

2005-4-10 Rhetoric of No
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
on a flowering day in April
to worship in spirit and in peace,
to affirm that we, to, are part of the spring,
bold and blossoming, opening to new warmth.
And to affirm that we, to, are rooted deep,
not just in the earth, but in a rich heritage
of both yes and no, praise and caution. Thus we say:

**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

I open myself to you, O Spring!
And you reach out to me,
your branches flashing with slow motion fireworks,
pink and white, your rain-darkened soil
exploding with daffodils which will not let me
turn away.

I open myself to you, O Spring!
Kelly green shoots displacing the brown grass,
the intemperate blue displacing the winter gray,
blessing both the bottom of my feet
and the top of my head.

I open myself to you, O Spring!
The transformations, so graceful, so obvious,
so thorough, remind me of all the possibilities

for my own soul, my own society.

If tulips bloom, then why can't peace also blossom?

You know, real peace, in countries fighting wars?

If yellow daffodils can flower, then why not reconciliation? Between people who really are at odds with each other?

If violets, in all their delicacy, continue to brave

the grass on which people walk, then why can't joy unfold just as shamelessly?

And if forsythia flowers can be quiet and beautiful at the same time, why can't we?

silence

And if spring rises with colors and blossoming, why can't we, we who are also part of the spring? Spring needs the full world in order to exist... sky and soil and roots and branches. And we, too, in order to spring, must go to our full world, our past, our dreams, our sorrows and our thanksgivings...bringing to mind, today especially, the loves which have brought us to this day, to this hour, and to dreams of peace and reconciliation. Aloud, or silently in our hearts, we gather the names of those who are alive within us, even in this house of worship...

naming

And if spring fills the world with unrepentant color, what prevents us from filling the world with the kind of colorful, unrepentant love which calls violence into question, and offers injury a chance to heal? May there be reconciliation and may there be healing. May there be restoration. And may there be peace. And may there be music.

First Reading *A fragment of a letter by the poet W. H. Auden and a reply by the poet W. S. Merwin, both dated in the month of June, 1971.*

In response to On Being Awarded the Pulitzer Prize (June 3, 1971), To the Editors:

As a fellow citizen whose views on American foreign policy are, I should guess, pretty much the same as his; as a fellow poet, and an admirer, I feel it is my duty

to say that, in my opinion, Mr. W.S. Merwin's public refusal to accept the prize money, as reported in your Review of June 3, was an ill-judged gesture.

To begin with, it implies that the Pulitzer juries are *official* political bodies, which they certainly are not. On the contrary, if there were a living American poet of major importance who openly supported our intervention in Vietnam, I think it highly unlikely that he would be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

Secondly, Mr. Merwin has no right, if he does not wish to receive the money, to dictate to others how it shall be spent. I should have thought the obvious thing for him to do, feeling as he does, was to accept the money and then privately donate it to the causes he has at heart. *W.H. Auden*

W.S. Merwin replies:

I'm sorry to learn of Mr. Auden's admiration for my writing from a statement that calls in question a piece that I was at pains to make as clear as possible.

I don't see how my comment on receiving the Pulitzer Prize implies that the juries are "politically official bodies."

I can't see what was "ill-judged" in that, nor why it should be any more surprising than my feeling about the war itself.

I thought I had made it clear that what I did was not intended as a comment upon anyone connected with the prize.

As for what Mr. Auden terms the "logical conclusion" of my position (i.e., not publishing at all) I've thought of that, too. But we mourn, at times, and still hope to go on living. I'm sorry if he was troubled by it, but what I did was an act of mourning, and I can't regret the form of it.

Second Reading

From a recent article by psychologist Jan Wagner, "Raising Safe Kids in an Unsafe World"

Action steps:

- 1) Teach your children that it's better to be safe than polite. By the age of two, children have already discovered the power of "NO!" Give a positive direction to this natural instinct by teaching your children that they have a right to say NO to adults who make them feel uncomfortable with their requests or touches.
- 2) In our society, No does not always mean No. Set an example of being clearer with your children by only using No when you mean it. Don't override a child's No---work it out with them. Respecting their feelings is the foundation for helping to keep them safe.
- 3) Give your children supporting statements beyond No. Teach your children expressions they can use when any person's actions make them feel uncomfortable. For example, they can say: "Please stop, I don't like that."
- 4) Test your children's ability to say No. Help them to practice saying No in a clear and forceful voice.
- 5) Reassure your children that you are on their side. Assure them that you will never be angry with them if they refuse a request and appear to be rude to an adult, older teen or classmate in the process of keeping themselves safe.

Sermon

It's been an dizzying couple of weeks in the world, by my account. The death and majestic burial of a long-lived Bishop of Rome, Pope John Paul II; the wedding of royalty in a bright stone chapel echoing with lavish music; the often lurid trial of a pop-star who has been accused of inappropriate touch...it's been nothing short of dramatic.

Of course, as a parish minister for 26 years, I have long ago come to understand, as I imagine many of you do, that "dizzying drama" is not the sole property of the famous and televised. There is drama in the lives of people everywhere, the uncelebrated, and the un-televised.

This became abruptly clear to me in my ministry very early in my career. A young woman of 23 came into my office...I was a mere five years older than she was at that time...and she slowly revealed to me the drama of her life. She was not a member of the congregation... she just walked in the door off the street. She brought her three-year-old son with her. She took a seat, and her son sat on the floor and played with a toy he had brought.

Her boyfriend, with whom she lived, was beating her up. I told her that it was not OK for anyone to lay a hand on her in that way...ever, and that she needed to find another place to stay that very night. I offered to help her. She told me she loved her boyfriend. I told her “Love him all you want, but from a safe distance. No one has a right to slap you around. Ever. I am convinced you have to say **No** to him tonight...and tomorrow, and for all of your days.” Since I had not met her before, I asked her a few questions about herself and her life story. Within a short time, I found out that this man was not the first person to beat her...her older brother and her father had done plenty of that, as well as sexually abusing her from age six on. And her mother joined the fray as well. This woman’s dramatic life had convinced her that being beaten and sexually abused was normal.

I was not prepared for this revelation of horrific drama. Remember, this was before Oprah and before any self-help books, and before the science of statistics applied itself to such appalling numbers. Seminaries did not teach much about such issues because no one else did either. It was a hidden reality here in the United States.

As a twenty-eight-year old man who grew up in a family where I was never hit even once, I really was blown away by her story; but I assure you, I have heard similar stories hundreds of times since.

I told this young woman that she needed not just to move out from this man’s house, but also that she would need to get help in facing this history of torment, and finding some healing from it.

We did find a place for her to stay that very night...he was working nights so she was able to get out without a blow-up. But still, it was difficult and it was messy. And she came to talk with me two more times, even though I was only shooting from the hip and had no real knowledge of her problems based on studies and

classes. There were no studies and classes on this subject in those days. But, she did take my halting words seriously enough to get into therapy. That too was difficult. And expensive. After she talked with me the third time, I never saw her again.

Hers was the first story I heard which told me how difficult and how important the word “**No**” could be in English. Such a small word. Not much changed, really, from the Latin original, **Non**. An old word. With an apparently clear meaning on the surface, but with all sorts of other meanings attached to it by the culture. This woman had been taught that to say **No** to adults was wrong, rude and impolite. Children don’t sass their elders. Ever. And so the only normalcy she knew turned out to be a violent drama with no good in it at all. Throughout my ministry, I always wondered what happened to her. She was in my mind often as a reminder that while Popes and Princes and Rock Stars may live dramatic lives, their lives are no more dramatic than the life of this ordinary woman.

Who knows how the Michael Jackson trial will turn out...but I assure you, the issue of the safety of children is not just something of concern to Michael Jackson’s prosecutors, or the Roman Catholic Church, the archdiocese of Boston in particular. While I was in Chicago last week at the Ministerial Fellowship Committee meeting, there was a lot of talk about a new document that is coming out of the Unitarian Universalist Association offices in Boston. It’s a document suggesting that all Unitarian Universalist congregations take the safety of their beloved children, older and younger, as central, and a major expression of their living faith tradition. The document is demanding, and, if implemented, will change a lot of things around even this church. Some people may even get huffy about it, saying that it’s expecting too much, and that there should be more natural and free-flowing trust in a church such as ours.

But I assure you that Roman Catholic parishes are hardly the only folks dealing with issues of inappropriate touch, especially of adults to children. Protestant congregations, evangelical congregations, Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, Humanist and pagan groups, and atheist or skeptical families and clubs seem to suffer from insufficient **NO** as well. And our Association is taking this reality seriously enough to propose concrete ways of dealing with it.

Most researchers have found out that if a child says a clear **No** to an adult attempting anything, that adult will stop immediately. But, as Jan Wagner says in the second reading, children have to be taught to say **No** *clearly* in a world where the power of **No** has eroded a great deal. Now, **No** can mean “maybe.” Or even “later.” In movies, just as often as in real life, if a teen-aged girl says **No** to the advances of a passionate boy, the story suggests that the girl’s **No** is not really a **No**, but a “maybe.” Or a “not so fast.” Our children’s story this morning is amusing, but also shows a common pattern where a strong **No** can be eroded quickly into a **Yes** by a few simple tricks. And because it’s good for little sisters to eat their green vegetables, no one is going to complain about those clever tricks this time.

But this capacity to twist No into a Yes is borne out in lives outside the sexual realm. Comedians have been joking for years now about how the phrase “No new taxes” doesn’t mean any such thing. It means a rearrangement of taxes so that some benefit more than others. On the other hand, **No** can signal a very strong political affirmation, not based on any hard evidence, but on simple, forceful assertion, a very devious form of rhetoric, which is, after all, only the Greek word for “persuasion.” For example, listen to one-time press secretary Ari Fleischer answering a question as to whether we Americans might adjust our habits of energy consumption and make changes in the way we live. “That’s a big **No!**” said Mr. Fleisher. Then he went on to assert that the administration believed that lavish energy consumption *is* the “American way of life,” and that “it should be the goal of policy makers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one.” (May 7, 2001) This is the kind of **No** which some of us would dearly *like* to turn into a Yes. No?

For such a short little word, the word **No** can mean a great deal. And if it’s true that the word **No** can mean *maybe* or even *yes* when said in certain ways, it’s also true that folks have found ways to say **No** without ever actually using the apparently *very* uncomfortable word.

“We’ve always done it this way!” and “We’ve tried that before, and it didn’t work!” are very effective ways of saying **No** without sounding the actual word. I am not sure that the evocation of those two famous appeals to the authority of tradition actually addresses any real issues that are being sincerely raised. They’re

just a longer way of saying **No** as well as “Mind your P’s and Q’s” and “Don’t rock my boat.”

The letter exchange between the poets Auden and Merwin you heard earlier was quite instructive I think. It reveals another reason why the word **No** can be so complex. Merwin rejected the Pulitzer Prize because he was so distraught over the Vietnam War. Auden chastised him with logical vigor, asking him why he didn’t just accept the prize money and give it away to anti-war causes.

But Merwin responded that his **No** to the Pulitzer Prize was “an act of mourning.” That is a beautiful and honest emotion, mourning, I think. But emotion is not the same thing as cool logic. Auden was seeing things from a logical and even social perspective. Merwin was approaching this from a deeply personal and emotional perspective. The translation of his deep grief about the war in Vietnam was his **No** to the Pulitzer Prize. Auden was right that it was not necessarily a logical thing to do. But Merwin was right in asserting his right to feel his way through his deep concern for his country.

There is no question, **No** is an elastic word. The late Bishop of Rome, Pope John Paul II, was alarmed by how elastic the word **No** had become in his own church. In the last hundred years, you see, the Roman tradition has come to really stress *beginning-of-life* and *end-of-life* issues much more than it ever had in the past. However in the Church’s past, life issues that fell *in-between* the beginning and the ending were interpreted with a different theology. So that great Roman theologians found ways to allow executions and warfare. The *just-war* theory of Thomas Aquinas allowed for a variety of wars to be fought by Christians in good faith. Even the cry of the Bishop who first called for a Crusade against the Islamic control of Jerusalem shrieked quite theologically “*Deus Vult!*” (“*God Wills It.*”)

And the Church itself burned plenty of heretics, which is a form of execution which, although, yes, officially carried out by the state, was undeniably a religious affair. But during his papacy, John Paul II was persuaded that the **No** of the church *could not be* so selective. He, perhaps quite understandably, wanted some consistency in his church’s theology. And so, through his constant persuasion, by the time of his death, Roman Catholic teaching had moved solidly *away* from just-

war theory and *toward* a Mennonite form of pacifism. And its leaders can often be seen rallying in anti-death penalty gatherings.

Now unlike Karol Wotyla, *aka* John Paul II, I do not think that the beginning and ending of life issues can be associated with such clear cut **NO's**. And I thought this both before and after Terry Shiavo's death. And although I personally have a rather unequivocal **No** to offer to the death penalty, I have been around long enough to realize that the issue of war is far more complicated, perhaps the most complicated issue on earth. And I say that, despite the clear and unequivocal **No** I have given to all the wars that have been fought in my name, in my life-time.

So I have to agree that the word **No** is often difficult to pronounce with any complete and secure clarity, especially when addressing certain ethical issues. The complexity of the world, and the even greater complexity of the human heart and human cultures, see to it that exceptions to most situations are almost as common as the rule.

But this brings me back to what I said earlier, while talking about children. There *can be no* equivocation about the kind of **No** a child has to learn to say. Even though many adult **No's** might have to be cautionary in order to be really honest, a child, or young teenager for that matter, can afford no such luxury. The safety of children, younger and older, has to be one of our basic congregational values as far as I am concerned. And helping to put an unequivocal **No** in the mouths of our children, so that they can confront inappropriate touch, seems like an important part of raising our children in a Unitarian Universalist environment.

Dr. Jan Wagner gives many helpful suggestions about how this can be done in the second reading. I especially like it where she says: "Don't *override* a child's **No**---work it out with them. Respecting their feelings is the foundation for helping to keep them safe." And I like it also that she asks parents to help their children say their unequivocal **No** with humane language. "Teach your children expressions they can use. For example, they can say: Please stop, I don't like that."

In our church, there are no bishops. There are no higher authorities outside the congregation and its elected leadership. There are only us, both elected officers and congregation and staff. So we who are adults are responsible for our beloved children. And please do not be so foolish as to think that these kinds of things only

happen in Catholic churches in Boston with Cardinal Law winking at them. These things have happened in our own congregations over the years. And many times, too. Some of you have probably heard of Horatio Alger, who wrote the famous Motto, “Go West, Young Man!” Well, what you don’t know was that he was a Unitarian minister serving a church on Cape Cod, and that he was run out of the church for his *freely admitted* sexual escapades with children in the church.

Now, in the year before I left California to come to this congregation, I received a phone call. I heard a woman’s voice. She used her name, but I had to confess to her that I didn’t know who she was. “Oh,” she said, “it was such a long time ago. I am not surprised. You might remember me if I tell you that I was a young woman of 23 when I saw you. I brought my son with me. I sat in your office and told you that my boyfriend was beating me...”

“Say no more,” I said, “I remember exactly who you are. And I have wondered about you all of these years, and what had become of your life.”

“Well,” she said, “that’s why I am calling you. You told me that you didn’t know much about my situation, but that you were sure it was important to say **No** to my boyfriend, and to learn to say **No** about unwanted sexual advances from my family members, and just to learn to say **No** for safety’s sake all the time. As you know, I moved out of my boyfriend’s house. It was hard for my son and me for a while. But I just wanted to call to tell you that somehow it all has worked out OK. I went into therapy and dealt with my past. I learned I was not responsible for what my father and my brother did. I learned that I am lovable for who I am. And seven years after I saw you last, I met a wonderful man who loves me for who I am. We are married, and he is very gentle and kind to me, and he loves my son, and has been a good father to him. My son, by the way, is graduating from Stanford University tomorrow night. He is doing good too, and I am so proud of him. So I just wanted to call you and say ‘Thank you for teaching me how to say, **No**.’”

Well, I wasn’t expecting such a call, that’s for sure. We ministers mostly know stories about which we never know the ending. We learn to live with that *not-knowing* as part of our lives. It’s not always easy, but we really, in fairness, don’t expect anything else. Lives just move on. It’s their nature. Life moves on. That’s its nature.

But when a minister gets a call like that, I'll tell you what he does. He thanks the woman over and over for calling. Then he sets his head down on his messy desk and weeps for the rest of the afternoon. He knows he didn't know much of anything when he was a 28-year-old young whippersnapper. And he has winced at some of his own sermons over the years, and wrung his hands for mistakes he has made, or omissions, or words spoken in anger or with clumsiness. He knows ministers are hard on themselves for being human, that's for sure. Often, he is not sure he knows what he is doing.

But on that one day, he knew how amazing this work is. Lots of drama, no less than the drama found in the life of popes and princes and pop-stars. Lots of amazement. But nothing for the television. Just thanksgiving that sometimes it all works out. That lives can be transformed right before your eyes. That horrible things can give way to the sight of a golden-haired young man walking in a black gown to Pomp and Circumstance as his mother beams with pride. And that, in the end, many of the No's of life can be translated at last, honestly, into a great big Yes.

Offering

To be a congregation, we have to do three things: promise each other our honesty and care, create a system of safety for one and all, and support the realities of a building with rooms, roof, welcome, joy, staff and shelter for the spirit. The symbol of the morning offering represents that reality. We offer you that symbol now.

Prayer of No

To say Yes to Thee, O Love,
my path and my goal,
I have to say No to anyone who makes it their joy
to demean or ridicule anyone.
I have to say No to anyone who tries to co-opt
anyone into thinking like they do, just to shore up their own ego.
I have to say No to anyone asking me to support their cause only because they
think I should.
I have to say No to anyone who offers me affection

in exchange for praise.

I have to say No to violence as a solution and injury as a pattern.

And I have to say No to deceptions delivered with
smiles and a sense of humor.

I have to say No to everything that would distract me from my path, from my goal,
from Thee, o Love,

O Blessed Spirit of my Life.