

Opening Words

We are here
startled by both days of warm weather
and by the sudden misery that took lives
on the shared shore of world's heart.
Reminded again that joy and sorrow,
praise and pain, share our common life,
we begin as usual by centering:

**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

The earth quakes in one place
and is still in many others.
The ice melts in one place,
and freezes like iron in many others.
The New Year comes for some,
but for others, another day arrives.
Ah, my heart! Do you not understand?
The former year moved to a music
but this year moves to the same music.
Joy and sorrow.
Love and loss.
Friends and solitude.
Heart and mind.
Praise and damn.
Day and night.
In and out.
Yes and no.
You and me.
Song and silence.
All rungs in a ladder
that leads, either up or down,
to the only paradise I know.
Here and now. (silence)
You and me, us and them.
Here and there.
It all collapses now
into the singular human heart.
Distance is cancelled.

Time is rolled up and put away.
Memory becomes reality for a time
as we greet those we love, have loved
or even find hard to love
by naming them aloud,
or letting their names echo
through our silent heart.

naming

Outside and inside.
Back and front.
Left and right.
Up and down.
Silence and music.

Music for the day

Readings

The First Reading is a poem by the late Oregon poet, William Stafford, called “Allegiances.”

It was written a quarter century ago.

It is time for all the heroes to go home,
if they have any. Time for all of us common
ones to locate ourselves by the real things
we live by.

Far to the north, or indeed in any direction,
strange mountains and creatures:
elves, goblins, trolls, and spiders... we
encounter them in dread and wonder.

But once we have tasted far streams,
touched the gold, found some limit beyond
the waterfall, a season changes...and we come back, changed, but safe, quiet and grateful.

Suppose an insane wind holds all the hills while strange beliefs whine at the travelers’ ears! We ordinary
beings can cling to the earth and love where we are, sturdy common things.

The Second Reading is taken from the essay

“I’m Rubber, You’re Glue” by the psychologist

Vicki Polin. It was written 9 years ago. I have condensed a much longer article, so this is something of a precis.

Do you remember the child’s rhyme, “I’m rubber, you’re glue. Whatever you say bounces off me and sticks onto you?” We can learn from that rhyme. Many times, people we love and care about say things that are hurtful. Often what they say is a projection of their own feelings onto us, feelings that belong to them, not to us.

These projections are usually considered undesirable by them. Nevertheless, anyone who blames another for his or her own mistake, or seeks a scapegoat, is using a form of *projection*.

That's right. Projection is one of the first *defenses* we learned... as children. A child needs to feel some sense of importance and safety. When this is threatened, the child may seek some magical protection by projecting feelings on to another person. Thus the child can continue to feel safe, guiltless and important. "I didn't do it, Marc did it," is something many of us have heard in one form or another. The child is unable to own his or her own feelings of guilt or shame, and so projects them onto another. Adults are only children who have grown up, and sometimes they continue to project their uncomfortable feelings onto others.

Sermon

I plan the themes, if not my actual sermons, months in advance, (August 15th or so) but after this last week's big tragedy in Southeast Asia, I thought of tossing the topic and preaching on that. When I gave it more thought, however, I realized that I could see a very clear connection between the destruction in Asia and the idea of projection I had originally hoped to address.

You see, as the death tolls rose, my history-loving mind began to remember another earthquake, another tsunami, with similar statistics attached to it. But this earthquake took place a long time ago, namely, in Portugal. Back on November First, on the religious feast called All Saints Day, in the year 1755, a great earthquake shook Lisboa, the capital of Portugal. At the time, Lisboa was the fourth largest city in Europe, one of its banking centers, and a cultural jewel. Much of the citizenry were at Mass, or preparing to observe the holiday, when the quake hit. Churches collapsed on worshippers, houses fell in on families. Almost the exact same number of people were killed by the quake back then as were killed this week in Asia. Not just by the quake, but by the endless tsunamis which followed, literally flinging people and carts and horses down the rubble-clogged streets. Fires followed. And rampaging disease, as many today are predicting for the present populations in Southeast Asia.

Those who survived were stunned and shocked.

"On the holy day!" they said. "It happened on the holy day!"

Their feelings bunched up tight like knots. Fear. Anger. Terror. Despair. Worry. Panic. Grief. Huge feelings. Threatening feelings. Natural and understandable feelings. Having survived the 7.2 Loma Prieta quake myself, I remember every one of those feelings in the very cells of my body, as does every other survivor of that quake I know. For six months after that shock, if a book dropped on the floor, all of us who survived scurried under the table in terror and fear. Yet apparently, many people back in old Lisboa just could not cope with these feelings.

So what did the surviving great minds do, the priests, the professors and the educated? They went around looking for someone to blame, someone onto whom they could project their difficult feelings, so they could escape them. Someone to blame. Scapegoats. And they found them. Pretty quickly too. The heretics. Anyone suspected of being Jewish, even though Ferdinand and Isabella had cast all Jews out of the Iberian peninsula in 1492. In short, the usual suspects in Western History. People who believed differently from them, and who thereby, they said, displeased God, the supposed author of earthquakes. And so they went about the demolished, flooded streets of Lisboa, and lynched as many heretics as they could, trying to curry God's favor and God's renewed blessing on the wasteland that had once been a great city.

The quake had a huge impact on Europe. The compelling details of this great Portuguese quake helped to get the new science of geology off the ground. Contemplation of its human tragedy seeded great literature. The great French writer, Voltaire, for example, based his famous novel *Candide* on this earthquake and its bizarre religious aftermath. Those of you, like me, who have seen Leonard Bernstein's great retelling of Voltaire's story have even seen the great Lisboa earthquake enacted on stage.

And John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, published an influential sermon on this earthquake. Although Wesley, in general, was supportive of the scientific study of that era, he had heard that some folks were daring to say that God had nothing to do with such things, and that terrible earthquakes were just "natural events."

Wesley was horrified. “That would make me feel very uncomfortable to think so,” he wrote. For him, supernatural power alone could produce such disasters, even though he couldn’t be sure why Lisboa had been such a focus of the divine displeasure.

Fortunately, and no matter how uncomfortable anyone is with their feelings, no one has yet hung anyone in Asia, at least as far as I know. But the religious conservatives in several major world religions are, predictably, at least *beginning* their field day. Some conservative Christians are proclaiming that God spared them, since so many of their church buildings seemed to have survived the tempest. They feel that the hand of God was punishing the citizens of those Asian nations, which, they say, treat their missionaries with contempt and even persecution. On the other hand, some conservative Muslim clerics are saying that Allah sent the quake to drive these same long-resented Christian missionaries out. One Jewish rabbi simply feels that G-d is mad at the general low state of humanity and has sent “a warning.” One Hindu group thinks that Brahma has sent a warning to the Indian government who has locked up one of their beloved leaders for some reason. The Buddhists, refreshingly, are not blaming God, since God is not part of their tradition. But only time will tell if the murderous nonsense that followed the Lisboa quake will also infest the Asian quake. I can only pray humanity has grown up a bit in the last couple hundred years.

As I read more about it, the Lisboa earthquake offered me a clear and dramatic understanding of what I had originally intended to speak of this morning. Here are survivors of a great calamity so undone with their feelings that they hurry to find ways to foist them on some poor scapegoat. What feelings did they feel? One: They felt *guilty* for having survived the tsunami... “survivor’s guilt,” it’s called by psychologists. So, since guilt is unbearable, they project their uncomfortable guilt onto the most vulnerable...namely, someone whom society has *already* systemically pushed to the edge... the heretic, the freethinker, and anyone suspected of being a Jew. Two: The survivors also felt numb and overwhelmed, a hard feeling to even describe, so they projected their dizzy discomfort onto the heretics, and hung them. Three: They also felt, strangely enough, shame. “Why us, here in Lisboa? Why not Paris too? Or Naples? Napoli is a large city too!” We are ashamed this catastrophe singled out our city.” So the heretics, always considered, by the powers that be, to be foreigners and interlopers, are hung, vilified by projected shame.

But thankfully enough, the Lisboa event *also* offers us a dramatic example of what it looks like when someone *refuses* to project their uncomfortable feelings onto other people. Sebastiao de Melo, the prime minister serving under the king, survived the quake. On the day after the quake, when asked how human beings should respond to such an act of God, he replied simply, and like a true grown up: “We bury the dead and take care of the living.”

That’s it. “We bury the dead and take care of the living.” As a survivor of such a calamity, he undoubtedly felt many of the same feelings that other people felt: The guilt and shame. The anger and despair. Worry. Panic. And of course, grief for all those he lost in the disaster.

But he did not think these feelings were so hard to bear that he needed to project them onto others. He bore them. He felt them deeply. He wept and wailed, and pounded his fist on the floor. But then he spoke as a grounded adult: “We bury the dead and take care of the living.”

All the living. Heretics and loyal churchgoers. Foreigner and locals. All of them.

This pretty much sums up what I wanted to say this morning, even though originally I never thought I would be saying it by using the dramatic language of catastrophe.

I do have to clarify a few things, though. As the second reading by Vicki Polin makes clear: projection is one of the first *defense* mechanisms we learn as a child. Who is going to argue against a little defense? “I didn’t do it. Marc did it.” The child is simply trying to protect his or her own newborn vulnerability...to get rid of the hard feelings of responsibility by sending them away, magically, onto someone else.

But children are supposed to grow up. Their bodies do, certainly. But not everyone grows up spiritually, and learns how to accept adult responsibility, or how to bear up under intense feelings. Oh, some of this is

understandable, sure, such as when a vulnerable child is abused by violence or by a sexual predator. Anyone can sympathize wanting to unload the horrific feelings generated by such sad tsunamis to the spirit.

But the examples of projection in modern life far exceed the number of people who were so reprehensibly damaged in their childhood. At least I certainly hope so.

So person after person projects his or her personal experiences, unique and singular, onto the world outside, and tries to make them universal or cosmic. They cannot bear their own anger, so the God they have drawn in their own furious image strikes out in anger and hurls people into hell. They cannot bear their own grief, their own poverty, their own sexuality, their own doubts, their own state of life. So the voices rise up and speak about all of “those people” whom they blame for the world’s grief. “Those Muslims,” “those Communists,” “those Capitalists,” “those Great Satans,” “those pagans,” “those Jews,” “those Christians,” “those atheists,” “those French,” “those ghetto blacks,” “those suburban whites,” “those drug users,” and of course, “those homosexuals.” Now of course, the origins of hatred and systemic oppression are more complicated than simple projection, I know, but I assure you, projection is always there in the mix of hatred.

Or, if not hatred, then caricature and category, two terms that often signal danger for the human spirit. A child experiences the idiosyncrasies of his or her parents, and then thinks that all mothers or all fathers are just like that. It’s a short step from that projection to the statement that all women are from Venus, and all men are from Mars, and that’s that. This is simply caricature. And wrong.

Others, who have genuinely terrible stories to tell of their childhood experiences in their home churches or synagogues grow up angry at “religion” in general, projecting their own toxic experience as the Universal Human Experience.

Or, terrified of feeling anything uncomfortable at all, others hold back from living the kind of life that risks *any* possible onslaught of feeling. And thus, they give themselves over, heart and soul, to their heroes and sheroes...pop stars, singers, idols, movie stars and other famous folks, the new gods and goddesses of the secular world, whose pregnancies they can tally and whose scandals they can recite.

And in the conservative *religious* world, those who feel resentful about their lives often project their resentment onto God, who then, with awful, uncontained power, strikes the supposedly deserving with illness, pestilence and earthquakes. No matter that it says very clearly in the scripture “God was not in the earthquake” (Melakim/1 Kings 9:11), many self-described “bible believing” Christians will tell you that it’s God, who is vengeful and punishing, when actually, they themselves would like to even out some childhood hurt. And projection distorts even Jesus, who clearly asked people to turn from violence, war and hatred. But the life of this ancient teacher has been projected onto such a distorted image of God, that his difficult ethical teachings have been almost completely replaced by his Superstar status. For many, he is only a hero to cause a person to swoon, not a teacher who calls for a better way of life.

Projection distorts religious community as well as theology. The leaders, lay and ordained, of any congregation, may serve as convenient projection screens. I know I personally have been seen as people’s mother, despite my gender. Or people’s father, or brother, or sister. People have projected romantic feelings onto me because I remind them of someone they once knew, or anti-romantic feelings, also because I remind them of someone they once knew.

But our poet, William Stafford, says with perfect simplicity: “It is time for all the heroes to go home, if they have any. Time for all of us ‘common folk’ to locate ourselves by the real things we live by.”

We live real and mature lives, I think he is saying, when we live as honest, non-panicking adults. When we do not project our individual feelings away from our hearts, but feel them and bear them as best we can, no matter how uncomfortable they may be. And then, as we feel them, getting on with the real work of life after a huge disaster: “burying the dead and taking care of the living.”

The poet acknowledges that we human beings would like things, “*safe, quiet and grateful.*” But when calamity strikes, be it personal like violence, or international like a quake, and our safety, quiet and gratefulness are

threatened, the response to such a threat is not to find scapegoats or people to blame. But rather, it's to center steadily, *in the midst of our grief, anger and wobbling*, on what we have always known...that we owe each other our care and our love and our courage and our kindness and our strength, no matter what happens. The poet assures us, "We ordinary beings *can* cling to the earth, and love where we are."

The ice-pond in the children's story this morning *is* the earth to which we all can cling... United States citizens, Sri Lankans, Indonesians, Indians, Malaysians, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, skeptics, and Buddhists. Different people have perfectly fine ideas for how to enjoy skating on such a pond. Somehow, they have to learn to live and share, not blame each other, or with strength, claim the whole thing for themselves.

Doris Oursler of this congregation sent me a news clipping with the following moving passage; Sutadhara Tapovanaye, a Buddhist monk, said: "Now, in Sri Lanka, human bodies are piling up and with no identities. *Nobody can recognize bodies as a part of any ethnic group or religious identification.* They are just human bodies. The medical workers give a number for each body," he says. "That means, we have to think about death as inevitable, but at the same time, we have to rethink about life. Though we have different barriers—human-made barriers, actually—reality is beyond that."

Right. Reality is beyond that. Beyond our projections and misunderstandings. Beyond our categories and fears. Beyond our uncomfortable feelings, which are, after all, not final reality, but responses *to* reality. Our daily spiritual work in this new year, it seems to me, as Unitarian Universalists seeking to live a mature faith, might be to pause frequently, daily even, to examine ourselves. To examine our motives in our relationships, our images of church and family and nation, our images of the divine, if we have them, our images of the way things ought to be. Are we projecting our wounds and hurts onto these realities? Can we make sure we are focusing more on what is real, and less on what we fear might be real...via our projections?

And if people project on us, and see us, not for who we are, but for who they would like us to be, is it possible to remember the old childhood rhyme about the rubber and the glue, and not take the hurt personally? Hard work, that, but it can be done.

Time-tested practices like meditation and prayer, or journaling, dream work, or therapy of some sort, might propel such good work. But this is the work I believe we are called to do, in the new year or in any year.

Earthquakes and tsunamis will continue to come into the world. It's the way the world is. They neither seek out particular victims, nor steer away from the self-satisfied and righteous. They neither represent God or God's self-anointed deputies on earth. They are simply the tectonic plates of our common earth chafing against each other, creating the subtle rise and fall of continents as they have been doing for over a hundred million years. And *personal* earth-quakes and tsunamis will continue to come into the world...the deaths of loved ones, the loss of work or prestige or health, or other calamities. But our calling is not to blame, to project, to scapegoat. No, it's to get on with life as best we can, burying the dead if we have to, and taking care of the living, but always, always, remembering to tell the truth kindly and to allow our love for each other to deepen.

Offertory

Prayer

All of us, oh Love,
all of us.

In this small, small village of the earth.

Some hurting. Some not.

Some strong. Some in need of extra strength.

But all of us in this new year.

Reaching out, holding hands across the

small, small creeks, called "oceans" in the human dialect, and called "home" in the language of the dolphins.

Moving to the music of the night,

the waltz of the dawn and the dusk,
the foxtrot of the stars, dancing,
moving, reaching out in tears, in care,
because the feelings are actually there.
All of us, oh Love, all of us.
Old and young and middle-aged.
Every skin color from midnight to noon,
to sunset, to dawn. Every story woven
into the village bible. Every name carved
into the village altar. Everyone drinking
from the same well. All of us.
The whole village. Blest is the village. Amen.