

2007-4-22 EarthDay,
Mark Belletini

Opening

We are here
on a bright Sunday morning in spring
to worship together;
to reflect on our joys and struggles
as common creatures on this blue-green earth,
creatures related to all else, yet each unique.
Mindful of this grace, we begin together:

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.

Commissioning of the BREAD Team: A Litany: *(preceded by a preface about what BREAD does and how. For the litany, apologies to William Safford for lifting a line from his perfect poem.)*

The world is beautiful, but its people suffer from systemic injustice. We therefore now commission you, our congregational BREAD Team, to help organize this congregation to work against these injustices;

for it is important that awake people be awake.

There are many things which call to us in this world, many obligations and duties, pleasures and relationships. Yet from time to time, deeper calls make themselves known to us, and call us to an even sharper awareness,

for it is important that awake people be awake.

Spirit of Life, sing in us as well as in those we commission on our BREAD team, for we are all in this together. We are called to make any faithfulness to truth, love and compassion we claim for ourselves *real*, through our ability to respond, to be responsible;

for it is important that awake people be awake.

Sequence

A week of tears for many.
Parents burying children.
Children burying parents.
Brutal violence once again, once again,
tearing at the nation's heart.

The earth beneath our feet blossoms anyway,
squeezes alleluias, some green, some pink,
out of the long stretch of the branches,
thrusts up blue and yellow flowers just like that.
Birds of many hues soar and dive.
Mosquitoes begin their spring ascension.
Bears brown and black lumber in the forests.
Bees connect everything by a slender thread
of golden pollen. Frogs announce themselves.
But neither flower nor beast weeps for the
violence.

Still, no one can say the earth does not weep
because of the recent loss of life. No one can say the earth does not weep
for losses in Virginia. In Baghdad. In the Vonnegut family. Or anyplace.
For this house too is the earth.
Its people no less a portion of the planet
than robins or brown bears.
Our tears, the very tears... of the earth.
Our awed silence before the alleluias of spring,
the very silence of the earth.

Silence

Bowing to what joins us...love, struggle, boundaries, burdens, memory and hope, we name the men, women and children who have deepened our lives, taught our hearts, healed our spirits or helped us discover who we are. Each name we say...in our heart, or aloud, is also an alleluia.

Naming

Alleluia. Alhamdulila. Laudamus. Amen.

Readings

The First Reading comes from an essay by Nina Simons, who, with her husband, runs the Bioneers Institute, which promotes practical environmental solutions and social strategies.

(This comes from a Spring 2005 issue of Earth Light, a magazine lent me by Wanda Hambrick)

I want to speak with you about what lies at the heart of the tough issues that we face, both as a culture and as a species. The root source of our gravest challenges---both socially and environmentally---is a crisis of relationship.

We have got to learn how to be in relationship in a way that is both enduring, and can help us heal our personal and societal wounds.

How then can we enhance and accelerate our learning about conscious kinship? Because, for many centuries, the value of relationship has been vastly underrated, even scorned. It's been relegated to the disrespected world of intuition or sentimentality. Our ways of knowing through our heart have become weakened from disuse, as we've become distracted by an emphasis on getting more stuff. In the Cherokee language, there is

no word for the love of an inanimate thing...love is only possible between two sentient beings. Anyone who loves a thing is considered insane, since such a person values belongings more than belonging.

Fortunately, there are some encouraging signs of change on a societal level. The European Union is an inspiring example of healing relationships on an immense scale between peoples who not so long ago fought the bloodiest wars in the history of our planet. Currently with 25 member nations, with a population 50% larger than the US on a land mass only half the size, the E.U. is now the world's largest economy, with far less wealth inequality between rich and poor than we have in the U.S. In terms of their quality of life, they have more physicians per capita, longer average life-spans, lower crime and FAR fewer prisoners and less violence than we do. Their annual vacation is more than double what ours is here.

The two cultures have diametrically opposed ideas about freedom and security. For Americans, freedom is associated with autonomy and independence. For many young Europeans, however, freedom is now found in embeddedness, in having access to many interdependent relationships. The more communities one has access to, they believe, the more options one has for a full and meaningful life.

In the U.S.A. with a history of relations that have reinforced hierarchy, domination and disrespect as the norm, we have a lot of unlearning to do. But, I believe our biological orientation toward relationship strengthens our likelihood of success. So, as the Lakota people say, in ending every prayer, O Mitakuye Oyasin...to all our relations.

The Second Reading is a short poem by the poet Francisco Alarcon, known for his elegant relationship to the native American culture which roots him. It's called Home Spirit and it comes from his wonderful book Snake Poems.

you lock
windows,
doors--

But I'm
inside you;
am you.

Sermon

It's Earth Day today, but since, as the proverb has it, “we don't see things the way they are, we see things the way we are,” there is no way to enter into this talk this morning without first talking about my trip to Berlin. For the person giving this sermon this morning, besides having yet another fool cough from sitting on a sneeze-packed plane for 8 1/2 hours, is still deeply resonating in his heart with his experiences there.

My sermon went over well for the European Unitarian Universalists, and my long lecture last Saturday on the future of the Unitarian Universalist Association during the next 50-75 years was both something I am proud of, and something, thankfully, received very well indeed. Having worked with these wonderful people from all over Europe four times now, I have watched their children grow over the last 11 years, and find this repeating weekend a deep privilege of growing relationship in my life.

But I also got to spend time with my best friend, Richard, from San Francisco, who used to live in Berlin back in the early 80's. He has

cultivated many friends there. We had wanted to spend some quality time together. So, knowing that I was going over to Berlin to preach, he wondered if we might not spend a few days together on either side of the retreat. Naturally, I thought it a wonderful idea.

Berlin is an excellent example of everything Nina Simons expressed in the reading you just heard.

I traveled all over this golden, beautiful city, from north to south, from east to west, from edge to edge, suburb to suburb, and never did I find the kind of economic neighborhood contrast (boarded-up slum vs. elegant estates) that you can find in any North American city. There were just...neighborhoods. In all of their variety. Poverty exists of course in the E.U....it's not a utopia...but it does not appear to exist in the way it so painfully does here in our urban centers. Crime and prison life are different in Europe too, Simons says...so I checked out her assertion. Here are the sobering facts: in the E.U., which has a far greater population than the U.S.A., the number of persons imprisoned per 100,000 people is 87. In the U.S.A., it's almost 700 per 100,000. And there are over three hundred million of us. When you do the math, it hurts to look at the actual number of incarcerated Americans. This business about crime and prisons is a vast and disturbingly strange difference, by my lights. Chilling to the bone. What makes our cultures so different?

Of course, in Berlin, the public transportation is out of sight. Subways, elevated trains, street cars, light-rails, trams, double-decker glass-walled busses...and plenty of them. And please, not just in the center city, all the way out to the farthest suburb. I never once waited more than two minutes for a train or bus. Even at midnight. It's the best transit system I've ever seen in the E.U. or anywhere else for that matter, New York City included. Both buses and subways were unbelievably quiet too, for reasons that were never clear to me. Very little noise pollution. Furthermore, everyone of the wide sidewalks they have there in that spacious city had a bike lane, which was heavily used.

The sense of *embeddedness*, of deep relationships, contrasted with our own U.S.A. propensity for independence, which Simons talks about in

her essay, was also abundantly clear to me. Over several nights, sitting at an Italian sidewalk café in Charlottenberg, a Berlin neighborhood, or eating Tibetan *momo* in a courtyard in Schöneberg, I was captured by the stories of many embedded communities with deep roots and complex relations going back thirty years. A Spaniard from Galicia, a Mexican from Chiapas, a black Brazilian ex-dancer and Candomblé priest, a young urban planner from the island in the North Sea, a retired city policeman, a Mexican student, a gay Kurdish Muslim, a Ukrainian father, a psychotherapist of fiery passion...all connected, all, all Berliners, inviting me as Richard's friend into their circle of deep belonging and relationship.

We spoke of our cultures. They admired and were slightly baffled by the volunteerism and do-it-yourself attitude of the U.S.A., which springs from our clear understanding of freedom as "independence and autonomy." You know, the "We'll do it ourselves" attitude. German Village, for example, here in Columbus, was largely refurbished and redone by the folks who live there. It wasn't a huge imposed government project. Whereas the fifth floor walk-up where I stayed in Berlin was entirely redone by the German government. Its occupants were housed temporarily in another flat, and the government offered them designers, planners and psychologists to help smooth their transition. And now their place is retrofitted, and redesigned, and they had nothing much to do with it except to gracefully step aside and let it all happen. This, I don't have to tell you, will not happen in the States. Ever.

As they noted our do-it-yourself attitude, Richard and I, of course, noted their admirable health coverage, their total citywide recycling consciousness, their lavish vacation schedule and their transportation system. In short, the conversations on those nights really underscored the whole gist of Nina Simons article describing a very significant cultural distinction between the U.S.A. and the E.U.

Furthermore, the sense of persons coming first, things coming last was very evident to me, at least among the Berliners I so luckily met. Like the Cherokee, who have no word for the love of things, I had every sense that there was nothing on earth these Berliners would trade for

what they have in their belonging, their deep network of satisfying relationships.

Now you may understandably be wondering what the children's story about dancing bears in Ute territory could possibly have to do with a trip to Europe. Well, here I have to do a little sleight of hand. You see, Berlin, the actual word, has a meaning. It refers to an animal. Just as Columbus, besides referring to an infamous sailor, is also the Romance word for "dove," so Berlin is the Teutonic word for "little bear."

The great forests around Berlin were once filled with bears and other wildlife. In ancient times, these bears figured as much in the mythologies and symbol-systems of the early people there as they did in the mythologies of the native peoples here. The Europeans even saw bears in the sky, and to this day we have Ursa Major and Ursa Minor in the sky, although here we have come to call them the Big and Little Dipper instead of Big Bear and Little Bear. The Natives here, of many nations, also related spiritually to the bear, especially as a symbol of dreams, since bears are famous for their long winter naps, their hibernation, as in the story this morning.

Many of the Europeans are interested in their old native religions and myths just as many modern North Americans are interested in the stories and symbols that originated here. The Finns, Lithuanians and the Estonians in particular have re-created ancient religious practices and rituals, sometimes based as much on bear lore or other animal lore as the Natives here.

Certainly the Natives of this land had a rich religious life. It was quite varied from nation to nation, and the religion of the Hopi has as much to do with the religion of the Cherokee as Quakerism has to do with Brazilian Candomblé, *at least on the surface*. They were very different in ritual and imagery, those spiritualities.

As I have affirmed before, I find that these native religious practices and theologies are often misunderstood, and worse, misrepresented, and lifted up on days like Earth Day as forms of simple earth-centered

devotion. They are lifted up as a collection of sort of pre-ecological spiritualities.

This is something of a romantic distortion, and very unfair to the dignity of the Natives, whose religions were complex, deeply theological and very rich. This distortion is typical, I have to add, as it's hard to find, in all of American history, an example of a single treaty; made by the natives with the colonists, which was kept by the colonists. Treating the Natives with contempt has been a blot on the American spirit for centuries.

As I understand it, the Natives, of whatever nation, did not reverence the earth as a medieval European might reverence a saint or the Virgin. The bears and wolves were not revered as angels of a different order, but rather, they proclaimed that all living creatures were our relations, our sisters and brothers. Thus, though the religious forms were diverse, there was a single theme that tied the religious expressions of peoples as diverse as the Hopi and the Cherokee. This was the affirmation of reality as entirely relational. All beings are our relatives. We are all one whole, entirely interdependent, not independent. The Native world was filled not just with sisters and brothers, but mothers and fathers too. Even the great Mystery which bound all creatures together as one....*orenda* in one language, *wakan tanka* in another, *manitou* in a third,... was often addressed with a relational title, -"grandfather." (Never "grandmother" as far as I can tell. Remember, the Natives were just as patriarchal in practice as the European colonists were. In this they shared much in common with the people who invaded their lands.)

Now please. This idea of the relationality of all things, the familyhood of all creatures, was *not* absent from Western Religion, although there are some who would like us to accept that statement on faith. I admit this stance was often suppressed, but it was there. Some of you know that the earliest poem ever written in a modern romance language, namely local Italian, as opposed to the universal Latin, was written by the great Christian revolutionary Giovanni Bernardone, whom we call by his nickname "Frenchy" (Francesco, or Francis, of Assisi). He called even the sun and moon "brother and sister," and he preached to the birds and

the wolves as creatures worthy of hearing a message of love. He understood his ancient religion in a most relational way, in a way quite parallel to the Natives on this continent.

This idea that all creatures are members of our family, or that all of us together are the earth, is economically expressed in Francisco Alarcon's sweet, sharp poem.

*you lock
windows,
doors--
But I'm
inside you;
am you.*

What is it that announces that it is inside me? The earth. I am the earth. You are the earth. The earth is not "nature," as if nature was only green things and wilderness, and Berlin and Columbus are no longer part of nature. Everything on earth is nature. Even this building we have built with sharp edges and clear glass rarely found in the wilderness. The earth *is* the beams above our head, the woven carpet, the foundation, the plants, the painting, the words in the air between us, the hearts beating within us. All of this, right now, is part of the blue green hills of earth. All one whole. No one is any more of the earth than anyone...or anything...else.

But what are the doors we lock, according to Alarcon? The windows we slam shut?

To say that belonging is not as important as belonging slams the door. To insist that one person is worthy, and another person is not, shuts the window. The cruel, nasty words we have invented to damn each other by race, color, religion, gender, orientation, culture etc. are slammed windows and shut doors. The death of all those people in Virginia weighs heavily on me. I can't help but think of parents burying children, the hardest thought to ever hold in the heart. But at the same time, I was so haunted by reading about this sad young Korean American man who

killed so many at Virginia Tech. How when this fellow had some problems speaking in a classroom one day, his classmates shouted at him with a mocking laugh, “Go back to China!”

Door slammed. Window locked.

Mental illness and crime are far more rampant in the U.S.A. than in the E.U. Why? Can it be that such easy phrases as *Go back to China*, or the damnable language of that radio fool Don Imus, are routinely defended as “freedom of expression”? A freedom that, as Nina Simons says, is more about autonomy and independence than belonging, or relationality? “I can say what I want. Don’t you take away my freedom!”

Don’t get me wrong. Just as I don’t want to romanticize the Native theologies around the earth, I don’t want to romanticize the idea of Native theologies around relationship... O Mitakuye Oyasin...to all our relations, in Lakota. Because, just as we have different relationships with members of our family, so we will have different relationships with members of our larger earth family. Berlin was going crazy, when I was there, about this polar bear, Knut, which had been born at the zoo there. Cute as can be, that little white bear. Could melt your heart with one glance. But not all bears are the same, even if all of them are our relatives. Best not to coo and melt, for example, when a hungry grizzly is in your path. You could be a goner just like that.

So, yes, even when all things are related, you have to use some sense, set boundaries, relate honestly, not in a fool-hearted way. But you know, bears have a strange reputation among most modern city dwellers. They can kill you, yes, but almost never do. Folks seem to think of them as fierce beasts...you know, “lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” from the Wizard of Oz. But in truth, they’re loners, and think human beings smell bad, and run away from us. Except in National Parks, when the bad smell of humans is merely a sign that good-smelling garbage is near by. And you are 90,000 times, according to one statistic I read in a book about bears, more likely to be killed by a fellow human being than by a bear.

I am glad to be back home. I love Columbus and this congregation and the family I have created here. But I have to say, I felt very much at home in Berlin too. And maybe, finally, that is what is going to have to happen if the human race is to survive the mess we have made of the earth...learn to see all creatures as our relatives. Learn to see all places as our home, our only home, our holy home, the blue green hills of earth.

Earth Prayer

I am part of you, great planet
Along with each blade of grass,
each garden snake, each robin, each iris.
I am part of you, along with dancing bears
in a children's story, or a deep conversation
in a foreign land. I am part of you. You are
in me. And in everyone. And we are the earth,
and for the earth, we sing.

Blessing (in Memoriam)

A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved. ~ *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) Kurt Vonnegut. Go now in peace, knowing that wherever you go is home, and that all creatures are related to you; and then love whoever is around to be loved.