

2005-4-17 On Frustration
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Opening Words

We are here
to celebrate that we live at all on this earth,
and join together to face both our joys and woes
with the powerful gift of our reason
and the tender blessing of our compassion.

Remembering that we are all in this together
we bless our time of worship with these words:

**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 do not breathe, save that the greening trees
churn out oxygen for me to do so.
I do not drink, save that there is still some drinkable water left, as
yet unused by human entitlement.
I do not eat, save that sun and rain have fallen on soil-hidden seed
for many weeks before the asparagus appears on my plate
I do not speak, without knowing that language is a gift I received,
not a tool I invented. I do not mourn my losses, without knowing
that tears splash all around the earth, and that billions sigh in
harmony with me. I do not laugh, without knowing that my
laughter is bound by culture and temperaments, not of my creation.

I do not keep silence, without knowing that the sun, more than one hundred million kilometers from this building, has been keeping perfect silence for 5 billion years longer than we are now going to keep silence.

silence

I do not breathe in this room, save that others have breathed before me. Parents, grandparents, ancestors. Mentors, teachers, friends. Therefore, grateful for all who brought me to this place by their nurture and challenge, I lift up their names in acknowledgement... in the silence, or aloud in the common air of this house of praise.

naming

I do not live without building bridges between myself and all that exists with me, and before me, and after me. I build bridges from the heart of the musicians and poets to the heart of my own heart. I build bridges between myself and the artists who multiply the beauty of the world. And, in that building of bridges, I catch some glimpse of what the ancients called spirit.

Readings

The First Reading is a poem by Wisawa Szymborska, "Wielkie To Szczescie," Literally, "How Lucky We Are." 1993

We're extremely lucky *not* to know the kind of world we share with any precision.

To really know about it, you would have to live a long, long time, unquestionably longer than the world itself. Get to know other worlds, if only for comparison.

You would have to rise above our flesh, which only seems to be able to frustrate us and cause problems.

And for the sake of good research, “the big picture” and all that, you would have to actually transcend time itself, in which everything else hurries and twirls.

But from that lofty perspective, you might as well bid farewell to things like “incidents” or “details.” Keeping our weekly calendars would inevitably seem like senseless behavior, dropping letters in the mail box just some youthful impulse, and the sign “No Walking On the Grass” a symptom of lunacy.

The Second Reading comes from the Masnavi, the masterwork of the great Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi. I am moved to know that at his funeral, Muslims, Jews, Christians, skeptics and Zoroastrians all walked behind his coffin. In this world of inter-religious conflict, it's good to hold his name in high esteem. The following lines are taken from two different “books” of the Masnavi, the 3rd and the 6th. I consulted with a Rumi scholar on line this week to get these texts and suggestions for other translations.

Search for the Truth in the same place where, in your hour of misery, you call out to Mercy. In the hour of pain you turn in that direction, Right? But when your frustrations have gone, does that mean that your good sense has left too?

When everything is going wrong, you call out to God, but as soon as everything is going smoothly, you say "I don't know where I want to go anymore." Yet when your frustration is great, you know exactly what you want. Your cleverness and confidence sometimes actually keep you from reality. Or, conversely, they may sometimes acquaint you with actual rapture. But I say instead, “Sell your cleverness and confidence and buy bewilderment: set your feet on the ground before you take on a pilgrimage to the great city of Bukhara !

-Rumi's Masnavi, Book 3:

1140-46

If you know everything, and are sure of it, you cannot be grounded. Give up cleverness and hang out with everything you don't know. Know that cleverness is a trap; it only wants to win and be right. Ambition is no more real than a scarecrow. Why should anyone devoted to Mercy wish to be clever? The clever ones are content to be ingenious; but there are sacred fools who have turned away from things to rest in the Source of Things, the way a baby curls hands and feet around the nurturing breast of the mother.

Rumi's Masnavi, Book 6: 2371-57

Sermon

I don't know about you, but I have been known to eat a whole heaping bowl of frustration for breakfast. Take this past Thursday, for example. I opened a kitchen closet door to deposit some recycling materials into the proper bag, and when I closed the door (and not very hard), the clock hanging above the door simply slipped off its precarious nail onto the tile floor and broke into five distinct pieces. The hour-hand was flung all the way under the dining room table. Mumbling to myself, I cleaned up the mess and continued with my day.

I turned on the garbage disposal in the sink to get rid of some onion skins I had left in it from a sauce I made the previous night. Turns out a tea spoon had fallen into the drain. The grinding noise was horrible. By the time I got to the switch, the machine had stopped all by itself. So I had to lay down on my back on the floor and use that little hexagonal wrench thing to try and make the disposal work again.

Moments later, as I reached into the refrigerator to get some juice with which to down my vitamins, my elbow caught the inside of the refrigerator in such a way that it pushed on the egg carton,

which naturally swung outward, falling to the floor, spreading sticky yellow yoke ooze everywhere. It took a very long time to clean that up.

I decided to go downstairs and get my mail, if for nothing else but to get out of my place before the roof caved in. In the mailbox was 1. a notification that I had not paid a certain bill, which I was totally sure I had paid; and 2. a notification that the insurance was going to cover only a third of my medical expenses from my last ruinously expensive visit to a doctor.

As I climbed back upstairs to my loft, grinding my teeth, I decided that it was almost time to crawl back into bed and start the day all over again. Otherwise, I figured, I would soon be completely unhinged by all this frustration before the clock struck noon.

Except my kitchen clock was now in five pieces in my trash bin. So I checked to see what time it was on the electric clock in the bedroom. It was flashing 12 noon. There had apparently been a power outage of some sort while I was down getting the mail and everything electric had gone kaput.

So now that the power was back on, I turned on my home computer to check the time. The computer clock was apparently haywire, since it read “5:33 PM” and the sun was still clearly in the east. So I tried to get on line to check the exact time. The cursor suddenly froze on the screen, and after trying everything in the book to thaw it, I had to shut the whole thing off.

To top it all off, when I got down into the garage to get into my car to head for a home visitation, my left rear tire was going flat.

If this is what my life looks like on the day before I write my sermon on frustration, I can hardly wait to see what my life will be like in the week before I offer a sermon on “despair.”

Of course, frustrations like I just described are as ordinary and as daily as our breath. And sometimes they *do* indeed seem to bunch up, like they did last Thursday. But I assure you, there is no grand conspiracy set against me, no great supernatural plot lashing me with aggravations in order to wear me down.

Things simply wear out. Spaces are tight. Not every movement of the body is elegant. The memory is fragile. Accidents do happen because not one of us can be mindful and conscious all the time. We're not gods and goddesses after all. We're flesh and blood. Szyborska puts it so well in her poem. In order to avoid all accidents and to know the world perfectly, *You would have to rise above our flesh, which only seems to be able to frustrate us and cause problems.*

And you and I know we cannot "rise above the flesh." So there is no way to avoid frustrations.

Still, there are frustrationsand then there are *frustrations*. And some of those greater frustrations might even ask of us our best spiritual insight. Let me unpack that a bit.

Frustration is another word directly from the Latin, like the word *No* I unpacked last week. Those simple syllables meant, and still mean, after 2000 years: "To do something in vain. To delay forward progress."

On that Thursday morning, my intended "progress" was very modest. I wasn't planning on saving the world. I was only trying to get to the office, after visiting two housebound church members. I was indeed delayed by all the frustrations. My actions with the garbage disposal, clocks and computer screen seemed all in vain. Worse, the frustrations continued on that day, too...I hit every single red light on the way to my visitations, and you need to know

that I have good evidence that the signal lights in Columbus are the longest in the nation. And then I was caught behind sluggish caterpillars of traffic, twenty cars long, which ground me to a halt five times in an hour, far from any pesky red light.

Despite it all, I did most of what I wanted to get done, and I did in the span of a single day. I may have ground my teeth a bit, but in the end, I can hardly say that my life that day was “lived in vain.”

Small frustrations like that are just that...small frustrations, mere annoyances. But there are other frustrations which seem to eat up greater portions of modern American life, but which themselves seem somewhat foolish. They raise the serious question about the nature of our expectations. The myth of personal progress for all Americans, which began, I think, with Benjamin Franklin’s famous autobiography, is simply a false expectation. Not every citizen can become president of the USA, no matter what they told you in grade-school civics class. No one owes us success. It’s not written into the American soil, it’s not promised us by God, despite what some of the louder TV evangelists say. Sometimes even our most sincere work is not rewarded with success, for I am aware of no guarantees. If you think there are guarantees, I’d love to see them.

And those popular diets and snazzy exercise machines which promise, via spiffy television infomercials, to turn back the calendar and restore us to our youth, often prove to be even worse examples of false expectations. I think it’s because they appeal to a certain sense of the miraculous, the “something for nothing” mentality that seems to dominate much of American culture these days. You know, you can gyrate to disco music for 6 weeks and lose 150 lbs, you can buy 23 houses without any down-payments, you can spend ten bucks on line and become the archbishop of Worthington without taking a single seminary course. There always seems to be some secret formula that will change the day,

some astute phrase found in the pages of Cosmopolitan or GQ that will save our romantic relationships just like that. All I can say to any of this is that, if any of us feels frustrated because these things rarely work like they pretend, it might be better for us to focus on the nature of our expectations, rather than on the painful bitterness of our frustrations.

But what happens when the stakes are higher? What happens when there are deep frustrations in significant relationships...in families and marriages, for example? Or the workplace?

And how do you respond when the frustration lasts longer than a single day? Or a single week? Or even, a single year? What happens when an election that you have worked on very hard goes off in a different direction than you had hoped? What happens when important state social programs you helped to establish are cut? What happens when your body betrays you, and gets sick with something the doctors find hard to diagnose? What happens when your job is downsized, or your parents' mental acuity slowly evaporates?

When we are frustrated a long time, when our progress is delayed, when our actions seem like they are in vain, what kind of response can we make?

The first thing to check is to get very clear about what it is we really know. Oh, we know there is a problem. But what is it, actually? Is it a problem with our perception of things, or with the larger society? What kind of communication did you try, spouse to spouse? Am I expecting that others should think and feel just like I do? What does the doctor actually know? Did you write it down? Did you ask questions? Did you write down the answers? What do I actually know?

The second thing to check is to get very clear about what we *don't*

know. “Sell your cleverness and purchase bewilderment,” says Rumi. “If you know everything, and are sure of it, you cannot be grounded. Give up cleverness and hang out with everything you don’t know. Know that cleverness is a trap; it only wants to win and be right. Ambition is no more real than a scarecrow. Why should anyone devoted to Mercy wish to be clever?”

Good question. I know many people who think of themselves as devoted to Mercy. To compassion in human affairs. To social justice based on the sympathy of the heart. I often am bold to count myself among them. But when my progress toward a merciful world is thwarted, and I am frustrated at a deep level, I find I want to throw a few stones and figure out exactly who is to blame. Sometimes, the first response to great frustrations is to come up with a solution. You might “know” exactly who to point to. “The right wing churches tilted the election. It’s all the fault of evangelists like Rod Parsley at the edge of town! He’s the one who wants to change the constitution so that everything is both bigoted and biblical.” Or, “Our social programs are all being downsized because of the galloping greed of corporations like Haliburton or Enron.”

But is it really all that simple? If Haliburton collapsed tomorrow, would justice automatically flow like a mighty stream? Would the jobless find jobs? Do I really know that much?

I think Rumi’s medicine is hard to swallow at first, but that does not mean it’s bad medicine. “Give up cleverness and hang out with everything you don’t know.” Cleverness is often knowledge based on moral righteousness, not cold, sober facts, I think he is saying. Such knowledge looks more like fierce ambition than any kind of wisdom, says Rumi. Your actual goal is not Mercy, he says quite forcefully, *but being right*. You want to get a notch on your belt, get a good jolt of self-esteem from all the good work you have done. You were doing good work to help people, but other people

frustrated your efforts. You are good, they are bad. Simple, clear knowledge, it would seem.

But such “knowledge” is most often simply wrong. And Szymborska really calls me to task when she insists that it’s actually quite impossible to really have such clear moral knowledge to begin with...to actually know the world *that* well and have all the answers, we would have to transcend time and space, she says. And I for one don’t believe that is possible.

Rumi adds another amazing series of insights. “Search for Truth in the same place where in your hour of your Misery, you call out to Mercy. In the hour of pain, you turn in that direction, Right? But when your frustrations have gone, does that mean that your good sense has left too? When everything is going wrong, you call out to God, but as soon as everything is going smoothly, you say “I don’t know where I want to go anymore.” Yet when your frustration is great, you know *exactly* what you want.

Here Rumi is telling us that times of frustration can be seen as a gift of superb clarity. We know exactly what we want when we are suffering. Our goals become clear. Our intentions sharp as a knife. We even understand what we have to do differently to get there. But often, when the urgency is past, he says, we forget our direction, and just mope.

I think he’s trying to ask us, “Where is your patience? Did you really think this work of Mercy didn’t require the deep spiritual work of patience? Did you really think that you could urgently campaign for just one election, and that everything else would magically turn around? Did you think that your million-name computer petition was a magic bullet? Or a spiritual Atkins diet to reduce the weight of all social problems in three weeks? Did you really think that the problems in America that frustrate you so would be solved in your lifetime? On your watch? Or did you

really think that frustration at this level is simply an irritation like a mosquito or a broken clock and not a good and reliable teacher? Do you really think that you are entitled to live in heaven now because you care so much, know so much, and you really have fought the good fight and run the good race?

Rumi's questions are tough. They demand a groundedness and a patience of us that is not typical of the instant and easily frustrated American approach. "Sell cleverness and skill and buy bewilderment: set your feet on the ground before you take on a pilgrimage to the great city."

I have been examining my own cleverness and sense of skill all week, and wondered where I could buy a little bewilderment. I am not sure I know yet, although I suspect that searching my heart for some more realistic, less grandiose goals might be part of it. And maybe that's all there is to giving up blame, cleverness and pretense...just saying, "I don't know all the answers, but I can tell you that although the world and its ways often bewilder me, my vision itself has not changed at all...it's gotten clearer, in fact, with each frustration that has delayed me. What is my vision? It's a dream of justice for all, regardless of differences and distinctions. I have devoted my life to working on that dream, patiently, patiently, incrementally, by organizing with our interfaith BREAD organization, by teaching about gay and lesbian issues in our universities and colleges, by being a mentor to my godchildren; even by preaching in this church.

I will not ever see heaven in my lifetime...I know that now...but I am a fool if I let frustration drain away my patience so that my distant descendants will never walk an earth made fair and just.

My broken clock was just an aggravation, really. So are the three minute red lights, the egg yolks oozing on the floor, and flashing 12 o'clock. But a true frustration might serve as an invitation both

to greater clarity of vision, and less swagger about who is to blame.

I know one thing, I think, amongst the vast encyclopedia of what I don't know. Frustrations, great and small will not disappear from the earth in my lifetime. What else, I wonder, did I expect?

Offering

The offering is a time for folks to do for our shared church home what they freely and gladly do in their own private homes: pay the bills, keep the roof above their head, clean the carpets, lessen the mortgage, nurture the garden, and water the plants. Please feel free to share the responsibility of caring for this place.

Prayer for Patience

Guidance please, O Love.

Guidance about patience.

In my journey, my race to my destination,
I sometimes lose my way worrying about
my problems, trying to compete with others,
or substituting mere passion for training.

So come, Love. I don't want you to solve my problems,
or whisk away my concerns.

I'm not much one for what people call miracles. I don't have any need for special favors. I don't think I deserve or am undeserving of anything in particular. I just need someone to companion me along the way, and to guide me in the ways of patience. I need someone to hold me, support me and encourage me to face the fears in my own heart. Come, O Love, and rest in my heart all the way across the finish line.