

2004-5-2 The Soul of It All

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
on the day when, once again,
the world ends and begins as it does every day,
to worship, to celebrate that we are
and that song and silence, word and wonder
have the power to weave us together in peace.

And so we begin with this invocation:

**May we live fully, love deeply, learn daily and speak truly that we might together leave
the sacred legacy of a better world...**

Sequence:

You full moon up in the sky,
round and pearly;
you dark pupil in a friend's eye,
round, inviting and non-judgmental,
you flowers in a vase, round as the earth,
you embracing arms,
rounding the rough edges of the world,
all of you be for us as preludes
to the roundness of this silence,
which will now for a time circle round us,
moving in a ring from my last word
to my next, moving in our hearts from
the last silence to this one...

silence

Circles of family and friends and strangers,
rounding us all in an embrace,
we claim your presence now by naming
those who surround us even at this moment,
alive in the world or alive in our hearts.
We do so, in silence, or in a whisper of love...

naming

Circle of moon, of eye, of embrace, of earth,
of wheel, of rose, of bowl, of years, join
the circle of our gathering, as now we worship with music....

The First Reading is a poem from *Eugenio Montale*, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975. He is *THE* great Italian poet of the 20th Century. These poems were written in 1948.

Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato
l'animo nostro informe, e a lettere di fuoco
lo dichiari e risplenda come un croco
perduto in mezzo a un polveroso prato

Don't ask me for words that might define
our formless soul, and publish it
in letters of fire, and make it shine resplendent
like a crocus lost in the middle of a dusty field.

Ah! L'uomo che se ne va sicuro
agli altri ed a se stesso amico
e l'ombra sua non cura che la canicola
stampa sopra uno scalcinato muro.

Ah. See that fellow over there, going along
so confidently, a friend to everyone, even himself? He doesn't seem to care if the hot summer
sun pastes his shadow on that crumbling wall over there, does he?

Non domandarci la formula che mondi possa aprirti
se qualche strorta sillaba e secca come un ramo.
Codesto solo oggi possiamo dirti
cio che non siamo, cio che non vogliamo.

So don't ask me for formulas to make it possible for you to open up the world. All I have are a few crooked syllables, dried-up like fallen branches. All I can tell you today is this: What we are *not*. What we do *not* want.

The Second Reading comes from the book, *The Wisdom of No Escape, 1989*, by Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun in the Tibetan tradition who is head of the Gampo Abbey, a monastery for monks and nuns in Ca' Breton, Nova Scotia.

As soon as you begin to believe in something, then you can no longer see anything else. The truth you believe in and cling to makes you unavailable to hear anything new.

Holding on to beliefs limits our experience of life. That doesn't mean that beliefs or ideas or thinking is a problem; the stubborn attitude of having to have things be a particular way, grasping on to our beliefs and thoughts, *these are what* cause the problems. To put it simply, using your belief system this way creates a situation in which you choose...to be dead rather than alive, asleep rather than awake.

You want something to hold on to, you want to say, "Finally I have found it. This is it, and now I feel confirmed and secure and righteous."

But in Buddhism there is a teaching that would seemingly undercut all this, if people would only listen to it. It says, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill the Buddha." This means that if you can find Buddha and say, "It's this way; Buddha is like this," then you had better kill that "Buddha" that you found. Contemplative and mystical Christians, Hindus, Jews, people of all faiths and non-faiths can also have this perspective.

Now we get to the interesting part. How do you do that? Although this approach sounds pretty aggressive, when we talk this way, we're actually talking about the ultimate in non-aggression. People find it quite easy to have beliefs and to hold on to them and to let their whole world be a product of their belief system. They also find it quite easy to attack those who disagree. The harder, more courageous thing, which the hero and the heroine, and the mystic do, is continually to look at one's beliefs straight in the face, honestly and clearly, and then step beyond them. That requires a lot of heart and kindness. It requires being able to touch and know completely, to the core, your own experience, without harshness, without making any judgment. Look into it. Get to know it completely and utterly. In that way it will let go of itself.

Sermon

Some of you may have noticed, over the years, how fascinated I am by languages. All human languages. You have heard me wrestling in this pulpit with the correct pronunciation of

names, or foreign proverbs. I sometimes try and have us sing in different languages, a German Christmas carol, for example, or a Japanese spring song. I often read, or have read for me, the original text of a reading before the English translation is offered. The *sounds* of words in other languages fascinate me. For example, I spent time this week researching how to pronounce things properly in a foreign tongue... the *dots* over the ö's in the name of the Tibetan Buddhist nun whose words you just heard. I am amused by the confusions and the overlaps of languages. I love it that when I say "mere" in Columbus, I am *merely* modifying a noun, but if I am standing on *Krasny Ploshchad* in *Moskva* (that is, Red Square in Moscow), the sound "mir" means both *world* and *peace*. Same basic sound; different meanings.

The meanings of words in all the world's languages spoken, written, or interpreted by gestures are always waltzing around, shifting, playing and fooling us. This quality of language brings me no little joy and amazement.

But, in the end, I've come to feel, over the years, that *all* words, in *every* language, are simply arbitrary. It may be an "oak tree" in English or a "*chene*" in French, but actually, the tree has no name in and of itself. An oak is silent and nameless, as is the maple standing next to it. The sap moving up and down their trunks is not really "sap"... *that's* simply a sound English speakers *assign* to that sticky nourishing stuff. And no actual name clings to the sky... those molecules of oxygen and nitrogen that arch above our pyramid roof here. It's neither heaven or *himmel* nor sky nor *le ciel*... it's just what it is. *All* names for *all* things in *all* languages are simply... arbitrary. The whole world, the whole universe belongs to itself, not to any particular human language. Rocks, trees, soil and clouds are silent. They do not name themselves. Human beings and a few really well trained monkeys and parrots are the only parts of nature which make the sounds called words, or make the signs we call communication. And only human beings can really make the scribble called writing.

Buddha, the noble title given to the man Siddattha Gotama, means "Enlightened One" in the Pali language, I'm told. That's all well and good, but I think the "Endarkened One" would have been a more accurate title. Let me tell you why I think so.

You see, Siddattha used to go around saying that all human thoughts are simply that, thoughts. They are not reality, but only concepts that point to reality. Later Buddhists phrased this metaphor, "Like a finger pointing to the moon is not the same thing as the moon." Reality itself is nameless, they said. Human beings, Siddattha said, try to control reality and make sense of it by naming it. Thus the Buddhist scripture, Dhammapada, written some four hundred years after Buddha lived, says: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The world is made up of *our* concepts." The Daoists said something similar a bit earlier... "Words about the universe are not the real universe." And the Christians too, in the Gospel of John, wrote, "In the beginning was the Concept (or Word), and that Concept was addressed to God, and indeed, that Concept was God."

In other words, if rocks and trees and the sky are ultimately nameless, in and of themselves, the seamless universe which we have rudely separated into separate parts and arbitrary and mere words...how much *more* outside of our control and power are the theological words...God, Soul, Prayer, Meditation, Life, Grace, Karma, Incarnation, Christ, Moses, Muhammed, Buddha? None of these words are graspable realities either...they point to various conceptions that people hold which interpret reality, culturally or religiously. But reality itself remains stubbornly nameless, a seamless whole of which we human beings are only one small and quite miniscule part. And even the idea that we are “part of the all” is really just a metaphor.

All of our beliefs and unbeliefs are thoughts. And as Pema Chödrön insists, our beliefs and unbeliefs *limit* our approach to reality. They are like small windows in a thick wall...we only see what the window we have put in the wall enables us to see. We would see much more if we got rid of the window and knocked the whole wall down. But even then, we wouldn't be able to see what was behind us. We would have to turn around to look. But then, we couldn't see what was once in front of us. And thus, if we remain still, we are never able to see the whole of things. And so, by our very nature as human creatures, I say we are each limited in our perception of reality. We cannot, when honest, so much as claim to be enlightened beings since we are almost totally in the dark. But our beliefs limit us even more, because they claim to tell us about actual reality. They tell us what other folks *are*, what other people *are*, what other parts of the world *are*. We name the other and claim to know what that means. And then the religions and parties and individuals and groups who name others as other often claim that their own window view is the *only* view, the only way to look at things. “I am an atheist,” says one. “I am right.” “I am an Evangelical Christian,” says another, “and I am right and you are a fool.” The believing Muslim and Jew and Sikh and Buddhist and Hindu and believing Humanist and Atheist and Agnostic all possess belief systems which limit their take on everything other than themselves.

But all beliefs are mere thoughts, even personal beliefs. What is a personal belief? I might believe that I am not good-looking enough, or smart enough, or wise enough, or sufficient enough. Such beliefs create mischief in the world and suffering for the self. They eclipse the world as it is, and give us a limited, cramped and narrow world which Pema Chödrön characterizes this way, “You want something to hold on to, you want to say, ‘Finally I have found it. This is it, and now I feel confirmed and secure and righteous.’”

Buddha apparently became famous during his lifetime for calling such a desire for security and confirmation and righteousness into question. He refused to say Yes or No to most of the religious beliefs of his time, and, according to the scriptures, this was an almost daily occurrence. Hundreds of years after he died, his followers tried to illustrate his persistent and characteristic questioning and refusal to answer by coming up with the amazingly sharp proverb, “If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him.” The Christians over in the Mediterranean were saying the same thing at the same time: “If anyone says to you, there is the Christ, or here he comes, don't believe it!” (Mark 13, 21) These ancient testimonies are strong and direct and even a little frightening to some, perhaps, but very important. They are

calling any final and secure and certain belief into question. They are saying “Do not believe what people are telling you just because they told you. Don’t even believe yourself if you have never taken the time to question what it actually is you believe.”

Our Italian poet also speaks to us directly about such things:

*Don't ask me for words that might define
our formless soul, and publish it
in letters of fire, and make it shine resplendent
like a crocus lost in the middle of a dusty field.*

*(And) don't ask me for formulas to make it possible for you to open up the world. All I have are a few
crooked syllables, dried-up like fallen branches.*

Now some will be quick to criticize this approach. Are you saying, Belletini, that everything is simply relative, and that all our conflicts and quarrels are meaningless because no one is right and no one is wrong, and that every belief is just as arbitrary, ultimately as the words we use for sky: *ciel, cielo, himmel, sky...?*

No, I am not saying that. I am also not saying that there is one penultimate and nameable truth, like some great mountain summit which is the equal goal of all paths, either political or religious. I don’t even have enough information to know if that is a true statement, although I agree it makes one feel good to think such a thing. And I am not saying that creationist teachings are in any way equal to evolutionary teachings, or that a Fundamentalist view of Jesus is equal in any way to the liberal-critical slow consensus view of Jesus that is developing in many quarters.

Today begins the five day, full moon celebration of the Buddhist holiday of Vesak. It’s the celebration of Buddha’s birthday, dying day and awakening day. It’s a celebration of his teachings. And I think of Buddha’s *dharma*, or teaching, as this: he was offering us a profound and beautiful caution. He was not offering us enlightenment, you see, bright answers, but rather, asking us to admit to our own *endarkenment*. He didn’t think it was helpful to be so cock-sure in our beliefs that we, thereby, limit our love and compassion for others (i.e. those fools deserve to suffer!) and sure beliefs can certainly do that, as our children’s story illustrated so well this morning. In the light, they danced only with people like themselves, but in the dark, they actually met each other, true strangers, and, in the end, had a great deal of fun. In like manner, Buddha preached a saving darkness. Like our Italian poet, he could not tell us what soul is, or what God is, or name, for all time, the ultimate nature of human life or love. But he did offer us the soul and center of his teaching in simple ways. Prefiguring the words of the Italian poet, Montale, Buddha said something like this: “All I can tell you today is this: what we are *not*. What we do *not* want.”

Let me expand on these two statements, briefly. Let me tell you what I think we are not: We are not a means to an end.

We are not worthless.
We are not the sum of all worth.
We are not improved by poverty, war or oppression.
We are not really divided from each other or the universe by labels, titles, or elections.
We are not to be defined by fear or loathing.
We are not reducible to this or that.
Life does not all come down to this or that,
some small answer clear and clean in the spotlight of belief.

Turn off the spotlight, said Buddha.
Stop believing so much, and being so sure.

Just get clear as to what you do *not* want, he said.
You don't want misery for yourself or others.
You don't want war on your doorstep or anyone else's doorstep.
You don't want hell in this life or the next.
You don't want condemnation for who you are, or to be controlled or commanded by arbitrary might.
You don't want your mistakes to define you,
nor your successes to lift you above others.
You don't want your brain to be set on a shelf by religious decree...you don't want to give up critical thinking.
You don't want to give up caring for yourself, or others, or even for your opponent, who after all, might have something to teach you.
You don't want to be attacked, slighted,
bullied, butchered or buried.

You don't want love to dry up, or compassion to be thin inside you or outside you.
You don't want to live in fear, or always moving to the puppet strings of your past.
You don't want to give up, nor do you want to browbeat anyone else.
You don't want to live only to compete and win, and never cooperate nor understand.
You don't want to suffer needless pain, nor
stew in hate, nor anger. Even if it's righteous.
You don't want to die before you die.

Exactly.

So say it how you will... *zhizn*, *vie*,
vita or *life*. Use any language you want to say it, knowing that all words are provisional and fragile, like dried up branches, and only point to the nameless reality beyond them. Just remember that life is more than beliefs, more than doubts, more than answers and certainty. And then, with Buddha, or Jesus, or wild Sappho, or singing Mirabai, or Rumi, or anyone who actually dared to live, instead of spending all their days trying to figure out the soul of it all, the final answer, the bottom line...LIVE.

Ritual for Buddha's Birthday

Form and emptiness are one and the same.

So said the Buddha by his birth.

So said the Buddha by his awakening.

So said the Buddha by his death.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato

Arahato Samma Sambudhassa.

May all living beings who are overwhelmed and who suffer experience, in their lifetime the fresh and flowering spring of relief, the spring of awakening and the spring of loving-kindness.

(Fragrant water is poured over an image of the Buddha)