

## 2004-8-29 Set Theory for Moderns

Mark Belletini

### Opening Words

We are here

*in this common time, and common house*

to worship, to restore ourselves to our ideals

*and live deeper into our questions.*

With hearts and minds enriched by experience

**and with both courage and praise we say:**

**(together) Living our lives  
with purpose and gratitude,  
moved by the beauty of the world  
and claiming justice for all who live upon it,  
we open our hearts to greater loving,  
healthier knowledge, deeper compassion  
and hope of peace.**

### Sequence

Funny how the sun never asks about what I did or didn't do today before it sets.

Funny how the rain refuses to question my motives before it soaks me through.

Strange how the peach is sweet in my mouth whether or not I am feeling sweet that day.

Odd how the sky maintains its altitude

even when I am asleep, and not noticing.

Curious how a toothache hurts even though

I passed all my tests and established a career.

Hard to express how the children in Sudan mean the same thing when they say "I am" that I do,  
even though we speak different languages, and they will live a much shorter life than I will.

Difficult to comprehend how both music and silence can seal the deal, when no one spent so  
much as even a single minute composing the silence.

(silence)

It's odd that I am ever speaking of myself when so many others are holding me up.

It's funny that I should talk of my individual life when I am in relationship with so many others through love, grief, joy, and concern.

It's strange that I ever tried to imagine going it alone, when there is no such thing as going it alone. Especially since all these names that, with you, I say aloud or think of quietly right now, remind me of how indispensably connected I am to every other living being on the earth, yesterday, today or tomorrow....

*naming*

Funny how the silence and word, as powerful as they are, give way at last to the luminous act of making art and music...

## **Music**

### **Readings:**

**The first reading** *this morning comes from a thoughtful essay by a young adult, a 19 year old college freshman named Jacob Wilcock, found in this month's Advocate Magazine. It's called*  
Bridging two worlds

Soon after my previous boss, U.S. senator Wayne Allard, presented me with a \$2,500 college scholarship from Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) during a public ceremony in June at his Washington, D.C., office, I unexpectedly became a news item, symbolizing some apparent contradiction.

After all, Allard is the same conservative Republican from Colorado who introduced a federal ban on same-sex marriage in the Senate last November.

When I was growing up in Baltimore, the only places more liberal than my Quaker school were my home and our local Episcopal church. I appreciated the many liberals who surrounded me, but I came to realize I needed a more diverse perspective. I believe every politically active citizen has an obligation to learn about the entire political spectrum, even if only to strengthen his or her political views. So, as part of a high school requirement to do a working internship, I took a position in Senator Allard's office in the spring of 2003.

Many people in my life—gay and straight— couldn't figure out why I was dedicating so much time to someone who didn't agree with me politically, but it made perfect sense to me. I was crossing a line and, ever so slightly, bringing two worlds together. I am one of the very few people I know in the fight for gay rights who has experience in an ultra-conservative work environment, and that's invaluable. While my contact with the senator was limited, I worked very closely and became friends with his senior staff, who advise him on issues. The environment in the senator's office encourages criticism and debate, and I brought up my issues

frequently. I wouldn't have worked for Allard had I known he would eventually sponsor a federal constitutional marriage ban, but I'm glad he got to know me. And that's why I invited him to present the PFLAG scholarship. I hoped that it would make my situation even more personal for him.

As I stood next to the senator and waited for the cameras to stop flashing, I realized that I was the only person *who was familiar and comfortable with everyone in the room*. No matter how small or temporary, I formed a bridge between two sides of an important civil rights battle.

I hope that day will not soon be forgotten. I hope that gay rights leaders will realize that this fight is too complicated to simply lump all conservatives into one category and label them "hateful" or "ignorant." And I hope that Allard and his supporters will ultimately see the devastation that the Federal Marriage Amendment will bring to millions of American families, including my own.

**The second reading** *this morning is a poem by*  
*Wisława Szymborska, 1976*

How leaky are all the borders  
we draw around our separate nations!  
How many clouds cross those boundaries  
daily without even paying the toll!  
How much desert sand  
simply sifts from country to country,  
or how many mountain pebbles  
hop down slopes onto foreign turf just like that!

Need I remind you of each and every bird  
as it flies over, and now sits,  
on a closed border-gate?  
Even if it's small as a sparrow, its tail is abroad  
while its beak is still at home.  
And if that weren't enough, it keeps fidgeting!

Out of countless insects, I will single out the ant,  
who, right between the guard's left boot  
and his right, pays no attention to any questions of origin or destination.

If only this whole messy affair  
could be studied more, in detail,  
all around the world!  
Look! Isn't that familiar hedge on the far bank even now smuggling its hundred-thousandth leaf  
over the river?

And who else but the squid, unashamed  
of the length of its arms, would violate  
the precious boundary of our territorial waters?

How can we speak  
of any semblance of order around here  
when we can't even rearrange the stars  
to show which one shines for whom?

Not to mention the fog,  
which reprehensively goes wherever it pleases. Or that dust blowing blithely all over the prairie  
as if the land had never been partitioned.  
And the voices gliding on the obliging airwaves! All those conspiratorial gurglings  
and suggestive sounds.

Funny, isn't it, how only what's human is truly alien? Everything else is just mixed forest,  
a few subversive moles, and the wind.

## Sermon

When I was in fifth grade, an August rumor moved around the neighborhood, suggesting that  
the nuns at my school were going to be teaching something called "The New Math." My father,  
when he heard this, grumbled aloud, "And what's wrong with the OLD math? What, doesn't 2  
plus 2 make 4 anymore?"

As someone who was instinctually good at math, but who was not a fan of those irritating "story  
problems" the nuns were always sending us home with, I had to admit that I hoped that this  
"new math," whatever it was, would at least spare me from such hated homework.

Well, they *did* teach us new math that year. It was not what I thought. Or, for that matter, what  
my father thought. No, we still learned how to add, subtract, multiply and divide...but in  
diverse bases and using different number systems: Egyptian hieroglyphics, Mayan pictographs,  
and Babylonian cuneiform; that is, base 10, base 20 and base 60 respectively. But also, I  
learned about things which seemed rather non-mathematical to me. For example, we were  
introduced to Set Theory, which meant drawing Venn Diagrams. Venn Diagrams were circles  
that always seemed to overlap. A circle denoting the set of "all female characteristics," for  
example, overlapped the circle that denoted "all male characteristics." But the eye-shaped place  
where they overlapped proclaimed that some characteristics of the first set resembled  
characteristics of the second set. Both men *and* women, for example, tend to have eyes and ears  
and mouths and fingers and hands in equal number, even if other parts are notably distinct.

I have found that I've been thinking about these Set Theory Venn diagrams a lot as we all ooze  
toward the coming election. I am hardly the first commentator to say so, but in the present era,

it's getting harder and harder to find any circles that overlap at all. The whole country seems so divided, with each side looking at the other as if they had just climbed out the maw of hell itself.

The religious dimension in all this division is especially troublesome. Some Christian right preachers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson actually claim that God personally speaks to them. And tells them that their followers must vote for their God-approved candidate. Folks on the so-called Christian left (or Jewish left or Muslim left, or Buddhists and Unitarian Universalists of all sorts), as well as those outside the religious circle completely, wring their hands. They wonder aloud why people who claim that God *talks* with them are not being safely locked up in padded rooms. Some on the left even say that if the election doesn't go their way, they'll covet a tony *Toronto* address.

Folks in one Venn circle are appalled at the torture in Baghdad and cry out against it. Folks in the other Venn circle say quite openly, on their religious television shows, "Torture isn't necessarily bad when you are dealing with Muslims." Watch any right-wing religious television show for ten minutes and this horrific theology is bound to come up. I've heard it.

One set of Americans is for gay and lesbian rights and all kinds of other human rights. The other side slyly fingers the constitution and dreams of taking away every semblance of gay citizenship. No overlap here. Abortion. Military spending. Welfare. Housing. Education. Even a specific corporation, like Haliburton. All divided territory. You and I could probably continue outlining our fractured American life for an hour or two. On most every issue I can think of, the chasm between sides makes the Grand Canyon look like a paper cut.

The *religious* expression of this division disturbs me deeply. Yet, this summer, it was made painfully concrete to me when I visited two distinct Episcopal churches. One in California. One in Michigan.

The one in Michigan is a beautiful gothic building in classic English style. Crisp stonework and masonry, elegant woodwork crafted from superior lumber, high-quality stained glass and tapestry work. Built in 1928, if it could be transported magically to the English countryside, I swear no one would imagine it was built any later than the reign of Henry V. I took my goddaughter Andrea there, not for services, but to show her a particularly fine building, since she loves good architecture like I love good architecture. However, the pamphlet racks in that gothic masterpiece were filled with proclamations I found far from beautiful; this was an Episcopal church which clearly stands against everything I praise. No women priests are allowed there, no gay bishops, no hymns addressing God as "mother." No pro-choice questions and no take on scripture other than a socially conservative one. All of their principles were clearly and unequivocally stated, and I found I was glad to leave this beautiful building.

On the other hand, I visited another Episcopal Church one Sunday in San Francisco. I went for the Sunday service as well as the architecture, for this Episcopal church is justifiably famous for

both. It's at the base of Portrero Hill (for those of you who know the City), and it's named after Gregory of Nyssa, an ancient saint from the Eastern Mediterranean world. Behind the wide couch where the priest sits to deliver his or her sermon, there is an icon portraying said St. Gregory, pointing with a bony finger to an image of God...*as a woman*. In the unusual separate room where Holy Communion is served, there are many other icons, life-size icons of human beings, painted brightly in Eastern Orthodox style...of people dancing. This is because every week, the members of St. Gregory dance around the communion table at the center of their round room, all singing in four-part harmony, and laughing heartily. They offer the bread and wine to everyone. "Regardless of belief or unbelief," they are clear to say, since Jesus never refused anyone his table. Among the dozens of icons dancing on the wall (all with halos around their head, marking them as saints), you'll find Charles Darwin and Mahatma Gandhi. You'll also pick out jazz musician John Coltrane; Lakota Sioux essayist Black Elk; singer Ella Fitzgerald; dancer Martha Graham; Hypatia, the pagan philosopher martyred by Christian fanatics; the misunderstood protector of the poor, Lady Godiva; the Russian novelist, Feodor Dostoyevski; the Quaker divine Anne Hutchinson; Queen Liliuokalani of Hawai'i; Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshal; the great Malcolm X; the Muslim poet Rumi; the incomparable Eleanor Roosevelt; Mirabai the Hindu mystic and poet; the Catholic monk, Thomas Merton; naturalist John Muir; the Universalist Origen of Alexandria; nurse and sometime Unitarian, Florence Nightingale; the prophet Sojourner Truth; and two great Jewish theologians, Abraham Joshua Heschel and the doomed Anne Frank. Add to this amazing painted environment a woman priest as well as a gay priest, *and* the fact that they advertise themselves as a "Christian Humanist church," and you have an entirely different kind of Episcopal Church than the one I visited in Michigan.

And yet both of them *are* Episcopal, congregations under the authority of bishops, churches sharing the same history cascading from the days of Henry the VIII and Elizabeth the First. They seem as opposite as opposite can be...almost like different religions. Yet their Venn diagrams would indeed overlap...they share 500 years of history, the language of sacrament, cathedral and bishop, and the splendid riches of Anglican poetry and spirituality. Despite their differences, they overlap more than they conflict.

And this is what our brilliant young writer Jacob Wilcock is trying to tell us in the first reading. He grew up in a liberal environment, and was loved by his parents, school and his local *liberal* Episcopal church for who he was. Yet he wants to acquaint himself with the *whole* world, not just the liberal side of things. Jacob is bold to do so, and thus discovers the deep pain of being torn between two ways of thinking in his own life. The Senator he is working for, Wayne Allard, is at odds with what is deeply important to him. Yet it's this very Senator whom he asks to hand him the scholarship check raised by the local PFLAG group. Conservatives and liberals and the mix between are all there...and Jacob is the only one, by his own testimony, comfortable with them all. He was building a bridge between them by the courage of his relationships. He was acknowledging, like Gandhi before him, the humanity of his opponents. He does not agree with them...that is clear. And pay attention to the fact that he is not compromising his principles one bit. But he is also not stooping to writing off those who stand

against him as sub-human, hopeless, beyond reach, evil, or worthy of immediate execution. He is stubbornly insisting on his own humanity in the presence of those who would try to legislate him out of it, no small assault that. Yet he is doing it.

Now, I suppose someone might be quick to accuse this young man of being naïve. Someone might even insist that one young man's courteous relationships with his foes is *not* going to change the world.

Well, if you insist on arguing in that way, you may as well argue with the people who refuse to vote because they say their single vote doesn't "really count." Or you may have to argue with those who say the only good enemy is a dead enemy...and that foes are better wiped out than slowly confronted with their own deeper humanity. But worse, to argue that steady, courteous relationships between those who say yes and those who say no *don't* work is to deny the whole action of the civil rights era. And I mean the real action, not the stuff we saw on TV. Does anyone really think that white politicians like Governor George Wallace, who played the race-card viciously in his gubernatorial elections during the mid last century, slowly came around before the end of his life because the undeniably sublime Martin Luther King, Jr. gave great speeches? Or that because millions marched, he suddenly counted them all, felt outnumbered, and then and only then strategically asked forgiveness of those whom he had wronged by his cruel racism? No, parades and marches are not for conversion, but for the confirmation of those who are already on the path. It was the white Wallace's *relationships with individual people of color* in his home state which slowly brought him around. He recognized their humanity and realized that enforced segregation is simply wrong.

Segregation is not even *possible* in non-human nature, says Szymborska. "Funny, isn't it, that only what is human is truly alien?" The desert sands don't pay attention to which foreign border they're crossing. Nor do the birds, or the clouds or the "reprehensible fog." Because all borders and boundaries between this and that are human-made, and thus, rather arbitrary. The world itself pays no attention. Segregation as a principle is simply foolish. Look, sexuality is found throughout nature... both different-sex and same-sex liaisons. Organization, too, is found throughout nature... bees in hives, ants in hills, clams in shells, human beings in cities. And even violence is found in all parts of nature, human and animal. But human beings make up the only part of nature which elects presidents, contributes to parties, writes platforms, and passes laws that nudge people into violence and invalidate other human beings for the wrong liaisons or wrong organizations. Only humans find other humans "alien." Only humans segregate themselves into "them" and "us" without even trying for a minute to discover what we might all have in common. After all, a case can easily be made, can't it, that we human beings share the same planet? And in this country, we walk the same land, share the same history, the same flag, some of the same songs, the same immense variety and abundance of foods and products, the same sports... baseball, football... the same roads, street corners, maple trees, water, doctors, dentists, lawyers, roses, and the shade of oaks.

Are there truly sick fanatics who cannot be appealed to by personal engagement? I don't know. Maybe. But sickness of that sort is not moral but pathological. And even Pat Robertson, whom I do not think is sick, but whom I consider the most dangerous man in America, is routinely engaged by a gay man who used to ghostwrite for him, a former friend. Maybe he *can't* be moved very far, but I am not giving up, even on him.

And the beloved mother of one of my closest friends has her good friends, Vice President Cheney and Mr. Rumsfeld, over to her house for a dish of Jeni's ice cream, ice cream which she imports from our Columbus North Market because I told her how wonderful it was, last time I saw her. Are there liberals out there who would have me spit on this woman because her friends involve themselves in issues and policies that trouble me so? I would hope not.

Funny, in the end, how something as abstract as the "new math" can give me a sense of hope. When I draw the Venn diagram, as an aging adult, of "them" and "us," I'm going to have to draw the circles, in all honesty, with the eye of our young adult teacher, Jacob...overlapping a great deal, overlapping like all of Szymborska's clouds, her reprehensible fog and her fidgety, flying birds.

## **Offertory**

Blest is the one love which has the power  
to cross boundaries. Blest are the people who ready themselves for love by self-questioning,  
spiritual deepening and singular patience.  
And blest is the community that readies us and  
deepens us and hones our love, because we  
support its vision, purpose and power.

## **Prayer for Our Common Future**

O Spirit of Freedom, a future for all of us, please.  
Not at the expense of millions in Sudan;  
Not at the expense of civility and kindness, so that name-calling, innuendo truth bending, and  
symbolic posturing are the only reality left  
Not at the expense of Universalist theology,  
which embraces all souls, not just those who  
aren't frightened of me or who agree with me;  
Not at the expense of freedom, which is never  
so much a present as a something that I,  
like every mortal, must claim for myself.  
Blest are you, Freedom, our means and our end.