

2004 06 13 **Grateful for it All**  
Mark Belletini

### **Opening Words**

We are here  
*to celebrate with gratitude,*  
to rejoice we are all still learners  
*in the school of life.*

We praise the gift of another morning,  
*opening our arms to receive summer's warmth*  
which announces its coming in advance.

*Glad for this, our time of worship,*  
we pray with words and our lives:

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

### **Sequence**

The chicory flowers are grabbing pieces of the blue sky again, and  
anchoring them onto earth so we can marvel up close...  
the human dignitaries have all returned home from the national  
cathedral, but the robins are still here locally, as well as a handful  
of sparrows; plenty of dignity there! And the gothic arches of  
maple and oak are beautifully darkened by the week's rain. O  
World, you never stop, you always astonish, you hold nothing  
back! What can I offer you in thanks but a small portion of the  
Silence that once gave birth to you, as you once gave birth to me...

*silence*

Remembering those we love, those who walk the earth with us still, and those who now stroll in the meadows of our heart, we take pleasure in sounding their names inside us. Or, in the common air, either as we wish, adding the astonishment of their presence in our lives to the marvel of everything else...

*naming*

How grateful I am! The sun rises again, day after day, morning after morning...and illumines the precious minutes of my life on earth, and the lives of all people on earth, very young and very old, the well and the sick, the joyous and the sad. Indeed, all those lives are just as important to them as mine is to me...ohk, how grateful I am...

**The First Reading** *comes from the commentary on his own bull paintings, made by Kakuan, the Chinese Daoist and pre-Zen teacher who flourished around the year 1150, the same time in the West when Francis and Clare of Assisi were living their lives. As the Europeans were designing stained glass to express their faith, the Asians were painting with ink and writing poetry to express their way of spirit.*

In the pasture of this world, I find myself endlessly pushing through the tall grasses in search of the powerful bull. Following unnamed rivers, lost in the interpenetrating paths of far away mountains, my strength sometimes failing me, exhausted, I cannot find what I am looking for, that elusive, amazing beast. So I stop, stand still, and hear the cicadas droning their a cappella chants high the trees.

Suddenly I see footprints in the fragrant grass,  
clear as can be. The bull must be close.

As the birds sing, and the sun grows warmer,  
I grow confident, and I know the bull cannot hide in this bright  
light for long.

And I do find him. I try to capture him, but the struggle is terrific.  
The bull is very strong, his power, inexhaustible. He tries to run  
away. But I catch him with a rope, and finally bring him down.

So I work to tame him, until he becomes gentle, so gentle in fact I  
can unfetter him and he follows me. I climb on top the bull and  
ride the bull home as I play my flute. I sing my song, and clap,  
hoping others will join me.

Finally I come back home. I am serene. The bull too can rest. The  
sun rises once again, a new dawn. Now I leave the rope coiled at  
my side. I no longer need to struggle. Suddenly, the rope and the  
bull and the person writing this all merge into No Thing Ness, a  
circle without those foolish distinctions of struggle and search and  
find and journey. I am now in a Nameless meadow so vast no word  
can explain it, any more than a snowflake can explain a raging fire.  
Here is the place where all the great wisdom teachers dwell...my  
true home, where the river flows tranquilly, the flowers burn red,  
and cicadas hum in their trees for but a moment.

**Second Reading** *is an excerpt of the words of Emma Avalos, who grew up in this church, and who is graduating from High School this week. She sent Wendy and me these wonderful words this last week. She regrets she cannot be here, as today she is leaving for a trip to Italy for which she worked hard all year to save up money. She will go to Costa Rica in the fall, and maybe in the summer will be part of the Lama Foundation, an intentional community in the mountains of New Mexico. After that . . . .*

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Ah! My answer as a kid was astronaut, dig up dinosaurs. Maybe I could do both at the same time. But here I am now, both those things only in my dreams. Now I want a lot of things.

I want to work with the soil. I want to put my hands in the soil and make love, help create, move my energies underground . . . I guess you could call that wanting to have a family. My kids'll be Real green, lots of vascular tissue and water. Energy. I want to give back to the earth, show my blessings, and feel her. I'll have children at some point, but that's not really a focus right now.

I want to live in an intentional community (like a commune) for a few years, maybe on and off, maybe for life. So I guess I want to travel and find a place I really love, and stick to it. I want to live near the water, near trees. I want to live right in the city, too, surrounded by concrete and young children. Travel where? Italy, China, Tibet, Russia, Australia, Panama, the western United States, east coast cities. Everywhere. I want to go to Canada and the Caribbean...

In the "academia" section I am not quenched at all. I want to use my time well in learning. I want to know about the nameless trees cut down for villages. What do the people believe in those villages? Who are the ones breathing underground, the ones feeding off trees and mammals? Who are the ones seeing underwater?

I want to understand all kinds of philosophers, read so many books . . . I feel like there isn't enough time. I want to experience other works of writing and art so I will know what not to repeat, what to use, what to let enter my heart. I want the kind of education that drips into that bucket that never fills up. " The world can be your university." Yes. This I want. But I want to go through higher education. I want to use the money for my

education to its fullest, I want an idea, a separate goal, vision that I am working toward. I want to know what I want to do for a living. I am not sure right now, which is frightening. I'm sure I'll do lots of things. Once I know I will then work on getting there . . . but I'm up in the air right now.

I need to be lost.

I feel so alive. I want to continue being open to this state. I want so much to be open: all this goodness, the lamp-posts, the dome of eyes, the caterpillar. I want to work on grounding myself, balancing what is raw and open inside to all that surrounds me. I want to learn to hold with me the momentary realization that I am part of all this. I am so thirsty. Always when it rained I kept my head down. I will look up one day and drink. I want to learn to articulate what I see and what builds inside my body, my self. I will do this through writing, art, perhaps something else. I want to find my voice in writing, to give it out. I want to be satisfied with my work. I want to give myself credit, appreciate who I am.

There are a few instruments that call me.

I want always to dance.

I want to confront myself. I am slowly etching my way here and it is scary. I want to open up to people, I want to communicate, connect. I want to listen, and tell you. I want to build strong relationships. I want to understand and get rid of my fears. I want to see the holy one in you, and you ... you. You're there. I want to love. I want to feel that rush of instinctual being and I want to build solid, long-term relationships. I want to mix the two and everything in between.

I want to know My Grandmother, elia, before she dies. I have this intense need to do this, she is far away. I want to know My Mother, nidia. My father Edwin, who I call Papi to everyone but him, his name is Edwin, I call him my father to you guys, but I do not address him, since he left. I want to know him. My Sister,

laura. I want to open up to her. I want to give to her. Mauricio. I name him. We are traveling separate parts of the world and share each other. He is here. All these people bring me to My Self, emma.

So the sum of these things are rooted and keep growing upwards, downwards.

Miles Davis said something like

"I play it cool and dig all jive,  
And that's the reason I stay alive."

Well then. Amen. Namaste

## **Homily**

The Zen Buddhist teacher Suzuki once reminded his students that they would always be beginners. Even after they had practiced for fifty years, day after day, faithfully.

This past ten days, I have been thinking about what he said. As I did a wedding. As I composed two eulogies for the memorial services of beloved members of this congregation. As I named a baby boy on a back yard deck. As I watched parents talking with their growing children, now come of age. As I called my best friend, William, now living in Dallas, Texas.

As I wept for others I have lost in my life...to moves, to death, to ruptures in relationship.

And I found to my surprise that I am so grateful for my life. So overcome with thanksgiving that I live to weep, and live to laugh,

and live to miss, and live into new intimacies, life always changing, no matter how much I brake against it. So now, for some reason, I have stopped braking. Am lighter on my feet. Less cramped from grabbing on so hard, so tight. Less resentful that the world does what it does, not what I want.

I think of the young man seeking enlightenment in the Chinese picture story. The strong bull is what he is after, powerful and astounding. Something really overwhelming. Sure, certain and real.

Yet what does he do when he finds this great symbol of enlightenment? Does he fall to his knees in amazement and wonder and admiration and appreciation? Does he note that the bull is charging through a beautiful meadow, and that the cicadas are humming in the trees, and that all of it *together* is amazing?

No, the searcher is looking for what he counts as the real enlightenment, the final answer, the true divinity...the wild bull. A wonder separated out from the rest of the world, somehow different, somehow not mundane and ordinary as a meadow and cicada, but snorting and tough.

And what's the first thing he does when he finds what he is looking for? Can you believe it? He *captures* the bull. He *tames* the bull. He brings the bull under his control. He treats it as a pet. His great brilliant enlightenment becomes as dull as a fading candle, soft, giving little light, tame.

But eventually, after sitting still for a long time, and watching the summer sun rise, he learns that his journey had been mistaken. Enlightenment is not some goal to achieve, or worse, to capture and tame, but a life to live in the middle of it all.

Our young seeker finally realizes that such a single goal, enlightenment, in this life, is ultimately no greater than any other goal...good hard work, ordinary kindness, love of all sorts, charity, chores, art, music, struggle, learning, unlearning, family, friendship. Everything is a wonder. Everything is of a piece, a seamless whole; No Thing Ness is the word in the poem.

In the last ten days, I find I am just beginning to get a sense of that seamless whole...that No Thing Ness. I find I am letting go of my quest for the great powerful beast called *enlightenment*, called *final fulfillment*, called *perfect peace*, called *once-and-for- all love*.

Instead, I find myself stopping a lot, and listening for the cicadas, which are there for but a moment, then are gone. And walking the concrete meadow of my city, which has been blossoming with people all along without me noticing, since I was looking for the great and perfect beast, not living my life. I am beginning to accept that I will be alive for just a minute, as far as the universe is concerned. For 13 billion years, the universe expanded and blossomed and whirled without me. In a few moments (and what are years but a few precious moments?), when I am gone, the universe will churn at least 13 billion more years without me. What I have is right now.

And so I find myself thinking in this month of June that I, for one, still have not graduated, nor shall I ever, from the school of life. I have diplomas and degrees, yes, but I have not graduated. For everything is just that, gradual, from the Latin “graduus” meaning step, one step at a time, one step at a time, no leaps, no final diplomas, ever. Like Suzuki affirmed, I am a beginner, always, a student ever, never finished.

And so I think of what our very wise high school graduate Emma Avalos had to say in her wonderful testament. Nowhere do I hear her say that she is looking for the final answer, the great dark bull



snorting and ready to be conquered and tamed. I hear her say, instead, the words of life: “I want to love. I want to connect. I want to open up. I want to listen. I want to see, and travel. I want to learn and unlearn. I want to live. I want to live. I want to live. “I want always to dance,” she writes. “I want to confront myself. I need to be lost. I am so thirsty. I want to see the holy one in you, and in you, and in you...” These are beautiful words, wise words, words expressive of gratitude and thanksgiving, not on a Thursday in November with the theme of Pilgrims, but gratitude and thanksgiving today. For today is what we have, no more, no less.

And so I, Mark Louis Belletini, son of Elisa and Louis, am thankful for many things today. I am thankful that my best friend, William, moved away to find good work in a far away city. I am glad for my sorrow and my tears about that, and for laughter on the phone when we speak. I am glad for my friend Yiannos who moved to Greece two weeks ago. I am thankful that this church called me, just as I am thankful to the former congregations which have called me to serve.

I am glad for the tears which remind me that my grief is life, not death. I am glad for the healers, both medical and the hands-on therapists, who offer themselves to my healing, even if they don't succeed all the time, even if some pains never go away. I am glad for Columbus, this city on the great sloping valley wall south of a great lake and north of a great river. I am glad for the people I have met here, whom I would not have met save that I moved here. I am glad for my friends like Doug and Richard and Kevin and Lam, those who love me without counting the cost, or fearing to tell me the truth. I am thankful for the orange tiger lilies and red Shasta daisies, the ficus plants up here on the chancel, the red dot in the center of this room, the teal spokes on the carpet and the colors in the clothes you wear. I am glad for this breath I take, for the sound of my voice vibrating in my throat as I speak to you, and for the beat of my heart suspended between the Big Bang at the beginning

of all things and the Omega Point when all things end. I am glad for the rain, for the often clogged traffic which signs a thriving town. I am glad for what I cannot see, burrowing under the ground, under the floor of this place, and for the birds which leap between the branches of trees outside these clerestory windows. I am glad when I remember my grandparents and friends who have died, and thankful that they have never let go of my heart even for a second. I am glad to be able to laugh, to make love, to cook asparagus and eat honeycomb, to cry out in loneliness, to sit in sadness and feel miserable, instead of denying that I am miserable. I am thankful to be able to flare in rage when needed, to be short with folks and apologize. I am glad when people forget appointments or don't show up when they say they will, because then I remember that I, too, have done such things, and am fallible as everyone else, human, exulting, hurting, loving, living. I am grateful when I stumble and make mistakes, because then I can unlearn what once I learned. I am glad to be exhausted after a day of hard work. I am thankful too that I can play hooky, or just play on some day, and let the world revolve without me thinking that I have something to do with its spin, and without me pushing the river to keep it flowing. I am thankful that I don't accomplish everything I'd like to accomplish, and that a lot is left undone, for I, too, am not done yet, nor completed nor finished. I am thankful to be here right now, confessing my love, my loss, my longing and my step by step, gradual acceptance that it's all change, that it's not in my control very much, that life is astonishing and wonderful, especially when I get out of my own way, and that there is no great beast to find...no enlightenment to complete, no finish-line or judgement day to come. It's all here...right now. Thanks. And as Emma says so cleanly at the end of her sweet piece, "Well then. Amen. Namaste."

## **Offering**

The work of this congregation is to serve each other, the world and our hearts, as we grow in spirit and deepen in relationship. At this time we offer the opportunity of the offering, so that members and friends can, if they wish, bring their pledged contributions to the upkeep of this congregation, its buildings, staff, bills, cleanliness and growth. Please consider this time something for which you can be grateful.

## **Closing Rituals**