

2006-2-5-

## On Growing Up

Mark Belletini

### Opening Words

We are here  
*as the unusual warm winds turn colder*  
to rejoice together in this starry universe,  
*which is our worship, our praise, our joy.*  
Here we sift knowledge from hurt,  
*and wisdom from challenge. And so we begin:*

**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.**

### Kindling

**Praising: 363 Alleluia Sang Stars**

**Ingathering:** Eaglet's Nest

**Greeting** (the children leave for classes  
with music, then announcements and  
rising to greet each other)

### Welcoming of New Members

#### **Sequence:**

And so, this is the story of how we got to this place, and to this very moment.

And so, from the possibility buried deep in folds of eternal silence, exploded a dream of something as beautiful as music.

And so, from stars scattering across the void like musical notes on a fresh page rose the melody we call the universe.

And so, from the stardust and debris gathered round gravity's fiery baton, our world sang "I am!" over and over in a round.

And so, from cells holding hands, began the circle dance until life started to hum, then chant.

And so, from the pods of a billion green things floating on the air, weeds and wheat floated down on every field, and jazzed the world.

And so, from eyes and mouths opening wide, anthems of hunger and love began to sing all over the green and icy earth.

And so, from farm and street, village and square, the great hymn of love and loss, anger and tenderness echoed around the globe.

And so, from us who gather here, caught up in culture and language and memory and hope, the beginning of a great and poignant song, our rounded heads now much like those original stars, or like dark notes spread across the fresh page of this moment, beginning with this rest, this silence pause.

*silence*

And so, memory and hope gather here, trembling onto our lips, or echoing in our deepest and most silent heart, as we name those with whom we share this privilege of life and love and sorrow and desire and justice called life.

*naming*

And so, the music begins, the music of real lives, the real hopes, real dreams, real sounds and real silence which echo everything else since the very beginning of time.

### **Readings:**

**The First Reading** *comes from a book by the Italian psychologist, Piero Ferrucci. This story introduces his first chapter:*

After years of searching, the seeker was told to go to a cave. In the cave, he would find a deep well. “Ask the well what Truth is,” he was told, “and the well will reveal it to you.”

The seeker found the cave, and found the well.  
The seeker asked that fundamental question.

And from the depths of the well came the answer “Go to the village crossroad: there you will find what you are seeking.”

Full of hope and anticipation, the seeker ran to the village crossroad, only to find there three rather uninteresting shops. One shop was selling pieces of brass, another sold pieces of wood, and the third shop just sold coiled wire. Nothing there; and worse, no one there, seemed to have much to do with the revelation of Truth.

Disappointed, the seeker returned to the cave and the well to demand an explanation, but was only told “You will understand over time.”

When the seeker protested, the well only echoed back the frustrated shouts. Indignant for having been fooled, the seeker continued wandering around in search of the Truth. As years went by, the memories of the cave and the well faded. One night, while the seeker was walking at night under the light of the moon, the sound of music gently floated on the air. It was wonderful music, and it was played with great mastery and inspiration. The seeker finally realized that the music was coming from an expert sitar player, that wonderful Indian instrument sparkling in the moonlight. Suddenly the seeker exploded in a cry of joyous recognition. The sitar was made of brass and wood and wire just like those once sold at the village crossroad.

At last the seeker understood the message of the well: we have already been given everything we need; our task is to assemble it and use it in the appropriate way. Nothing is meaningful as long as we only perceive separate fragments. But as soon as the fragments come together, something new emerges, whose form we could not have seen considering the fragments alone. In just this way, cells come together to make organisms, and notes come together to make melodies.

**The Second Reading** *comes from the late Denise Levertov’s well loved book, Candles in Babylon, and the piece itself is called Concurrence.*

Each day’s terror,  
almost a form of boredom---madmen  
at the wheel, and stepping on the gas,  
and the brakes no good---  
and each day, one, sometimes two,  
morning glories, faultless, blue,  
blue sometimes flecked with magenta,  
each lit from within  
with the first sunlight.

## Sermon

I can still vividly remember Ron Cook, my preaching professor in seminary. He was tall, lanky, and not very talkative for someone teaching folks how to speak in public. He used to love to sprawl out in his office chair, relaxed and unflustered. I certainly liked him a lot, finding him very approachable.

One day, when I was all in a snit about a sermon I was supposed to give that coming Sunday, I went to talk with Ron in his office to see if he could help me deal with my severe mental block. I plopped down in his office, and told him how insecure I was feeling about my sermon, which I just couldn't write.

He asked me what I was going to be speaking about "in general." "Family relationships," I told him. "Ah huh," he said, and then after a brief pause, he said: "And so, where are YOU in that sermon?"

"What do you mean, 'Where am I?'" I asked.

"The sermon is about family relationships, not about me," I protested.

"Well," he said, "don't you have a family? It's not like the phrase 'family relationships' is some abstraction up in the air. As long as you are a human being, and you are part of a family, the sermon will always filter through who you are at the moment you are preaching. After all, we don't see things as *they are*. We see things as *we are*."

As soon as he quoted that oft-quoted proverb, I suddenly remembered a difficult conversation I had with my father only a week earlier. I was still haunted by that telephone call, and it was the unresolved nature of that conversation which clearly had been blocking my sermon. Once I realized that, I called my father, explored the issue further until we had come to a more grown-up resting place. Suddenly, I felt free to write the sermon. So Ron was absolutely right to ask me that simple question, "Where are you?"

And so it is that standing here on Sunday demands work from me that has nothing to do with creative writing, computers, reading books, studying experts or submerging into the pool of poetry. It has to do with facing my own life. I do not preach about things as *they are*, in Ron's words. I preach about things as *I am*, on the morning I preach, or at least the day I prepare my sermon. There is no way around it. I cannot abstract my words from my flesh, or keep everything intellectually floating high above my heart. I have to be who I am right now, no matter what the topic is.

And so, this morning, I speak my words after the death of Coretta Scott King, a woman who kept her husband's spirit alive in many different ways. Her death plucked at my heart, especially because, on top of everything else she has done, she has been so outspoken about gay rights.

And I speak as the media lift up my home town of Detroit, as they name its peculiar ways while the Super Bowl looms. I am still engaged deeply with my Detroit roots, since Detroit is one of the most unusual cities in the United States, and have been reading book after book about my place of origin these last few months.

I also speak as someone who just heard that two of his friends broke up after a long relationship. I don't know about you, but news of split-ups like that always leave me wobbly for a while.

And, as those of you who have already read the newsletter know, I speak as someone who has spent two weeks dealing with the violation of his car being stolen. And most heart-felt of all, I am dealing with my father's report of a serious and deadly cancer crowding deep inside him.

So you can bet I had to wrestle with what it means to be "grown up" this week. An adult. "An eaglet" (*reference is to children's story*) who has learned to fly. I chose this topic sometime last August, not knowing, of course, that any of this was going to inform my preaching.

Now you can bet that I didn't want to act grown up one bit about the car. I kept on having shaking visions of finding the culprit who stole my car, and doing something terrible to him. I won't go into that because it involves imagined bloody violence not fit for a sermon. But I was deeply enraged, no doubt about that.

You can also bet I didn't want to preach on anything about how a son's heart wrestles with hard news about an aging parent.

But then I read Madeleine L'Engle's tremendous words, which I have handily printed at the top of your orders of celebration.

**"When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up, we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability."**  
(Walking on Water, 1980)

I don't know what those words do for you, but for me, there was a sudden release of breath, and an intake of fresh air.

All of a sudden, I realized what I needed to do was not focus on my particular situation, but on the shared human situation illuminated by my own very personal news. Adults, Madeline L'Engle says, are those who accept that they are just as vulnerable as children. Good things and terrible things, happy things and sad things happen to us all, whether we are younger or older.

Oh, in different proportion, sometimes, to be sure. My mother cannot be the only mother who used to hold her finger up in the air and pronounce "Terrible things happen in threes, you know..." suggesting that she herself had experienced the bunching up, the triad clumping of difficult days in her own life. Maybe you have experienced something like this too.

At the ministers' retreat up in Akron this week, my dear colleagues were very solicitous of my welfare. But as I thought of my recent life and the painful violation of losing my car (with my address book inside, of course) I remembered that just as powerful as the undeniably negative experience of losing a car is the *positive presence of friends and colleagues in my life*.

Love, you see, is just as strong as shock and loss. The ancient Hebrew scripture "The Song of Songs" put it this way: *Ahavah az maveth...* "Love is stronger, even more impudent than death."

And at the retreat I focused on being aware of how much love moves in my life, both from family and friends, and how that love and support far outbalances the difficult things.

Our poet, Denise Levertov, says this so beautifully...against all the difficult news in the year 1982 when she was writing her poem... threats of nuclear proliferation, the rumors of war...she places two very fragile flowers, some blue morning glories, which, if picked for a vase, would barely last an hour or two. Simple transitory beauty.

Yet she proclaims that the simple joy of these morning glories actually *balances out and challenges* the kind of political terror, which, being so relentless and so constant, almost takes on the characteristics of boredom: numbness and denial.

The teacher Jesus goes even further. He told a story about weeds and wheat growing in the same field. (The story as it is found in the New Testament and Gospel of Thomas has been garbled, but I am basing my words on a reconstruction.) When someone suggested that the weeds be pulled, Jesus

reminded them that they were all tangled together, the wheat and the weeds. There is no way to untangle them. Life is, and always has been, a combination of them both. Love and loss. Misery and joy.

The story from Dr. Ferrucci also spoke to my more adult self this week. It leapt right off the page and into my heart. Looking for the Truth, the capital T Truth, the seeker finds three things that don't seem to have any relationship to each other. Yet, after being disappointed by this discovery, the seeker goes on to live life without having any great answers about the truth.

After a long while, however, the seeker hears this wonderful music, and realizes that the music comes in part from the disappointing realities of the past brought together in a new synthesis, a new relationship. And the music is beautiful under the moonlight. It has become, in some way, a symbol of the Truth sought long ago. But the music is not a fixed truth...it moves and changes and flows.

Now don't get confused here. This story can clearly be taken in a magical way, which is not at all what I am teaching this morning. When some overly-devout person finds a picture of the Virgin Mary in a breakfast pancake, a vague image made up out of random brown burn markings, they are *not at all* doing what I think a grown-up person does in bringing all aspects of life together. Finding patterns in pancakes is not the same as paying attention to all the diverse aspects of one's life over the years. Seeing that life's diverse experiences... suffering as well as joy, can, when we reflect upon them, contribute eventually to the health of the whole *is not in any way* like finding a picture of Jesus in the wood grain of your bathroom door. That's just a distorted, and I'd say, surprisingly selfish piety.

But a maturing grownup can, over time, and with patience, find holistic depth in his or her life by synthesizing its various experiences including the sorrows as well as the joys. A grownup is probably not going to assign them vast cosmic meanings, as if we human beings whirling at the edge of the galaxy were somehow the center of the Universe. Nor does a grownup imagine that the universe, or God, or Fate, gangs up on some folks more than others, beating them to an emotional pulp, only to blithely work trivial miracles in wood grain for the credulous. No, I am convinced that no one "deserves" either suffering *or* joy, or "earns" it. They both just come, as the Book of Job made plain 2400 years ago. What I am saying is hardly news, you see.

So please, I am not saying that there is some cosmic meaning in loss and pain. And I am not saying that losing my car is a lesson I've been given by some celestial task-master so I can learn something spiritual. Nor am I saying, that by noticing how some things can come together, *over time*, to make beautiful music, that the experience of crime is somehow a *necessary* boost for the spiritual life.

And you will certainly never hear me utter the old proverb which goes “God or the Universe never tests us beyond what we can endure.” As someone who, in this year 2006, still stands in the long shadows of Auschwitz, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, My Lai and even the Detroit uprising of 1967, I cannot utter such a sentence. After forty years of studying such events, I still do not see how there is anything to learn from being gassed, or shot, or oppressed. I personally just don’t find such approaches helpful or even comforting. I am aware some do, but I have never been able to understand it.

Furthermore, because the balance of hurt and health in this world is out of whack, largely due to *human* folly, the adult person, the grownup, is one who doesn’t waste time complaining about having to fight institutional evils, or to challenge people on their malice and hatred. The grown-up person knows that almost all of the disproportionate unfairness and sorrow in this life comes from *us*. The human part of the Universe. Wars, prejudice, disenfranchisement, racialization, religious bigotry, anti-science posturing, entrenched poverty, ignorance, superstition, legislative manipulation...*these* are the creators of disproportionate suffering among us, far more than any random tsunami or hurricane. For example, beside the tremendous poverty which wracks Ohio in both cities and the small towns, beside the incessant wrangling over evolution by devious right-wing religionists, our Ohio House just passed a bill forbidding challenges to federal elections, requiring voting booth proof of ID even from the homeless or elderly, and ending the practice of recounts. When I first read this, I wanted to throw my hands up and cry. Then I realized that, if I want to claim the difficult privilege of growing up, I cannot allow myself to be surprised by such things any more than I can be surprised by a car theft. I have to simply face the reality, and confront it in any way I can...with patience, with knowledge, and without the luxury of hand-wringing or loud complaining.

The losses and frustrations and sadness of this last week, bunched up as they were, had their impact, to be sure. But I am aware that my life is made up of them, as well as love and joy, no matter what I say or think. To be a grownup is to *accept* that I am vulnerable, and to stop protesting that something sad or unfair crossed my path. Sadness and unfairness cross everyone’s path. Almost every soul who has lived long enough has tasted betrayal, aggravation, loss and anticipatory grief.

But I am also aware that love and grace cross everyone’s path as well, and that the coming spring morning glories will shine for everyone, unstinted; for those who notice and those who do not, for the car thief and the theft victim at the same time. For the weeds and the wheat grow in the same field, and that field is the cosmos, and we who gather here are born from the



womb of its astonishing mystery, to learn, to question, to struggle, to accept and to love... together.

This is my sermon this morning. Preaching. Not from any sure knowledge about how things are, but from very real knowledge about how I am. I think Ron Cook's advice was right on.

And so, how are you this morning? And where are you in this sermon?

### **Offering**

The trees give off oxygen by which we live.  
The sun gives off sunshine by which we live.  
The land gives of its fruits, by which we live.  
The sea gives of its bounty, by which we live.  
All of the universe gives and gives and gives,  
that life may be full, and that the circle be  
whole. May we, who are part and parcel of that universe, that circle, join in that  
unending process, that life in this place might be full. The morning offering of  
pledges and gifts will now be given and received.

### **Jazzy Amidah**

(the Sabbath standing prayer)

(tune: God is Love by Clarence Rivers)

*Standing here, where once those before us stood, we're standing here, a circle of  
peace.*

May our hearts bless the memories of all the natives, the immigrants, and city-  
makers, the poets and dreamers, the builders who made this place what it is.

*Standing here, alive and knowing, alive and  
unknown, and mortal all.*

Let this day be a time for resting in this radiance, for the giving of thanks, for the  
blessing of peace.

*Standing here, where once those before us stood, we're standing here, a circle of  
peace.*

*Alleluyah. Alleluyah. Alleluyah. Amein.*