the hill, "He said he would collect the sorrows of the world and replace them with light, but all we feel is the emptiness he left behind." And so, as generations passed, and lightness was lost, they turned their backs to the man on the hill and resumed their sorrows for themselves.

The man's own sorrows sank a little deeper at the unkindness of the people. But he remained a good man and wished still to be useful and he turned his thoughts to how much worse the sorrows would be without his sacrifice. And so he stayed on top of his hill where the sun shone hard until the grass grew parched and breezes whipped up clouds of dust, and the people's sorrows replaced their gifts as his meat and drink.

And as aeons rolled by, the man saw that the people did not learn but only practised the sufferings of all the people gone before them. In the harshness of sun and the weariness of grief, the man grew old as the hill, his robes bleached to the colour of dust, until the people of the world could see him no more against the dirt of the hill. And, in time, they forgot all about him.

And when the man saw that there was no end to the people's sorrows, they rose in him until he felt he might drown and they brimmed and fell from his eyes and down the grooves of his cheeks to pool upon the hard-baked earth. The years of sorrows fell deep in aching release, running over the shoulder of the hill and to the valley below, where they streamed and ribboned and wound across the world, until flatlands were flooded by sorrow and soon the man knew he must stop for his tears might drown the world.

And so the man turned inwards and did not see that, in his falling tears, he wept a river, which wound a course through all the wrongs and foolishness of the world. And he did not see how it sparkled in sunlight and splashed over rocks, and nourished the land through which it passed. He did not see that it brought woodland glades of dappled sunlight, reed banks for nesting birds, and liquid cool to desert sands.

Yet the river flowed on. And it reached a faraway land, where the sorrows

had lain deep, for the earth was cracked and dry, and dust dried throats and heat burned crops, and the people knew too much of loss and grief. But then came the river, winding its way through the land, and with it came life. And clean cool water quenched the people's thirst and brought shoals of fish to fill their bellies and abundance to their crops. And orchards grew, bending their boughs to the weight of fruit, while children danced in the shallows and the people sang out their joy. And life was good.

But in neighbouring lands was a warlord who disliked the people's joy and soon, in his thirst for power, he waged war upon them and claimed the river as his own. And though the people fought back, for livelihood and life, they were gentle where he was cruel, and they were few where his army was many, and the warlord met soft flesh with cold steel and the people bled for the river that had sustained their children and their children's children as they had believed it would forever more.

And here is the day of reckoning where the warlord's army faces down the people of the land, who will watch the blood of their fallen ones wash crimson downriver, bound to the last of their hopes, whilst sorrow, the deepest and most bitter of all, will rise.

The general orders his army into position. On common ground, knee deep in meadow grass, the people line the riverbanks in one last show, and they know in their souls they are lost.

Ragged breaths. Pounding hearts. The air lives heavy. And time stands still.

Crouched low in tall grass, a small girl sings to herself as she picks ox-eye and clover, weaving them in her hair as a crown. She ups and dances riverwards through lush green pasture, and the people start, and they gasp and cry out. But the child dances a different rhythm and she spins and twirls towards the greatest sorrow of all.

The warlord's face is a gathering storm. His army's readiness flickers, and the people hold their breath.

The mother tries—oh, she tries—to reach her child but the girl is swift and her mother lets out one last cry that sheers like lightning and at the feet of the warlord the child stumbles, throws out her hands, and falls.

And scattered on the ground before her lie flowers from her hair. She reaches out to spread them in her hands, then waters them with tears to break a warlord's heart.

He kneels and faces her, and he gathers flowers, threading them stem to stem as the whole world slows and, mended, he rests them back upon her hair.

And at her crown, a single flower lies loose and the child holds it out in peace. The warlord breathes deep its scent, then smiles a smile of exile while her smile, watery still, swims in his eyes. And as he reaches out to wipe her tears, the soldiers weep for their mothers and the people weep for their losses and each reaches out to wipe away the other's sorrows.

And all this the man watches. And as he watches, he sees the child dissolve more sorrow than in all his years upon the hill. And this time, when he weeps, he weeps for himself, for lifetimes of wrongheadedness when he thought he would heal a world through sorrowing. And through the long velvet black of night, where life shrinks to a pinprick, enlarges to a universe, his tears water the parched ground, soaking deep into hungry soil. And where they fall, an ash tree, ancient and gnarled as the man himself grows from the earth.

With the rise of the morning star, he dries his tears and reaches up to the ash to chop a bough strong enough to bear his weight. He gathers his tattered robes and long white hair around him and, leaning on his crutch, makes his slow, careful way down from the hill. And where, such lifetimes before, he was a young man who was good and wished to be useful and had climbed the hill steady and sure, this time his steps lurch and falter, yet still he is a good man who is more useful now for he is wise.

And as he nears the river, he sees a group of pilgrims gathered at its banks preparing to bathe. A woman comes towards him, her arms held wide. "Let me help," she says. "You look to be carrying the sorrows of the world."

"And in my foolishness, so have I been," says the man. "But I have learned. I have learned that in holding fast to the sorrows of the world, I only watch them on their course and change not a thing. I have learned that in binding myself to them I cannot feel the wonders that echo large and small across the world, for my sorrow is so deep it leaves no room for joy. I have learned that sorrow must tangle with joy, for the fullness of life lies in their coupling, and in our suffering, we might, each one of us, allow the light of joy to chase the sorrows away."

And the woman helped the man lower slowly into the river, where he bathed away the sorrows of lifetimes and the years fell from him until he was let free once more to live his life anew.

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