

2006-1-8 Snake Oil
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here,
after a week of surprisingly warm winter
to worship, to go deeper, to soar higher,
to rest from our ordinary routines
and take up extraordinary visions
of how we want to be together, and in the world.

And so we say:

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Sequence

And so now the candles have melted down,
and now the cards have been read and tossed;
And so now the ornaments, dreidels, and solstice poems are locked away
for next year, along with all the festive cookie recipes.
Now the last slices of Aunt Josephine's famous
chocolate cake have been frozen for later,
and the crusted dish from the last casserole, created from leftovers, is
soaking in the sink. And now the trees have been packed or pulled out
for pick-up, and the wreathes boxed and stored.
And now Port Columbus is less busy,
Uncle Jeff is back home now, and all the grown children packed up and
went back to college. And now the carols are no longer echoing, and
Bing Crosby's hope for a white Christmas has melted in this almost
spring-like weather. And now that great grey shelf of cloud which is

anchored in far Lake Eire spreads over us.

And now we are here, in this January, a little tired, perhaps, maybe even longing for some down time. Or recovery. But here. Together. Under this familiar wooden pyramid. The bare branches sharp in the windows. The warmth of friends and strangers near us.

And now, the nurturing gift of silence....

silence

And now, we are here as we are, with all that is our lives with us. Taking time to remember the gifts of love in our lives, both given and received, we set aside a moment to name...whispered aloud or in the silent sanctuary of our hearts...the people who are at our side, even if they are far away, or no longer around. We would not be here without them.

naming

And now, music, flowing like a mighty river, carries us forward, flowing from the still small source of the silence into the common life of this remarkable day.

Readings

The First Reading *comes from Walter Truitt Anderson's classic book Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, written already 15 years ago.*

In the postmodern world, false events commonly become real life. A good example of this was the U.S. government's Grenada expedition in 1983. Operation Urgent Fury they called it. That was a hell of a title. The operation, in case you have forgotten, was an intervention against a Marxist government on that Caribbean island state, the smallest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Grenada's importance to the American public, measured by any traditional standards, was none whatsoever. It would have made utterly no difference to the average American whether Grenada were Marxist, Mormon, Green or Libertarian. Most Americans had no idea of where Grenada was, or even that it existed, before it was suddenly announced

as a matter of national concern.

When it did surface, it seemed to many people to be important. The American public had been frustrated for years by international conflicts that started out to be simple “good-guy/bad-guy” dramas and then turned into confusing debacles. A new story formed, with Grenada as its locale.

The Grenada invasion was real. And it was also a false event. It was orchestrated by a public relations operation at least as big as the military one. Reporters were kept away from the action so that the news could be managed. The government’s primary purpose was to give the American public a “win,” to flex the muscles of the Administration, and to allow Americans (in the phrase current at the time), to “feel good about themselves.” It was political therapy, and real theater.

The second reading *is a poem, originally written in Bengali by Namita Chaudhuri, just last year. It’s called: fragmented words*

every complete word
carries within it
fragmented words, broken words,
ground-smooth-into-paste words;
words that squeeze out of gaps
between paragraphs;
words that slither between
my skin and yours;
words that clamber back,
seeking lost meanings.
words fly out of my mind,
recklessly careening in the wind.

however you say it in the end
it’s the same message:
dancing around the fire
we are birds at home.

Sermon

I talked this week with a long time member of this congregation, Ed Slowter. He had read the title of my sermon, “Snake Oil,” in the newsletter, so he said with his twinkling smile: “You might check out Samuel Hartman. He was Columbus’ very own snake-oil salesman, and he made a mint from it too. He was once asked what the secret ingredient was in his famous bottled elixir and he joked, ‘Why, profits, of course.’”

Actually, there were really no secret ingredients in Hartman’s bottle. He concocted the stuff from cheap alcohol (28%), water, caramel, and put in a few cubebs for flavoring...a cubeb is a spice once popular in European cooking a thousand years ago, but one which is rarely used these days. It tastes like a cross between a peppercorn and a clove. It was unusual, but hardly a secret.

He called the potion he brewed and bottled “Paruna,” and he sold it for a buck a bottle back in the early 1900’s. That was a day’s wages back then, so today a bottle of his stuff would cost the equivalent of anywhere from 50 to 200 dollars, unless you were a CEO or sports star, in which case your equivalent might be closer to ten thousand dollars. It cost him just a few cents to make the stuff, which made him a dandy profit indeed. Due to an aggressive advertising campaign, Paruna sold like the proverbial hotcakes, not just here in Columbus, but all over the nation. And people testified that this magic elixir was a cure for everything, ranging from mere tummy aches to congenital problems. Nothing was too severe, too daunting. And yet it was nothing but alcohol, water and uninspired flavoring.

Of course, though I often tend to relegate “snake oil” cures like Hartman’s Paruna to history, the same thing still goes on today. For example, every single day, televangelists aim their hands at their tv cameras, broadcasting their palm print into the homes of the hopeful. Then, scrunching up their faces in great concentration, they announce long distance cures as the Spirit informs them. “There is a woman in Texarkana who has been suffering from lower back pain; it’s kept you in

bed for weeks. But the Lord is now healing you. There is a young man in Laramie who was just told he had lung cancer. Warmth is spreading through your body, and that is the Spirit healing you.” This long-distance healing technique is called a “word of knowledge” from an obscure, poorly translated phrase in one of St. Paul’s letters. It is a modern invention, however, totally unknown in the history of the Western Church. But then, the relation of religion to healing is not the issue, as Dr. Hartman was so bold to confess. It is profits.

But, as with Hartman’s watered down liquor, people claim that they are actually healed through this “word of knowledge.” People from Texarkana and Laramie call in, testifying that they felt the warmth, and that they were cured. But I say that mere assertion was not proof of anything back in Dr. Hartman’s day, and it’s not proof now. It seems that even if snake oil doesn’t come bottled, people still drink it down.

Of course, those other evangelists, the Madison Ave preachers, are at it too, reminding us all, through image and slogan, that the product they are pushing will bring us love, contentment, happiness, prestige, and peace of mind. They will even tell you that you are taking care of the environment while sitting in your armchair. Never mind that the two people running toward each other in slow motion while the music swells are a lot more svelte than many of us have been in 30 years; many people *identify* with the slow motion sweethearts and thus end up buying the soap, the car, the perfume, or the brand. Or, at the very least, allow them to dream for a minute of winning big on one of the give-away shows. “I knew every single one of those answers on Jeopardy. I should have won that 50 grand. I could pay off the mortgage and have enough left over to take a trip to Sydney. That would be so great.” And it would, wouldn’t it?

Oh, listen, I’m hardly claiming to have risen above this culture I’m critiquing and remained pure. I’ve fallen for snake oil plenty of times, too. I have my desperate moments like most everyone else. I remember when my 16-year marriage ended, I was up every night, sleepless, feeling pretty blue and alone. I didn’t feel good about myself. I felt pretty unlovable. So I would lie on the couch, wide awake, watching

infomercial after infomercial offering one of about thirty magical exercise machines, which, if used only five minutes a day, would build abs that looked like Jacob's ladder in about two weeks. I actually sent away for one of these gadgets, and discovered that not only was it made of the cheapest plastic ever made, but that the regular crunches I had been doing worked faster, were actually easier, and didn't leave marks on my skin. In a moment of need and self-doubt, a clever snake oil pitch helped me dupe myself.

Or, forget TV. If you are on e-mail (and the vast majority of us are), and despite all the filters and impenetrable walls, you are probably offered a chance each and every day to be potent sexually, a chance to buy pills you may not even need, for next to nothing, and a spouse from Russia who will end your loneliness forever. And you can do this, while paying off your 2 percent mortgage rate, winning the flashing free prize, and getting a honest-to-God PhD on-line...all for the cost of one Dr. Hartman's Paruna bottles or less.

Snake Oil everywhere. Every supermarket and airport bookshelf I see is crammed with Tim LaHaye novels...the most read novels in the history of publishing. They offer the "true story" of the arrival of the anti-Christ, forcing God to replace this world with a simpler one free from aches, pains, frustrations, failures, resentment, crunches and chores. End-of-the-world fiction is the New Paruna. Other fictional pieces claim to tell the "real" truth about Signoro Da Vinci, or to reveal the identity of Mrs. Jesus. And the self-proclaimed psychics are everywhere...on television, in best selling books, on the back pages of the free weeklies. Admittedly, all of them confess in the fine print that they are taking your money "for entertainment purposes only." They get points for honesty, I suppose.

But if such snake oil is now defined away as mere "entertainment," then just about everything is entertainment. And Hedy Lamarr's droll comment that in the cheesy entertainment world, everyone feels like they're treading on Jello reveals itself as not only humorous, but soberly descriptive. In a world where snake oil rules, and the chief theology is the idea of getting "something for nothing" or by "magic," there cannot be very sure footing for many of us as we make our way.

Snake oil everywhere. Simple answers to life's challenges. Simple and singular solutions to life's difficulties. One sip from the bottle, and everything is A-OK.

Now please don't get me wrong. I am not denying that some illnesses may fade away without medicine. That happens every day. I am not denying that some dire illness spontaneously heal. That happens sometimes right in hospitals and in a non-believer's bed too. And I am not denying that some people feel better about themselves when they dream of winning lottery tickets or becoming slimmer with that special diet or super exercise machine.

What I *am* saying is that the snake-oil doesn't do that. Cubeb flavored alcohol may help you *think* everything is better, but I assure you, when you are plastered, you are probably not thinking very clearly, right?

That's why I found the words you heard this morning from Walter Truitt Anderson so enlightening. He is describing snake-oil in our modern world too. But he goes beyond the bottled alcohol of charlatans, all the way to our shared political world, where an actual *war* against a symbolic enemy was primarily waged and touted as a way of making people think that everything is better. I find Anderson's language painfully clear.

Reporters were kept away from the action so that the news could be managed. The government's primary purpose was to give the American public a "win," to flex the muscles of the Administration, and to allow Americans (in the phrase current at the time), to "feel good about themselves." It was political therapy, and real theater.

The sad part of the story is that "real theatre" in this case means not just a well-acted story, but real blood-spilled on the stage of history instead of ketchup. The fact that a potential check and balance system, the press, were kept away makes it all the more troublesome to me.

I want you to hear something which I feel is very important, but which I usually don't point out very clearly, at least in these terms. In our religious tradition, you will find no principle urging us to "feel good about ourselves." You are not going to find any exhortations to "feeling bad about ourselves, either." Feeling good or bad about ourselves is self-serving at best, and has very little to do with our ancient religious history or practice. In none of our principles, in not one of our historical covenants, will you find any phrases that remotely suggest any such thing. Our religious way is not about how we feel, or even about what we believe, but about how we behave...together.

For thirty years the people of this congregation often recited an edited form of covenantal words penned by Griswold Williams. This great covenant named both "love" and "peace" as the touchstone for our behavior. It named the "search for truth" as central, but did not name that truth. And note, it's the search for truth, not the search for "feeling better about ourselves."

And, though this may surprise some people sitting here, the original covenant that gathered this congregation back in 1940 spoke of living in the "spirit of Jesus," by which metaphor they also meant to express "love" and "peace" as behavioral models for being together.

Furthermore, this morning we affirmed the beautiful words of my dear colleague Bill Schulz, who says that we are here to make a difference, together, by our hospitality and our service.

In none of these documents do you find entreaties to feel better, to feel worse, to share a belief, or to draw a doctrinal fence around the congregation.

Bill also mentions *revering* (strong word, that!) both the "critical mind and the generous heart." These are two beautiful phrases which sum up our approach to religion: clear thinking which is not afraid of questions, and real openness and access to one another at a deep level.

So what makes us who we are is this: We acknowledge right up front

that we are all different...in what we believe, in what we think matters most, in culture and style and temperament. We are even different in our vulnerability to snake oil pitches. We acknowledge that right up front. We also admit that there is a good chance that we could disagree about some things, and rub each other the wrong way, or disappoint each other. We start off by always acknowledging that we are joyfully, fallibly, entirely human. As our Bengali poet put it: like the birds, we are all home here, dancing, that is, circling around the fire.

We see that fire from different angles. And we always will, for that's the truth of a circle. And the poet reminds us that each of us is dancing, that is moving. We ourselves are growing, changing, deepening, and have no fixed position that endures forever.

And so we know, at least I hope we do, that we cannot share a common understanding of the central mystery, the living flame of the mystery of life, love, spirit and reality.

But that means that, throughout our history, we have had to make tacit and deliberate agreements to help us deal with this reality gracefully. Whether we are quick to speak, or slow to form opinions, whether we come from loud or quiet family systems, whether we are prone to cooler, logical thinking or move steadily from our generous heart, we agree in advance to find ways to approach each other with *care, honesty, and mutual accountability*. We agree in advance to approach each other with truthfulness and steady faithfulness right in the midst of an unfaithful, wobbly snake oil world of deceit and cultivated fear and cynical manipulation. Right off the bat we agree that there is no single solution to life's problems and ills, no simple jolt from any bottle, no hand that heals all, no magical way to bring everything together. Ours might be fairly described as an anti-snake oil tradition. But it's a slow religious approach, nothing fast-food about it. It is deliberate, and thoughtful. It asks us to be accountable to each other, and to the world.

Throughout our history, we have worded and reworded such covenants. As congregations. Even Wendy and I wrote such a covenant just for ourselves, the two of us, which we recite before you, now and then. This

is because our religious liberal ancestors never felt it was entirely honest, considering the diversity of emotional approaches among us, to say, “Oh, well, everyone means well, don’t they? Why do we have to write anything down at all? You know how *fickle* words can be.”

Sure, but we also know how *powerful* words can be too, especially when used uncritically. Every snake oil pitch is a good example of that power. So were the words that sold a huge wealthy 3000 mile by 2500 mile nation to attack a poor island that was only 12 by 23 miles.

Instead of wringing hands over the fragility of language, acknowledge their power, their richness, their histories, their passions, their stories. Remember what our poet Namita Chaudhuri said so beautifully?

*Every complete word carries within it
fragmented words, broken words,
ground-smooth-into-paste words;
words that squeeze out of gaps
between paragraphs; words that slither between
my skin and yours; words that clamber back,
seeking lost meanings.*

Meanings are lost after a time, sure; the Spirit of Jesus and the Love and Peace of earlier gathering covenants for religious liberals in Columbus have had their say, and are not referred to as often anymore. But the spirit of those words, the call to be accountable and true to one another never fades. Which is good, since the world of snake oil and dishonest language usage never fades either, as I hope I have made abundantly clear with the stories of Hartman and Grenada. And thus, by powerful, deliberate, caring and ever-revisable words of covenant, we hold ourselves accountable for how we use our power, and how we relate to each other and to the world. The process to work on the present form of that behavioral covenant begins today. Doing that is one of the best antidotes to all that snake oil that I can think of. Enjoy it, rejoice in it and be glad.

Offering

And so, we are the ones who are responsible.
And so, we are the ones who carry the torch
in this season, our ancestors gone before us,
like beacons lighting our path, our young ones still learning about the
flame. Blest is this time of giving and receiving with gratitude.

Prayer

Love, here we are.
Different, yet together.
Turning toward the dancing fire, the Great Mystery, but also turning
toward each other,
the authentic faces of that Mystery.
Love, we are not ashamed of it.
We want. We want good things
for ourselves, some peace of heart and mind,
a deeper honesty, reliable trustworthiness,
real faithfulness to the process,
some protected safety in our speaking,
and continuous encouragement to listen deeply.
We want to joyously use the gift of our reason,
questioning solutions that profit some but
not others, and refusing easy snake oil remedies.
And how wonderful it would be if we could joyously share the
abundance we find in our own lives with each other.
Love, here we are. One of us is talking.
Others stand in the flow of his words.
Not every word resonates. Not every word is perfect. And no word is
perfect forever.
And so we shall have to let *our lives* say Amen.