

2005-11-2005 The Thanksgiving Celebration

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here

*(as the weather outside grows colder
and warmer images of table and hearth
draw us homeward to break bread),*
to worship, to bask in that ancient radiance
which calls us to lives of fairness and peace,
and which illuminates our dreams as we say:

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Sequence

For shaggy Ohio fields, tan with fallen corn husks, my thanks.

For crisp leaves blowing across the cemetery behind St. Mark's In the Bowery down in at the bottom of Manhattan, my thanks.

For the gray swell of the Atlantic as it thrusts toward Reykjavik's port, my thanks.

For the grey clam shells lying like abandoned castanets on the shore of Port Lligat in Spain, my thanks.

For the evening light glancing off the dark wooden gates of the Beguijnhof in Amsterdam, my thanks.

For the linen bolt-ends flapping in the evening breeze down at the central market in Marrakech, my thanks.

For the purple and white thunderheads towering over the golden plains of the Serengeti, my thanks.

For the leafless birch forests in Russia, not far from peeling
Petrozavodsk, my thanks.

For the stars blossoming over tired workers trying to untangle the
earthquake rubble in Pakistan, my thanks.

For the moonlight falling on the saris of late night nurses in the AIDS
hospice in the city of Mumbai, my thanks.

For the star Sirius reflected in the freezing indigo waters of Lake
Baikal in Siberia, my thanks.

For the bright eyes of the sleepless old man sipping fermented mare's
milk in the middle of the night just outside Ulaanbataar, Mongolia,
my thanks.

For the teenager taking the early street car to work amid the sleek
towers and brick lanes of the great city of Melbourne, my thanks.

For salmon-colored early morning light on the peaks around Lake
Tahoe, and all the nameless songbirds making morning music, my
thanks.

And for the brief breath of silence in this room
in Columbus, Ohio, and for so many millions of millions of other
unlikely miracles, my thanks.

(silence)

For all that is our life, we sing our thanks and praise. For the
challenges and gifts, the loves and misses, for the whole world of our
lives, our heart beats. Naming our loved ones aloud or in silence, we
remember that we are one humanity, all hearts beating in this world
together.

(naming)

For all that is our life, for all of this mystery woven of stardust at the
edge of a vast universe, our songs of peace, our canticles of praise.

The First Reading *comes from a 1983 essay by the late Toni Cade*

Bambara, found in Black Women Writers at Work, edited by Claudia Tate in 1990)

“My responsibility to myself, my neighbors, my family and the human family is to try to tell the truth. That ain’t easy. There are so few truth-speaking traditions in this society in which the myth of ‘Western civilization’ has claimed the allegiance of so many. We have rarely been encouraged and equipped to appreciate the fact that the truth works, that it releases the Spirit and that it is a joyous thing. We live in a part of the world, for example, that equates criticism with assault, that equates social responsibility with naïve idealism, that defines the unrelenting pursuit of knowledge and wisdom as fanaticism.”

The Second Reading *is a 1994 poem by Edward Hirsch which I last read about 7 years ago on a snowy morning in January when almost no one was here. It’s called Mergers and Acquisitions*

Beyond junk bonds and oil spills
beyond the collapse of Savings and Loans
beyond liquidations and options on futures,
beyond basket trading and expanding foreign markets, the Dow Jones
industrial average,
the Standard and Poor’s stock index,
mutual funds, commodities,
beyond the rising tide of debits and credits, opinion polls, falling
currencies, and signs
for LA Gear and Coca Cola Classic, the signs
for U.S. Steel and General Motors,
hi-grade copper, municipal bonds,
domestic sugar,
beyond fax it and collateral buildups,
beyond mergers and acquisitions, leveraged buyouts, hostile
takeovers,

beyond the official policy on inflation and the consensus on happiness,
beyond the national trends in buying and selling, getting and spending, the market stalled and the cost passed on to consumers,
beyond the statistical charts on prices,
there is something else that drives us,
some rage or hunger, some absence smoldering
like a childhood fever vaguely remembered,
or half perceived, some unprotected desire, greed that is both a wound and a knife,
a failed grief, a lost radiance.

Sermon

My grandmother Belletini was always cooking. If I dropped in to see her in the morning, she was cooking. If I dropped in to see her in the afternoon, she was cooking. In between, she was stooped in her garden, yanking spinach or onions in preparation for cooking. You never got out of her house without a meal. And a damn good one, too.

When I got older, I used to come over to her house to watch her cook, so I could learn. I realized that cooking skills were not innate... you had to study them like you had to study anything...a language, math, or how to hit a baseball out of the park.

One day, while watching my grandmother knead the golden pasta in preparation for making tortellini, I exclaimed to her how much I enjoyed watching her cook, because she loved doing it so much.

“You think I *love* doing this? I love *you*,” she said, “but I really don’t like cooking at all.”

“But you do it all the time,” I said, rather surprised at her confession.

“Of course. We have to eat, right? So I cook. But when I was a little girl in Italy, I was taught by my mother that, since my sister Louisa and I were girls, *we* had to learn to cook, and my brother Silvestre didn’t, because he was a boy. I protested that it wasn’t fair. But my mother told us that this is the way the world is. I decided then and there that I didn’t much care for the ways of the world, and from that day on I hated cooking. But after a while, I realized that even if the world isn’t fair yet, we still have to eat. And that even if I don’t love cooking, I love you. And since I love you, and we have to eat, why not celebrate that love by cooking with care, skill, good ingredients and love. The world will be more fair one day, but until then, we still have to eat; so why not eat well?”

I always think of this story around Thanksgiving time. Of all the yearly holidays here in the States, it’s clearly the one most centered on a particular meal.

My grandmother has been gone now for two decades, but truly, the world has been changing, as she hoped it would. Men cook all the time, and women are in the workplace outside the home, and there has been a shift, a loosening of the ancient patriarchal bonds which kept people in particular places whether they liked it or not.

But whenever I remember my grandmother’s story, I immediately leap to the famous quotation attributed to Emma Goldman. “It’s not my revolution if I can’t dance.” Actually, as is true of a great deal of popular quotations, Goldman never said that. Here is what she *did* say in her autobiography “Living my Life.”

“At the dances I was one of the most un-tiring and gayest. One evening a young man, a cousin of Sasha, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce a death, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such

reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference. I told him to mind his own business. I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for release and freedom from conventions and pre-judice, should demand the denial of life and joy. 'I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things,' I said to him. I would live it in spite of the whole world--prisons, persecution, everything." [*Living My Life* (New York: Knopf, 1934), p. 56]

I agree with Emma Goldman, and my grandmother. There are many things that are unfair, many freedoms still to be won, and many prejudices still to shed. But if some voice in our head tries to rob us of joy when we eat the great Thanksgiving feast with family or friends, telling us that to do so is somehow shameful because of how our abundance here in the United States in general contrasts with the great social needs around the world, then I would advise putting a sock in that inner mouth. Such an attitude toward social justice is foolishly puritanical as far as I am concerned.

The origin of Thanksgiving in this nation is most interesting. It has nothing to do, really, with the story of the Pilgrims feasting on succotash with their native hosts. You will never find references to Jefferson sitting down to a feast based on cranberries and turkey on the last Thursday in November.

No, it was Abraham Lincoln who first proclaimed Thanksgiving Day, in 1863, at the urging of a magazine editor named Sarah Hale. Well, he didn't actually write the proclamation himself; his Secretary of State William Seward did. Lincoln signed it. It began "The year that is drawing towards its close has been filled with blessing of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties...others have been

added. In the midst of a war of unequaled severity, order has been maintained, the laws respected, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict." The proclamation of a day of Thanksgiving and Praise goes on at some length, urging praise to God, but finally asking all those who celebrate this day to be "penitent," that is sorry, for the "national perverseness" of the "lamentable civil strife" which caused so many to become "widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers."

I was surprised when I first read the document. It appears to me that from the very official beginning of the holiday, Thanksgiving was associated with what can only be called *social* issues..."the widows, orphans, and sufferers " of the document.

Yet this morning, despite the reality that poverty and suffering are still rampant across the earth, as the Guest At Your Table program makes clear, and despite the sad truth that the dire and genocidal European colonization of this land has never been really faced, and despite the sadness that war is *still* tearing us apart, I'd like to join my grandma and Emma Goldman to say a little word for praise and joy.

"My responsibility to myself, my neighbors, my family and the human family is to try to tell the truth. That ain't easy," says Toni Bambara. She goes on. "We have rarely been encouraged and equipped to appreciate the fact that the truth works, that it releases the Spirit and that it is a joyous thing."

What is the truth? How can anyone say that truth releases the Spirit, and is joyous? Isn't the truth hard, nasty, difficult and rough? Well, Edward Hirsch, in the second reading, certainly offers us an overpowering list which seems to confirm that theory at first, from junk bonds, mergers and acquisitions, to ubiquitous Coca Cola signs, and bags of domestic sugar. He lists hostile take-overs and leveraged buy-outs, the hot and ragged stuff of the economic life of this country

that forms the context of our daily grind.

But he doesn't really say that these things are the truth. Truth, he insists, thrives beyond that. Beyond. Deeper. Deeper than buying and selling, deeper even than some consensus vision of happiness.

The truth lies deep inside us, where the grief still weighs us down, the anger, the sense of loss and abandonment, the desire for more, the deep places in our soul, the wounds that are also so often a knife, the frustrations we can't even name anymore. And, he adds, almost as an afterthought, a lost radiance.

The wounds remind us that we are human.
The desires and grief underscore that strongly.

But the "lost radiance?" What is that doing amidst all the common struggles of our human state? Something bright. Something warm. Something which clarifies things. Which spotlights the deep beauty of things. Something that glimmers with a suggestion of joy. The joy that makes life worth living. The "radiant things" in Emma Goldman's words.

But this radiance is lost, he says.
Where did we lose it? I suggest that it's been buried under the junk bonds and consumer indices. I suggest that it's been hidden under the expanded foreign markets and the liquidations. I suggest that the daily grind has ground down the mirror of the heart which has been reflecting that deep light into us.

And what is that radiance?

It's the radiance that shines on each of our faces so brightly that when we turn to face each other, we know in our bones the deep truth that we are all brothers and sisters who share a single earth. None of us

has any more right to the earth than anyone else. That's a truth deeper than junk bonds too. Deeper than our anger or grief too. More truths: No one is worth more than anyone else. No one has the right to claim power over anyone else. The rivers, the trees, the rocks, the oceans, the oil beneath the ground and the silver clouds above our heads are all parts of a system of which *each of us* is a part. It's an abundant and rich and fabulous planet rainbowed with singing birds and whales, magnificent sunsets, wild blossoms and galloping wildebeests. It's an inviting world, with hidden dangers yes, but all of a piece nonetheless. And the radiance, the deepest truth of all, the truth which, in Bombara's words, "works, ...releases the Spirit and...is a joyous thing," is that everyone has the right to come to the table of this abundance.

And that anything which prevents that is precisely why social justice actions are part and parcel of our lives. We're not talking about naïve idealism here, as Bombara warns us...we're talking about deeply feeling the loss of our sisters and brothers by our side. We're talking about realizing that our privilege is not a divine right, but something claimed at the expense of others. We're talking, not just about charity and kindnesses, but about deliberately reframing the structures of the world so that they serve us all, and not just the few. The deeper, and yes, even the deepest truths, you see, *are* joyous and radiant. They claim the world as it might best be, not as we have lost it under all of the systemic unfairness which threads through our daily grind.

As our earliest church ancestors used to say, the bread of life is for everyone, not for the few. Like them, I do not break the daily bread of life to remember an ancient supper, but as an anticipation of the radiant fairness and justice to come. We can all break bread and share it...whether today or on Thanksgiving, to release the Spirit, not wallow in guilt. We claim a radiant future as our own, by joyfully enacting its vision in the present, around a table, either at home, or here at our common house of praise. The hard truths of injustice and

lack of freedom are tough, to be sure. But the deeper truth, the lost radiance which comes to light in the joyful Thanksgiving feast, is a *lot, lot* tougher.

My grandma was no Emma Goldman, or Toni Bambara, social justice activists both. But my grandma *was* aware that though the world is unfair, joy is not a luxury. And for that wisdom I will give thanks both today and come Thursday.

Offering

For the chance to bring our pledges and support to this our congregation, we offer this time where we pause for the opportunity of offering.

The Table Prayer and Great Thanksgiving

(Wendy) **Bread of the world, be a sign of our life.**

First Reader: May this bread be for us our *joy*. Joy before the good gifts of sun and soil, seed and water, sowing and harvest, kneading and baking. Without such gifts, we would not be alive. Thanks for life.

Second Reader: May this bread be for us a *blessing*. May it speak to us of the sacred meals of our ancestors when the bread they ate was more than bread, and when they knew they were more than their separate selves.

Third Reader: May this bread be for us a *promise*. May it speak to us of a day to come when we have worked to see that there is ample food for every human being on earth.

Fourth Reader: May this bread be for us a *dream*. A dream when men and women and children shall come from north and south and east and west and sit down together to eat in peace.

(Mark) *here, breaks bread* May this bread be for us a *call*. A call to share the bread as much as eat it. For such bread does not disappear when it has been eaten, but remains present when we welcome each other in love and respect.

(Wendy) **And blest are you, Love, our joy, our blessing, our promise, our dream and our call. In you we live and move and have our being. For all that is our lives, we give our thanks and praise.**