

## 2008-1-13 Obstacles

### Opening Words

We are here

*on a grey Winter's morn, to worship.*

Here we remember honestly,

*and envision a better world tenderly,*

knowing it's best to remain faithful

*even though a thousand things block our path.*

And so we begin together in peace this way:

**Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.**

### Sequence

Thus I have heard.

I've heard that my own body resembles the universe of stars around me, and that the space between my molecules is vast,

like the distance between the galaxies;

I've heard that I am not much more than a puff of breath.

But it doesn't feel like that.

And the slap of my hand to my hand when I clap *feels* completely solid.

(clap) So be it.

Thus I have heard.

I've heard that the oxygen I breathe to live was once generated in a star,

and that my blood and this oxygen I breathe shake hands every minute as they

braid themselves into my very flesh.

But it doesn't feel like that.

My pulse and my breathing are quiet and non-intrusive in my everyday life.

I never notice them unless I choose to.

They *feel* like part of my solidity. So be it.

What I have heard is certainly true.

But what I feel is also true at the same time.

So now, before the altar of that paradox I now keep my silence for a time, breathing, pulsing and fully inhabiting the breath and small universe that is myself.

*Silence*

Thus I have heard. We are individuals, and we are each precious. But it doesn't always feel as if I am just an individual. It often feels as if I am a multitude, part of a circle of love and nurture and loss and life, which is itself very precious. I am unique, but I'm also connected to all that is, each part of which is unique. Thus, so I might reverence this truth, I set aside some time to name those within me whom I love and miss, aloud or in quietness, *naming* So be it.

Thus I have heard. Human beings are fragile, their breath a cobweb, their heartbeats fleeting. But it doesn't feel like that. Music is woven of that supposedly flimsy breath and pulse, but it feels as enduring as the earth in space, and does not perish, even when it is finished. So be it.

**The First Reading** is by *George Leonard, father of the human potential movement in California, former award winning editor for Look Magazine, where he wrote brilliant coverage of the civil rights movement. He is also a playwright, martial artist, jazz musician and a leader at the Esalen Center.*

Civilized societies need predictable, standardized human components. The early states shaped them with the whip, but soon worked out techniques for internalizing the whip. As technology developed and specialization increased, a rigid system of formal education evolved, devoted to fixing individual behavior at a preordained point, thus effectively blocking the individual's tendency to learn (change, keep adapting) throughout all of life. This process contributes to personal dis-ease.

Civilized societies needed individuals insensitive to their environment and to their own feelings. Individuals who could sense and feel what they were doing in the name of Civilization to nature and other people simply could not keep on doing it. So the social order set about turning off the sensitive ecological sense developed over millions of years of mammalian and early human evolution. By a variety of conditioning techniques, human components were trained to ignore the messages of the senses and distrust their own feelings. The ideal civilized component is one who can keep on doing its task, at the same rate, regardless of its feelings, or of what is going on around it.

Must we go on building, expanding, exploiting forever? Obviously not. The earth is a limited system. So we now are living in a world that demands not Civilization, but Transformation.

**The Second Reading** comes from *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature 1972*, by the great Margaret Atwood. A beloved Canadian poet, essayist and novelist, she was named Humanist of the Year by the Humanist Association. Several of her works have been, or are being made, into film. Here she makes some famous comments on Canadian literature.

A preoccupation with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external – the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more

internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. Sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and a character is paralyzed by terror (either of what he thinks is threatening him from the outside, or of elements in her own nature that threaten her from within). It may even be life itself that they fear; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle.

## Sermon

If you would like, you may think of this sermon as a preface for my sermon next week on Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday. After all, I will be speaking then of the vast and quite systemic obstacles here in the States which maintain unequal privileges for all persons of color, whether beige, saffron, brown, pink or taupe.

Or you might think of it as an example of psychologist Carl Jung's famous word "synchronicity," since early this week I received three written notes from members of the church, each of which used the word "obstacles" in their text. Happily, each of the notes let me know that these obstacles were being successfully tackled, one after another.

Or you could just say this sermon is the story of life in general. I say this because I was studying the classic structure of children's stories this week. Over and over I read how any really *good* children's story must present a series of obstacles... for the main character to overcome in order to get to that joyous, wonderful and happily-ever-after life that we often unconsciously hold as the way life's supposed to be. Whether it's Vasalisa being forced to do chores for Babayaga, or Herakles having to complete his 12 labors, or the princess having to trick Rumpelstiltskin, or even Moses having to face the obstacle of Pharaoh's hard heart, obstacles create stories we remember best. No obstacles to a good life. No honest stories. I certainly doubt that anyone in this room, however happy, has lived an obstacle free life.

Nevertheless, I also doubt whether there are many in this room who *root* for obstacles, who go out of their way to throw them in their own path, or who smile with glee every time an obstacle falls across the road. The word "obstacle" is hardly a cuddly, warm and sweet-smelling word in our language.

But since obstacles to a life of joy are universal, inescapable and rather constant, it might be good to turn around, face them and take a good look.

First, I notice that there are two kinds of obstacles. First, there are *inconvenient* obstacles. And second, there are *consequential* obstacles. Examples of the first, or inconvenient obstacles, might include missing a flight because of mechanical or weather problems, delaying traffic jams, colds, flus, broken bones and sprained ankles, bureaucratic blunders, letters, or even bills, lost by the post office, two hour lines at the DMV, Kroger's being all out of Pampers on Sunday evening...all very annoying and frustrating. Incredibly inconvenient. But usually not permanent.

Inconvenient obstacles may be surmounted. For example, during the Sabbatical I took in 1987, the one I mentioned last week, I had especially looked forward to seeing the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, filled with magnificent Russian paintings almost unknown in the West. But when I surfaced from the subway and looked toward where it was supposed to be, it wasn't there. Turns out they had to redo the foundation of the building for safety reasons, so they put all the paintings in storage for two years, and took the whole building down to the second basement foundation. What I discovered was a huge hole in the ground, not delicious paintings by Ge, Kramskoi and Repin. It was inconvenient and frustrating that I showed up at the exact worst time...and frankly, I doubt I will ever see it. No one just pops over to Moscow to see a museum. But, I am not destroyed. I am not permanently damaged, or doomed. I am not dead. I was just annoyed. The point is, however, they didn't tear down the museum just to annoy me. Inconvenient obstacles, you see, are usually *accidental*.

Now here is where it gets complicated. Because sometimes something terribly frustrating does actually lead to death. And death *is* permanent. I think of the woman, Toyo Suyemoto Kawakami, Jim Bailey's friend whom he remembers today by the beauty of these chancel flowers. Toyo's beloved son Kay died when he was only sixteen. He died of a totally unexpected reaction to a medication he was being given for allergies. No one intended to kill him. It was an accident of the worst kind. A chemical anomaly. Still, *Shikata ga nai*. "It cannot be helped," the Japanese American proverb goes. Toyo heard it a hundred times. It was an unfortunate accident.

But now I want to offer you a clear example of the second kind of obstacle, the *consequential* obstacle. This is a systemic obstacle, and it always leads, if not to death, but to enduring misery and tragedy. I think right away of the famous story of Romeo and Juliette. Two young people deeply smitten, or if you want, in love, but each from rival families. The righteous parents of each teenager are veritable terrorists, trying to control the lives of their aching children, until, by the end of the tragic tale, four are dead, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo and Juliette. And just as with Toyo's son Kay, there is no way to bring back the dead.

But note, just as in the case of Toyo, the parents in the play did not *intend* that their children should die, any more than Kay's horrified doctors intended to kill him. But, the Montagues and the Capulets allowed themselves to be caught up in a system of enmity, stubbornness, rivalry, strictness, competition, violence, hatred and arrogance. These were not personal neurotic traits on the part of the families, so much as a description of a whole system bigger than their combined clans, a form of "civilization" which, by its competitive violence and capacity to demean, undermines its own health and dignity.

But Romeo and Juliette are fictional folk, you say. Emblematic fiction yes, perhaps, but fiction.

OK then, let's return to the very un-fictional Toyo Suyemoto Kawakami, the woman who lost her son. She was an American citizen, born in that most American city, Sacramento, California before the end of the First World War. She eventually attended the University

of California at Berkeley, where she majored in English. She actually didn't know much Japanese at all, because her parents, young adult Japanese immigrants, wanted her to grow up thoroughly American. She was a well-known writer and poet in the Bay Area. Then came Pearl Harbor. And immediately Toyo faced obstacles of systemic origin, with horrific consequence, consequences far more than inconvenient. She and her family were placed in a militarized camp in Utah, one of many such camps set up for American citizens with Japanese ethnicity during the Second World War. They were there for the duration of the war. I have visited one of these camps, Manzanar, in California, just down the road from where my friend Tom Ace lives. It's been restored a bit, and they have put in a poignant museum which, frankly, kept me in tears for two hours.

This systemic violence against people who had committed no crimes is one of the consequential obstacles I'm talking about. And the obstacles were solid and real. A barbed wire fence blocked their exit. The deprivation of their family homes and their livelihoods blocked the free flow of their spirit. The denial of their dignity was an obstacle to their life and peace long after they were released.

The Manzanar museum, run by the National Park System, interestingly enough, is courageous enough to admit what I just said. They freely admit that the Japanese internment camps were tragic obstacles to freedom, dignity and life, and that, as a consequence, they sign a deep betrayal of the American spirit. They were landmarks of sheer bigotry.

Are there other consequential and largely unconscious systems threaded through our American civilization that serve as obstacles to a good and joyous and happy life? Yes, indeed.

Why, for example, do some have health coverage, and others literally die for lack of it? What is the difference between those who see a doctor and get medication and those who can't get to a doctor or pay for medication? Are those with health coverage better people than those without? Look, I don't need Roger Moore to make a movie about this...I just have to open my email, or call a friend or two, to find more than enough tragic evidence for this obstacle.

Or what are the systemic obstacles to a good secular education? Education in grade school, high school, college...all forms of school. Is it the system of religious entitlement, growing more severe every day blocking the path: "No child of mine is going to hear from a godless teacher that we come from monkeys." Or is it a matter of economics...wealthy suburbs have cool schools, poor inner cities often have schools without books or supplies. And how can anyone afford higher education now? I couldn't even afford to go to the seminary I attended once, and I am not destitute. What are the other systemic obstacles that keep all children, no matter where they live, from getting a good education?

The continuing racialization of this country, even though "race" has no biological reality, is another example, as is the distorted nature of our prison system, shaped by the pathetic

sin-and-redemption model of human nature. And then, there is the whole ecological mess of the present age.

These are exactly the kind of consequential obstacles which George Leonard outlined in the first reading. Civilization itself, he says, the overarching system that binds us all, becomes itself the chief obstacle in the world, “effectively blocking the individual’s tendency to learn (change, keep adapting) throughout all of life.”

He goes on. Brilliantly. “Civilized societies needed individuals *insensitive to their environment, and to their own feelings*. Individuals who *could* sense and feel what they were doing, in the name of Civilization, to nature, and other people, *simply could not keep on doing it*. So the social order set about turning off the sensitive ecological sense developed over millions of years of...evolution. By a variety of conditioning techniques, human (beings) were trained to ignore the messages of their own senses and distrust their own feelings. The ideal civilized citizen, he concludes, “is one who can keep on doing its task, *regardless of its feelings, or of what’s going on around it*.”

Exactly. Then he adds that the human race does not need a *civilization* which promotes some and allows others to perish, but rather, it needs a transformation so that all might live a good and happy life. And I think Mr. Leonard gave us a clear indication as to how such a transformation might come about. Human beings have to disengage from *any part of the social system* which numbs their feelings, *so that they can begin to feel things again*. Feel what? Feel revulsion at what we are doing to the environment, day-by-day, year-by-year. Feel revulsion at the use of bloody war, race politics, and religious certainty as systems for maintaining privilege and power. It’s not only an intellectual analysis we need, in his words for example: “The world is a closed system”; but we need a *renewed sensitivity* toward our environment and our fellow creatures, human and otherwise. The mind can describe the wounded world, but it takes heart to respond to the wounds, and the heart’s strength to begin to bring healing to a broken world. The transformation Leonard calls for, therefore, seems to be a spiritual one.

Margaret Atwood remembers when the obstacles we faced were just things like land, forests and rivers. But over time, our inner fears, our self-doubt, and our sense of overwhelm became obstacles to a life of joy. She concludes that sometimes we can be our own worst enemies, because “sometimes the fear of these (psychological) obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and” we become “paralyzed by terror. It may even be life itself that” we “fear; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a...vicious circle.”

How can life itself become a threat? Easy. By making the poor assumption that a good life has no obstacles, or very few of them or just shouldn’t have them at all. Or by making the assumption that there are easy ways around the obstacles and that nobody has to suffer all this California nonsense of feeling their feelings or making changes in their life. “Oh, don’t worry, they’ll invent a cheap electric car, and then it will all come back to normal.” Or, to use that painfully witty metaphor of Lew Welch: “Don’t worry, we’ll find that flashlight and then we can use it to find the flashlight.” Vicious circle indeed.

The thing is, obstacles have always been, and always will be, part of life. There is no obstacle free life. There is no human story without obstacles, whether it's fiction, like Romeo and Juliette, or Vasilasa, or real, like Toya Suyemoto Kawakami.

The *inconvenient* obstacles we simply have to bear and grit teeth. Lines at the BMV. Traffic snarls. Earthquakes. All that. There is nothing we can do about it. I'm sorry. Even if a sad death comes of it. *Shikata ga nai*. Nothing can be done.

But it seems to me that our calling as religious liberals is to faithfully refuse to say *shikata ga nai* when it comes to *consequential* obstacles with permanent effects. Thus, my hope and faith as a religious person is this: I have faith that there doesn't *have to be* any systemic obstacle to health care for everyone, no matter what. I have faith that any such obstacles already in place can be patiently overcome. I have faith that there doesn't have to be any systemic obstacles placed before the guy on the street in a sleeping bag in the cold at two AM who needs warm shelter. If there are obstacles in place, and there are, I have faith they can be patiently overcome. I have faith there doesn't need to be any systemic obstacles to ending wars, repairing the environment or making peace. Where there are obstacles, I have faith they can be faced and overcome. And I have great faith that we can even overcome the obstacle of our own selves, our own overwhelm, and get on to patient, incremental work. I live by this faith. I cannot live without it. I have this faith for many reasons, but not the least of them is knowing that women like Toyo suffered both kinds of obstacles, and yet lived on to make a good and even joyous life for herself, transforming her grief into strength. And so I just have to love how Leonard ends his reading, and with that I'll end my sermon:

"Must we go on building, expanding, exploiting forever? Obviously not. The earth is a limited system. So we now...right now.... are living in a world that demands not Civilization, but Transformation." So be it.

## Offering

Wing it! You are the best!

**Norito** (*Shinto priests I used to work with insist that the Japanese word kami, used in these prayers, is not to be translated as deity, as is often done in western interpretations of Shinto, but rather as Great Nature. And so I do now.*)

(*clap three times. bow*)

It is the end of the celebration,  
and we are here, O Great Nature.  
The wooden ceiling is above us.  
The carpeted floor is below us.  
And we are surrounded by our community,  
both strangers and friends.  
We are soon to sing the closing song,  
a rousing spiritual from another tradition

found in this world of interwoven traditions.

You, O Great Nature, surround us too,

as much inside this building as outside it

in the black tree branches. You are the guarantee that all of our burdens will one day fall

away from us, for you are constant evolution, and therefore we too are constant

evolution. We are coming to the end of this prayer, O Great Nature. Soon this voice will

trail off. But, we have been here and that is good. And now we will sing, and that too is

good. (clap)