

2006-5-7 Authority Problems
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
as May flowers create a universe of color
under a sky of wheeling spring stars,
to worship, to take up the power of reason
and the gift of awe and song as our own,
and to celebrate the depth and mercies of life.

And so we say together:

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.

The Sequence

The temple bell is silent
until it is struck. *
If a butterfly lands on the bell,
it will fly away when the bell sounds.
I see tulips, dark as night,
and shaped like this bell.
I see peonies the color of claret.
A petal from one of them falls.
It strikes the earth.
And the earth sounds like a bell, *
and now I am like that butterfly, aflight.
I talked with my friend Mary on Friday.
She was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's
a few weeks ago. Not good. No good at all.
And as we talked, I was struck as if I were a bell, * and I sounded for a long time afterward.
I'll never get used to it,
this astonishing mystery of life and death,
love and loss. I am clear about that, at least.
I'll always be surprised. Always. *
And so, I too am a temple bell,
waiting to get struck by life mysteries.
And in that striking, something like a prayer courses through me, whether bid by the shaman of a
butterfly, the magician of a morning star, the prophet of a deep purple tulip, the love of a friend,
or the tone of a bell. It's a prayer to thee, O Love, not that I pray, but which, as it were, the
universe prays through me, the universe, of which I am but one small, small part.*

silence

A small part with so many others that make up this miracle...others who make up my family of blood and spirit, of love and loss, of joy and sorrow, work and play. I name the others that hit the bell of my life, making this moment echo inside and out with their names, a holy incantation.

naming

A holy incantation: Gate, Gate, Rama, Rama!

Wakan Tanka, Inyin Hawe. Kadosh, Kadosh, Mi Komokho? La illaha, il Allah hu! In excelsis, et in terra! Voice and bell and drum. Amen.*

(Text of anthem: Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha: Gone from suffering. Gone from forgetfulness, all the way to other shore. Such Joy!)

Readings:

The First Reading *comes from the Gospel of Mark, written by an anonymous author we have called Mark for 1900 years. It was written in the first years after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70. The author of Mark often writes in present tense, as in this case.*

So once again they come to Jerusalem. As he is walking about in the Temple courtyards, some of the ranking priests and elders come up to him, and start questioning him. Questions like, “What right do you have to do the things you do?” and “By what authority do you do these things?”

Jesus says to them: “OK. I’ll ask you a question as well, and if you answer it, I will be glad to tell you by what authority I do what I do. So, tell me, sirs: the ritual immersion of John the Baptist: Was he doing what God wanted him to do, or did he just make it up himself, a purely human invention?”

Immediately, they conferred together: “If we answer ‘He was doing what God wanted him to do,’ then he will ask us, ‘So why didn’t you trust him?’ But, if we say, ‘He just made it up himself....’” They looked around with fear at the gathered crowd, since just about everyone back then considered John to be a genuine prophet. So they answered Jesus by saying, “We simply cannot tell you.” So Jesus says back to them, “Well, then, I’m not going to tell you by what authority I do what I do, either.”

The Second Reading *is a poem by Lisel Mueller, whose poems always seem to move me deeply. It’s called “What is Left to Say”*

The self steps out of the circle;
it stops wanting to be
the farmer, the wife, and the child.
It stops trying to please
by learning everyone’s dialect;

it finds it can live, after all,
in a world of strangers.

It sends itself fewer flowers.
It stops preserving its tears in amber.

How splendidly arrogant it was
when it believed the gold-filled tomb
of language awaited its raids!
Now it frequents the junkyards,
knowing all words are secondhand.

It has not chosen its poverty,
this new frugality.
It did not want to fall out of love
with itself. Young, it celebrated
itself and richly sang itself,
seeing only itself
in the mirror of the world.

It cannot return. It assumes its place
in a universe of stars that do not see it.
Even the dead no longer need it
to be at peace.
Its function is to applaud.

The Sermon

In preparation for this sermon, I asked several people this week what or whom they trusted as an authority in their lives. My friend Tim, for example, answered that he trusts the authority of his inner voice, first. He also finds the external world of trees, flowers, fields and stars authoritative, especially when he sits still in a park and just listens. But most everyone else told me first about their inner voice, like Tim. I realized as I talked to people that it wasn't really that inner authority I wanted to explore, but rather, how we respond to authority when it lies outside, beyond our inner voice. And that is when this story sprang to mind.

So, once upon a time, I attended a single-gender parochial high school. In suburban Detroit. It was long, low one-story affair with lots of glass, built in the shape of a letter E. There were about a thousand of us altogether, attending the four-year institution. Marist priests and a few lay teachers taught us during those years. The famous parochial discipline was real. Required devotions every day, a mass or a rosary. Prayers before every class. Even in French classes, where we prayed, *Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grâce...* We wore coats and ties. Kept hair short. Kept silence while walking between classrooms.

The teachers had full authority to make decisions about our daily lives, and the parents all seemed to want it that way. If there was a conflict between a student and a teacher, in general, the parents supported the teacher, and the student got creamed when he got home.

But, long before we ever heard the famous teaching: “Question Authority,” we were living it out, questioning the right of anyone to tell us what to do.

Now I’ve never smoked cigarettes, but there were plenty in my high school who did. Call it symbolic rebellion, or whatever you please, a surprising number of my classmates tucked packs of Lucky Strike in their shirt pockets.

And of course, modeled on the media giants of that generation, Lucille Ball, Dean Martin and even Rod Serling (who entered that industry from this very congregation), many of the priests and lay teachers also smoked. Like chimneys. They even had a smoking lounge in the school to which they retired several times each day. And of course, Fr. DeRosiers in Second Year French had to teach us the verb “fumer” (to smoke) every single day, by lighting up in class and then conjugating: “*Je fume, vous fumez, ils fument.*”

Well, one day, someone, I forget who, got all riled about this injustice. If the priests could smoke in their lounge, then the students who smoked should have *their* smoking lounge. It was only fair. So what if the priests were the supreme authority? We would challenge them.

So someone, I forget who, devised a plan. And we were all in on it, non-smokers as well.

First, of course, we went through proper channels. We began by simply asking the principle, Fr. Kiley, if the senior class could have a smoking lounge. His eyebrows went up way past his forehead, veins popped in his temple, and so we left his office pronto. Second, we tried to get smoking priests like Fr. DesRosiers, to support us. Of course, they couldn’t. So then the plan was this. All seniors agreed that, on such and such a day and time, we would get up, leave classes, assemble in the hall, march to the senior bathroom, each with a cigarette in his hand, whether we were smokers or not. Then all 250 of us would pile into the bathroom, claiming it as a lounge by smoking there in a crowded protest, even those of us who would turn green by doing so.

Of course, it didn’t work. Parents were called. The yelling started. “You did WHAT?” And that was the end of it. Challenging authorities about such a patently foolish thing didn’t have much of chance to begin with. But I confess, I liked the giddiness I felt while *questioning* external authority in this manner.

But now I want to ask you a question: when you now see the popular bumper-sticker “Question Authority!” do you imagine a radical is driving that car, a screaming progressive, ready and willing to stand at the barricades and denounce presidents and generals, CEOs and bishops?

I used to imagine that. But today I am beginning to wonder. Because the folks who are really “questioning authority” in our time are, as often as not, the cultural reactionaries of our day, not the old-time liberals.

Look. I have never personally dug up a fossil stegosaurus, nor calculated the age of a trilobite. But my inner voice trusts the massed evidence supporting the evolution of life over hundreds of millions of years as conclusive of an established truth. A truth, in fact, which stands at the center, not at the edge, of all science. I respect the peer-reviewed scientific method. Therefore I trust the authority of this body of work.

Yet you and I both know that, in this country especially, the authority of such work is being questioned. And questioned in organized, funded, and clearly politicized ways.

Another example: for years, faithful scholars have painstakingly worked through the ancient texts of both the traditional scriptures and the Gnostic gospels, using the exacting methods of sociology, cross-cultural studies, historical criticism and archeology. Again, I have come to trust these authorities. Their honest humility convinces me. But today, religious conservatives insist that such authority is empty, and that the only authority is the scripture itself, *as selectively interpreted by their pre-existing and unbending prejudices*.

Worse, on the other side this coin you'll find folks who have so *romanticized* anti-authoritarian stances, that they have come to a place where only conspiratorial and fanciful notions have any real authority: the furor over Dan Brown's DaVinci Code is a case in point. As I have said before, recently, authoritative scholarship knows, and only provisionally, three things about Mary Magdalene: one, that she was *not* a prostitute but a Galilean woman of means, probably a widow; two, she was a student of Jesus whom he both liked and apparently helped to heal of some problem, and three, she seems to have been considered an authority herself in the early church until some authoritarian men decided that women couldn't have any authority, based on their gender.

But today, for those who gleefully question the authority of a hundred years of unglamorous scholarly work, Magdalene is the Holy Grail itself, the mother of a whole group of people who have the blood of Jesus in their veins, *as if that was somehow important anyway*. And so important that vast conspiracies, involving half of the geniuses of western history, were created to protect this somehow upsetting information from discovery. I weep when I realize that for many, a work of fiction is now sober history.

No, I tell you, the folks who go around "questioning authority" today are not the disturbing radicals anymore, the Gandhi's, Kings, Harvey Milks and Susan B. Anthony's, but rather those who specifically hope to keep their own power and position un-assailed, whether it's a reactionary stance, *or* a romanticized anti-authoritarian stance. I tell you truly, when the authority of the scientific method, and the authority of patient, peer-reviewed historical methods, can be tossed into the trash bin with such ease and confidence as we have seen it done in our days, then the more brittle authority of documents like the US Constitution will be coming up for question and twisting, too. James Luther Adams, a great Unitarian Universalist thinker, predicted, over thirty years ago, that a full-out assault against science, differing sexualities, and critical scholarship would one day be made by sweetly smiling faces on the spiritual right. He said it would take place at exactly this time in American history, and by God, he was right, down to the last detail.

Interestingly, the gospel of Mark depicts Jesus as stubbornly refusing to play this futile authority game with the religious right of his own day. The right-wing elites back then are depicted as questioning his authority. So he lets them get tangled by their own deviousness, revealing their motivations...namely, to get through life without ever being questioned themselves.

In other words, the religious right of that day thought that their authority was their entitlement. It was their safe hideout. They did not think of authority that only comes with covenant, patience, character, evident skill and real relationship.

Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but we Unitarian Universalists often seem to describe ourselves as having lots of problems with authority. God knows I've said so, with exasperation on some days. But it *is* true that throughout history, Unitarians and Universalists always questioned the authority of anyone who would impose their own religious doctrines, like hellfire, onto others. Fair enough. I can see why authority might be an issue for us.

But, in every congregation I have ever served, there have been other, less theological, issues described as "authority problems." For example, in every church where I've served, the authority of elected members to establish policies for what they feel is the good of the institution comes to question frequently. The claim is made that the elected don't really know what the good of the institution is. The elected members, on the other hand, wonder why it's their "authority" itself which is questioned, instead of questions being put to them directly, as fellow members of the same congregation. Another example. In every congregation I've ever served, some question the authority of people to make rules about eating food or drinking coffee in certain places, claiming that their personal freedom is curtailed by such rules. One Unitarian Universalist church I know proudly proclaims that coffee drinking is encouraged during worship, to show how welcoming they are. But then others have to ask if it's the freedom of the support staff which is being curtailed, since they have to spend hours on their hands and knees each week scrubbing the carpet of stubborn stains from the coffee spilled by all those free, but apparently amazingly clumsy, people.

And, in every church I have served, the authority of organizational documents and covenants comes under question. Some question whether rules need to be written at all. Instead, they believe, free hearts need to be changed by persuasion and kindness. "After all, you cannot *legislate* a cooperative trusting community," they say. "Rules restrict, not welcome." Others retort, "Yeah, but you can't sit around waiting for everyone to form honest community by appealing to such romantic thinking. You have to agree on clear expectations, or there is no congregation, just an accidental group, with the bold and boundry-less deciding everything with their verbal skill and extroverted confidence. Introverts, you can just keep being quiet!"

And then, there is the authority to speak out on controversial subjects. During the Vietnam War, for example, when some ministers expressed their moral dismay at the vile carnage of My Lai, others questioned their right to speak about things that were merely reported in the untrustworthy newspaper. One of the early ministers of this church, John Evans, also served my former congregation, and I remember that at least in my former congregation, his authority to express his moral disgust was often questioned with some fury.

But as I see it, there's a serious problem with *all* these authority problems I've mentioned. If one group in a congregation has a clear idea as to what the "real deal" is, they might assume that everyone else feels...or should feel... the same way. But clearly, since Unitarian Universalists openly claim diversity as their reality, this is not even possible to begin with. I cannot wear your face, nor you, mine. We are each and every one of us probably going to have differing ideas as to what the 'real deal' is around here. Is it organizational fairness and integrity? Is it worship and spiritual growth? Is it service to the unfortunate? Is it the strengthening of supportive community? Is it pastoral attentiveness? Is it the free exchange of ideas unto wisdom? Is it learning that wisdom? Is it the tearing down of unjust oppressive systems in the world, and the offering of a counter vision of wholeness and health? And I say, based on the authority I've earned by serving many congregations over 30 years, that our claimed diversity *itself* has the

authority to insist that we talk with each other, and ask each other questions about what we think the real deal is, before we question anything. And, to that end, I am going to take up my own authority again and “suggest” a rule: *When we Unitarian Universalists are in conversation with each other, no one gets to say “After all, this is what Unitarian Universalism has always meant” as part of their argument!*

Why do I make such a rule? Because I say that no one, in any UU congregation, has the authority to determine for anyone else, or everyone else, what the “essence” of our tradition is. All of the “real deals” I just mentioned...integrity, spirituality, service, education, community, the pastoral, the free idea, the social justice vision...*are each and every one rooted deeply in our history.* Each of them has a clear place in our heritage. And, yes, each of them will clearly appeal to some folks, more than others. I understand that. But I’d like to suggest that we do need *all* of these touchstones. Not one of them is expendable.

Did I just say I’ve served in churches for thirty years? Wow. That’s a long time. And God help me, it’s been forty years since that silly smoking stunt in High School. Perhaps this is why Lisel Mueller’s poem called out to me this week. I saw it as a deliciously joyful conclusion to this nerve-wracking sermon on authority problems. The poet too has lived a long time. I’d gladly wager she went round and round with authority issues herself. But age is changing her. She says her “self” is now stepping out of the circle. What circle? The circular trap of authority problems. The same circle Jesus is depicted as stepping out of when he refused to argue with the religious right of his day, who questioned his authority because he refused to see their face when he looked at his own in the mirror.

And I don’t want to see my own face in the world anymore, in Mueller’s phrase, and a lot of my own authority problems really have to do with exactly that. Wanting to have my own prejudices massaged, my preferences approved, my needs authorized. I am going to stop trying to learn to speak everyone’s dialect, and remember that all language really *is* second-hand. My function, suggests Mueller, at this stage in life is to applaud. To praise. To love. To understand. To affirm what I can affirm. To question even questioning when it’s become a species of aggression, instead of a summons to applause, and praise, laud, reverence and loving-kindness.

The Offering

The Herakleitan Prayer (Rhythmically snap fingers)

Buddha said it on his birthday,
Life’s a river, flowing river.
Herakleitos also said it,
Life’s a stream that flows forever.
Never did your foot step in it
that it wasn’t wholly different.
So said Kwan Yin as she chose to
live her life in flowing service.
So said Mira in her singing,
flowing flowing, change unceasing.
Moments, moments, always flashing
fresh as stars that bloom in evening

setting soon below the fields,
rising new unseen in daytime.
Fresh as flowers, seed to blossom!
Holding fast but e'er illusion.
Gold will melt, and jade will soften.
Only thou, o flowing Love art
loving, loving, loving, love.