

2005-3-6 **On Death**

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
as human beings, alive and questioning,
 older and younger, feeling and thinking,
wondering and certain
 that we exist at all on this small planet.
Such wonder is worship,
 the ground of our praise and song.
And so we begin our celebration this way:

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:

Let my body remember.
 Let my hands and feet remember.
 Let my breath remember
 those who have come before me,
 those who have come before us.
 Didn't Muhammed wait quietly in his cave?
 And didn't Jesus sigh silently by the blue lake?
 And Kwan Yin, didn't she sit in silence
 thinking about what to do before doing it?
 And what was Siddartha the Buddha doing
 anyway under that tree if not just sitting quietly?
 And Susan B. Anthony, didn't she push back
 from her desk, and take a breath now and then?
 And Florence Nightingale, didn't she
 put down her nurse's hat and think silently about what to write in her essay on
 mysticism before she actually wrote it?
 And Sophia Fahs, didn't she stop telling

stories sometimes and just sit there?
 And didn't Black Elk just notice the sunlight
 glancing off his chair sometimes?
 And Starhawk, does she talk always, or
 does she too keep silence?
 Let us remember them all with our bodies.
 Let us remember them with the silence
 they too knew.

silence

Let us remember the love we have known
 and the struggles and the tears by saying it.
 Let us remember our relationships with the
 images of faces rising before us.
 Let us remember our place in the vast network
 of life and death, our interconnections, by
 naming aloud or in the silence of our hearts
 those who call out to us from that web, that
 vast network, and invite us back to ourselves.

naming

Let us remember with music and text,
 voice and pause, piano and echo, harmony
 and melody, all of those who led the way to us.

Stories

This morning's sermon is not a sermon in traditional form. You will hear stories, brief sentences, and the like. The sound of the bell shall strike throughout. Think of each of these things as an invitation for you to weigh and consider and bless your own inner musings on this topic. Think of each of these stories and reflections as variant meditations on a subject that is with us always, and until the end of our days.

And please be aware that I talk about this topic every Sunday, in one way or another.

bellsound

Godfather Death (*A German folk tale collected by the Brother's Grimm, and as told by Debbie Shaw*)

See original Brother's Grimm story text at

<http://oaks.nvg.org/grimmtales31-32.html#godfatherdeath>

bellsound

Strange Tale (*based on a story by Orson Scott Card, Mortal Gods*)

One day, a whole fleet of spaceships approached our tiny planet earth. They came into our atmosphere and hovered over our great cities. The inhabitants of these ships communicated with our leaders. In exchange for a cure for some kinds of cancer and some cheap ways to build and use engines, they told us they simply wanted some land. A few acres here. A few acres there. No really important land. No acreage in Yosemite or anything like that. Just some land. When asked why, they said “We need it for our religious practices. We assure you that we will do everything possible to not disturb you and your way of life.”

So the strange creatures landed and claimed their land. They looked kind of odd, more like seaweed than anything else. But people were a lot more surprised by their buildings than by their appearance. The creatures from another star built very earthly buildings. Nothing alien at all. In New England, for example, they built white meeting houses. In Chicago, gothic cathedrals. In Los Angeles, Spanish missions. In Madison, some Frank Lloyd Wright synagogue design. In China, pagodas, in India, temples of stone. In Afghanistan, mosques with lovely blue domes. In Africa, modern churches and mosques, and grass temples.

“Why do you use *our* architecture?” people asked them with great interest.

“So as not to disturb you,” they answered politely. “Why, look at us...if we built buildings appropriate to our kind, it would be very upsetting to you indeed.”

People seemed satisfied with the logic of that answer.

After a time, everyone got used to the aliens and their buildings. They would even stop in to visit, and have tea with the alien creatures, who would listen to their human friends talk about their lives for hours on end.

One day an elderly man entered one of their buildings, a nice gothic church, in fact. Out from behind a stone pillar slithered one of the aliens in welcome and greeting.

“You are up to something,” he said. “I am going to find out what this is about.”

“We are here to worship,” said the alien. “We have always told the truth about this.”

“But what do you worship?” protested the man.

“The most Wonderful. The Most Sublime. The Eternal Wisdom. The Most High. The most Holy...just like most of you seem to do. You know, God.”

“Hmm..” said the man. He was quiet for a while, thinking. Then he said suddenly “You people don’t have gender like we do, right?”

“That’s right,” nodded the alien.

“So you don’t have sex, do you? When your children are born, they simply bud off of you, right?” “That’s correct,” said the alien. “All of the species we have ever met, except yours, reproduce like that.”

“So you are telling me,” said the man, “that you and all the other species in the universe are immortal? That you do not know death, and that each of you, after budding off, knows everything the rest of you know going back millions of years?”

“You got it” nodded the alien, if you could call that a nod.

“So do I,” said the old man, smiling at last. And with this last statement, he left.

Two years later he came back to the same place. But he was now very frail. And very sick. He looked as if he would fall over at any moment. The illness that wracked his body was almost palpable.

“I am here to give you what you want,” said the old man to the alien who slithered up to him.

“What we want?” asked the alien.

“Yes. I figured it out. You do not die. We do. And so I am here to give you what you want so you can practice your religion.” And so with these, his last words, the old man lay down on the stone floor of the church. Within minutes, his breathing slowed, then stopped, until finally he stopped breathing and died.

As soon as he died, many other aliens slithered out from behind the columns of the church. They surround the body of the old man. And together they bowed, if you could call it a bow, toward his dead form, as they chanted “Oh Our Lord and Our God. Our Most Holy. Our Most Sacred.”

bellsound

Here is one of the truths about life and death as I have experienced it after 25 years in the parish ministry.

Sebekh'su lived.

He grew up in a village

a day's journey south of On, on the dawn side

of the River. He once saw a vision of Apis

flying on wings made of lapis lazuli. He loved the feel of morning sun on his

shaved head. He was given in marriage to Merit of No, who claimed to have once

seen the Godking Merneptah with her own eyes. Sebekh'su directed the making

of beer at his owner's private brewery for 36 years, and knew local fame. He died

when a horse owned by his protege Nutmesu bolted in a rare thunderstorm and

trampled him. People spoke of Sebekhsu's beer for almost three generations.

bellsound

Marcus Iunius Agricola lived.

He grew up in Bononia not far from the Uia Emilia. He once saw a lark in the sky which seemed to his heart to be the very pivot around which the whole world turned. He loved the taste of *garum* on asparagus in the spring. When he was 17 he tenderly touched, for the first time, L. Publius Donatus of Mutina, his friend of 6 years. They were lovers for a year, until Marcus was given in marriage to Ualeria Flauia Clemens by arrangement of the families; he moved with his wife to take a civil post in great Roma itself. He died of what we would now call a burst appendix when he was twenty one. No one remembered him after 26 years.

bellsound

Saadia, daughter of Muhammed Ibn Rushd and Fatima, lived. For six days after her birth in Damaskus she cried almost constantly. She died at one a.m. on her seventh day of life. From that day on Ibn Rushd always felt a peculiar feeling whenever he gazed at the Niche in the House of Prayer. It was as if he could see the image of Saadia growing into a young girl and woman, as if the Niche was not empty of images but filled with his daughter. When he died thirty two years later of unknown causes, no one else would ever see Saadia hovering in the Niche again.

bellsound

John Sutcliffe lived.

Salisbury was his home for 24 years.

He was taught to read and write at the school convened by Vicar Phillips. John and his brother George both heard a follower of Gerrard Winstanley preaching the end of the "terrorism of original sin," and "the universal salvation of God." Although John and his brother intended to continue working together at the sausage-making business established by their grandfather Wilfred as a support for their widowed mother, John became so entranced with the reasonable vision of Digger life that he left Salisbury for Buckinghamshire to spend time with the great Leveller himself; but he was attacked by a highway band on the way and killed for the coins of his purse and the clothes off his back. His mother and

George remembered him jaggedly, with starts and sudden wet eyes and sighs, for they never did find out what happened to him.

bellsound

Maria Louisa Zacharini lived.

She grew up in Chicago. Mother Cabrini used to walk past her window almost daily. She had an especial devotion to San Pellegrino when she grew up. She made lace. She made up songs, ditties some would call them, right on the spot. She picked dandelion-greens for the family table in May. She married none of the men who came proposing marriage. She loved it when her little nephew Gian Claudio called her Zia Zucca (Auntie Pumpkin) because of the henna in her hair. She died of tuberculosis at age 41 in 1939. Gian Claudio remembers her fondly, although since his stroke he is too busy trying to regain his ability to speak simple words to remember his wonderful redheaded aunt very often.

bellsound

William R. Williams lived.

He grew up in Washington D.C. He spent four years in Dakar in Senegal when he was kid because his father was an attaché at the American Embassy there. When he was a fifteen he knew that he was beautiful, and that both women and men found ways to approach him and touch him. He never did graduate from Morehouse. He went into the restaurant business with his cousin LaVonda Williams. They ran a smart cafe near Dupont Circle for almost ten years. William died of pneumocystis at age 37. Jackson Cole eulogized him at a party the week after he died as the "best looking man in three counties." At his funeral at Corinthian Church of God in Christ down the street from his mother's house they simply said he died of pneumonia. His cousin will remember him till she dies. His mother, between her molten fits of sobbing, sometimes cools down into a steel pillar, for she was always very ashamed of "his way and all."

bellsound

Naomi Blitzstein lived.

Her mother, Ruth, was one of the first women ordained as a rabbi in Canada, in Mississauga, Ontario. Her father's father, and his father were also rabbis. And it was said, but could never be verified, that Musa ibn Maimon, Maimonides

himself, had been a blossom in the family tree. She was a student at McGill, in the music department. On the stage at Lalo Hall at L'Université de Montréal, she simply dropped dead of a burst cerebral aneurysm which had probably been there, (the doctor said sadly to her parents) from birth without anyone knowing it. She was 19 when she died. Her parents, her brother Marc, cousins Sherry, Dana, Devorah and Michael grieve for her at this very moment, the keening hours of *shiva* filling their hearts to their edges. Who knows how long she will be remembered?

bellsound

The author of these strange stories lives.

He drinks maté in the morning, eats figs on late summer nights. He once saw stars shining through pear branches in an orchard and thought for one rare moment he could have picked a star as easily as a pear. He preaches on most Sundays, a spiritual tightrope walker; and folds *tortellini* without any of his grandmother's deftness. He has lost many friends, and many loves, and survives deeply into his other friendships, other loves; these are his singular gravity, his moth wings that keep him aloft, his mysteries. He meditates on flying into the flame at life's end every day at about the same time that he notices that he is.

bellsound

O, that selves woven of names and stories exist!

Oh, you who thrive and read a hundred years hence, a thousand years, a century of centuries to come!

Make in your mouths this sound,

if you still have mouths,

when you set these ancient pages down,

if you still know what pages are:

Mark Louis Belletini once lived and wondered that he lived.

bellsound

From the book of Qoholeth, or Ekklesiastes, found in the Hebrew Bible

There is nothing better for us to do but to eat, drink and enjoy ourselves, for soon enough, we die.

bellsound

How many times have I died already.
 Where is my two year old body,
 rolling on the carpet in the sun?
 Where is my seven year old body, skinny
 and floating on Lake Huron like a cork?
 Where is my 15 year old body, awkward,
 filled with growing pains?
 Where is my 21 year old body, growing wider,
 longing for another body?
 Where is my 30 year old body, fit and strong,
 with contacts over my eyes and hair to my shoulders?
 Where is my 40 year old body?
 And my fifty year old body?
 And where is my seventy five year old body
 right now? Is that the body that will die once and for all?
 Or will it die in exactly the same way as
 my seven year old body died?

Who is Mark who lives? Who is Mark who dies?
 An address? A degree? A career? A friend?
 A teacher? A man who weeps every day? A man who cooks? Who is the me that
 is, and is becoming?

bellsound

Will "I" be in a million years in some other form?
 Growing as a apple in some future orchard?
 Reincarnated as a woman named Beth
 with her own life, her own address and degree,
 her own memories, that are not mine?
 Will the universe pop out a copy of me, a replica
 some time, because that's what universes do?
 Will I sit and have tea with Jesus in a garden?

Rejoice with Buddha in giving up life forever
and embracing nothingness?

Or will I have adventures in a thousand worlds no one has yet dreamed of in
either literature or theology?

Will my last body come back to life

because G-d calls it back? Which body will
that be? The seven year old? This body?

Or will that call instead come from a laboratory voice?

Or are these my words written on this page

my only memorial, save my image (which image?) in the memories of all who
outlive me?

Why is death considered a period at the end of life's sentence?

What is wrong with a comma?

What is wrong with a question mark?

bellsound

Who *wants* to live forever?

What does forever feel like?

What does life have to do with death?

If "life and death but *one thing* are," as the poet said, what is another name for
that *one thing*?

Potential? Spirit? G-d? Cosmos? Energy?

Or were some of the rabbis right all along?

It was a story in the beginning.

And a story in the end.

And the whole purpose of it

is to tell the stories and live the lives.

Is death sacred? Is life sacred?

Praise for all that is, but most especially this
singular moment, when our breaths share
this space of life and celebration and meditation.

Soon this moment will know its own death,
and be no more.

Let us rejoice in what is here, now, and be glad.

bellsound

Offertory

Prayer

Life of my own life,
in between the heartbeats of my heart,
and the breaths of my breath,
I raise my voice in a song of thanks,
that you are now,
that forever is not any more your home,
than this moment is right now,
this moment which is the threshold
on which I stand
before I enter the bright
and eternal heaven
of this song.

