

2008-Sept1:Worry&Vision MLB

Opening Words

We are here

to take up the example of summer roses

by blossoming, by being ourselves fully.

As diverse human beings in free community,

may we see our worries and weariness

through the clear, clear lens of Love.

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Sequence

The roses and dahlias blossom of themselves.

It is their nature to grow, to blossom.

In solemn dance with the sun and moon,
which blossom in the sky.

In solemn dance with the rain clouds,
which blossom unbidden in the heavens.

But gardeners blossom too.

Their nature is to hoe, and mulch,
and labor with pruning shears.

And the nature of designers is to labor to draw the image of those shears.

And factory workers labor to hinge their blades and sharpen them just so. It's their nature.

And miners labor at machines to pull the
ore from the earth which can be poured
into the molds that give us blades and hinges.

It's their nature.

And the nature of farmers and grocers is to labor to feed the miners and factory workers and designers and gardeners with strength for their own work.

And on this holiday weekend at summer's end,
the eyes of all those who labor now mirror the beauty of roses and dahlias back
into the world,
where the nature of everything is to grow,
to blossom, to become more and more
what they are. And preachers labor too. They hoe and mulch and prune this
very moment with words, that silence too might blossom, and become more
and more what it is.

silence

The labor, the very nature, of those with human hearts, is to remember and love
other human hearts, to greet them with our mutual humanity,
both in person, and in the imaginative life
of the heart. Now we bless the silence by
remembering those who by their presence
in our lives have enabled us to be the
people we are becoming. These we name in
silent or whispered thanksgiving.

naming

Like roses, like dahlias, the nature of musicians
is to blossom and offer heartbreaking beauty.

The First Reading *this morning comes from Rebecca Parker, the minister who serves as president of Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley California. Our neighboring Unitarian Universalist minister Susan Ritchie, up in Lewis Center, is teaching there for a full semester this fall...history and ministerial practice.*

Paulo Freire – (the late and much honored Brazilian) educator – can assist us in defining the purpose of education. For Paulo Freire, the purpose of education is humanization, “the struggle to recover lost humanity.” “Dehumani-zation,” he writes, “which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human.” To be fully human “is to be a subject who acts upon and

transforms...(the) world, and in so doing move(s) towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life, individually and collectively.

Dehumanization, however, cuts us *off* from experiencing the world. The dehumanized are submerged in the world, passively shaped, controlled, determined, and used for the purposes of others – but they are not active in the world.

Education thus becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically, and creatively, with reality, and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

Freire emphasizes that “the pursuit of full humanity...cannot be carried out in isolation, but only in fellowship and solidarity... Attempting to be more human *individualistically* leads to **having** more *egotistically*. “Radical trust in people,” Freire says, “*is* at the heart of revolutionary teaching.”

The liberation of humanness is not simply a matter of casting off an oppressor. It involves re-collecting, re-discovering, and re-engaging powers of the soul that have been silenced, suppressed, split off, or denied by dehumanizing social systems. Such reparation can be the work of a lifetime, an unfolding process of claiming and manifesting the power of life within oneself.

The Second Reading comes from David Richo’s most excellent book *The Five Things You Cannot Change and the Happiness We Find By Embracing Them*. *This is a longer reading. But don’t imagine that I expect you to take everything in. Just let what you notice and hold on to be something you think about later. Different folks will respond to different ideas.*

Most of us think of virtues in terms of specific words (such as *honesty* and *patience*) rather than in sentences that describe behaviors. However, a spiritual practice of building virtue focuses on them as specific actions. Ponder one virtue from the following list and look for ways to put it into practice.

1. *I am happy to appear as I am, without pretense, and no matter how unflattering. I am not perfect, but rather than simply pass through experiences without awareness, I choose to pause long enough to address*

and process what is happening to me. I learn from my own reactions: Tears at a movie invite me to look at my personal griefs. Attraction and repulsion invite me to look at my hidden needs and motives. Memories and images that tug at me invite me to stay with them and to follow their lead into my own unopened spaces.

2. I am not caught up in regret or self-reproach because of my mistakes in life. I take it all as a learning experience so I can do better in the future. I make amends whenever I can.
3. *I listen carefully to others' feedback rather than become defensive or ego-aroused by it. I welcome feedback that shows me where I am less caring than I can be, where I am less tolerant, where less open.*
4. I notice that my behavior and choices are no longer determined by what others may think of me.
5. *The events in life and the actions of others impact me, but they do not impinge. I remain secure within myself and, at the same time, connected to others.*
6. I forgo taking advantage of others by using any charms of body, word, or mind to trick or seduce them. To grow in humility, I blow the whistle on myself when I notice myself being phony, mendacious, passive-aggressive, or manipulative.
7. *I ask for what I want without demand, manipulation, or expectation. I remain respectful of the timing, wishes, and limits of others. I can take no for an answer.*
8. I have a sense of humor but not at the expense of others.
9. *My question is not "What can I get away with?" but "What is the right thing to do?"*
10. I keep my word. I honor commitments and I follow through on the tasks I agree to do. More and more I can tell what my limits and skills are. This helps me set sane boundaries on how much I offer to do for others, rather than simply being accommodating.
11. *I am thankful for the values and helpful beliefs that I received in the course of my life from so many sources. At the same time, I am examining the scaffoldings of beliefs, biases, and myths I inherited from family, school, religion, and society.*
12. I am no longer under the blinding influence of the four main streets that direct so many attitudes and lifestyles: Madison Avenue, Tin Pan Alley, Wall Street and Hollywood Boulevard.

13. *My work on myself has made me more conscious of the politics and stresses of the world around me. I question authority while affirming, praying and working for an end to war, retaliation, greed, hate and ignorance. This is based on the fact that I have not given up on believing in the possibility of transformation for every person, political and religious leader, and nation.*
14. Confronted with the suffering in the world, I do not turn my eyes away, nor do I get stuck in blaming God or humanity but simply ask: “What then shall I do?”
15. *My love of nature makes me tread gently on the earth with what Saint Bonaventura called “a courtesy toward natural things.”*

Sermon

My friend Devere is a funny guy. What I mean by that is that he makes me laugh. He has a genius for word-play and joking that few equal. And I think he enjoys my ready laughter. Thus, we enjoy each other’s company immensely. But this week I saw another side of Devere. And, more importantly for this sermon, another side of myself.

Devere and I were talking about the political scene in the States right now. “Did you hear the big acceptance speech last night?” he asked. “Did you go wild over it like everyone else?”

Now he said this with such cynicism that I simply said, “Hmmm...sounds like at least *you* were not impressed.”

“You got that right,” he said. “I don’t trust either of those two guys. I mean, how can anyone trust the American political world no matter who runs? They all make promises which they don’t keep. It’s pretty easy to make a convincing case that the last two elections were out-and-out stolen, making the whole idea of voting a complete waste of time. And then there is the whole nonsense of the Electoral College. I am registered to vote this year, but I don’t think I am going to. I am disgusted.”

Now this little speech Devere made was not at all humorous. It did not make me roll on the floor and guffaw like I usually do when he is holding forth. Instead, I found myself growing irate.

“Not vote?” I said incredulously, the full choir of every civics teacher I ever had standing behind me and tearing their hair out. “Not vote?”

We talked a few more minutes. My face grew flushed. I was aggravated. But then I noticed the clock and I had to get to the office to compose this sermon, so I bid him farewell. But I didn’t hug him as we usually do when we greet and depart. I just left in a huff and went to my car. Steaming.

When I got to the office, I re-read the longer readings I had chosen for today. They brought me up short. And, I started to realize how much work I have to do about what had just transpired. After all, although I most certainly intend to vote, Devere *is* expressing what I sometimes feel deep inside, and what many others feel deep inside, but don’t express so forthrightly.

Devere expresses very well the generalized worry, panic, and anxiety of many modern folks in the States these days (although in fairness, I seem to remember that critiques of the electoral college go all the way back to my gradeschool).

Worry and anxiety seem to be at an all time high, at least in my memory. I am not just talking about the high gas prices, the expressed fears of a repeat of the Great Depression of the 1930’s, and so forth.

I am talking about the great changes in American culture, too. The auto industry in my hometown of Detroit is almost down for the count. Other US industries have migrated overseas. On this Labor Day weekend, unemployment, layoffs and underemployment are all rife. What few energy and environmental policies there are scary. Medical insurance is almost a joke. Medical students and computer experts are more often studying now in Delhi India rather than at MIT or John Hopkins. The life-expectancy in Europe and Japan is way higher than it is here in the States. College expenses are beyond reach for many people, even with scholarship help.

With these vast new realities, expressions of high anxiety seem to be way over the top. For example, Devere showed me all of these websites about the coming of Nibiru. Never heard of Nibiru? Neither had I.

But there are literally hundreds of sites dedicated, in all seriousness, to this planet x. When Devere first showed me one of the sites, I had a hard time believing what I was seeing and hearing.

There are altering versions of the story, but in brief, it's like this: out beyond the edge of our solar system, they say there is a brown dwarf star with two planets orbiting it. This star system is in a big cigar-shaped orbit around our own sun. In the next two years, we are told, these objects will come close enough to earth to see with the naked eye. And in the year 2012, one of them will hit us squarely, and utterly destroy our whole planet, including us.

I said to Devere, "Do people really believe this? Oh brother, this is just the plot of George Pal's 1951 film *When Worlds Collide*, with cheesy special effects."

The sites claim of course that the two planets are inhabited, and that certain choice folks may make it off the earth in rockets, but again, that is part of the plot of the famous Pal film.

But the thing is, these sites are not isolated. Many people in the last seven years or so have been yammering about the world ending in 2012. Some interpret a certain Native American calendar as predicting it. And smirking televangelists like John Hagee and Jack van Impe have been accruing evidence that the end of the world, according to familiar evangelical proclamation, will probably be happening around that same year, even though "no one can know the exact date or hour."

To all of which I say, so what? Periods of high anxiety and worry have appeared in our United States history like clockwork. Similar highly fanciful stories of the apocalypse and the end of the world accompany every such period of cultural shake-up. George Pal's movie, for example, was based on a novel written by Philip Wylie in 1933, when the world was beginning to develop the shakes because of Nazi Germany, and the horror of the Great Depression following the prosperous '20s.

And before that, lurid predictions of the end of the world surrounded the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of Darwinism and Marxism. In the 1950's, with the anxiety around atomic bombs, Hollywood, not religion or

pseudoscience, provided the apocalyptic imagery, as giant insects and reptiles in black and white, always enlarged and made dangerous by some exposure to radioactivity, stomped over our cities and ate up our populace. Knowing this history, I say this: expressing worry in strong language and apocalyptic story line is almost a predictable American pastime.

Thus, the mistrust bred by the present age will naturally elicit strong reactions. One will say “I am just not voting, because my anxiety asks ‘What’s the point?’” Another says, “The world is so unfair and cruel now, let the whole thing be utterly destroyed!”

But there is another response to anxiety, which is one of vision, virtue, community and care.

To be a part of this congregation, for example, is to be part of an educational and spiritual community which *recognizes* the dramatic changes of our time, but, instead of hiding out in stomach-churning worry or apocalyptic fantasy, bids us hold close to a liberating vision which helps us to resist the dehumanizing power and principalities of our era. Our heritage asks us to humanize ourselves, that is, to become more human, not less, more shaped by our vision than our worries, more subjects than objects, more faithful than cynical. Rebecca Parker presents Paolo Friere’s insights, with perfect and inescapable simplicity: to educate ourselves to be more human is “to practice freedom.” Or practice liberty, in Bolivar’s phrase.

“We are fully human,” she says, “anytime we move towards possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively.”

Yes, collectively, in community. To do it alone is to risk egotism, she says. She defines dehumanization this way: “to be dehumanized is to be cut *off* from experiencing the world.” The present era is dehumanizing precisely because it doesn’t permit us to experience the world directly. We are simply *told* what the world is.

Muslims are all violent, the pundits tell us. So don’t meet them face-to-face and experience otherwise. Blacks are like this, Jews are like this, you know, wink, wink, gay men think this way, all Christians everywhere are like this or that. This is all the language of dehumanization, the language that changes the

oxygen we breathe into an atmosphere of fear, the language that robs us of our capacity to experience people directly. In Friere's words: "The dehumanized are submerged in the world, passively shaped, controlled, determined, and used for the purposes of others – but they are not active in the world."

David Richo on the other hand, dares to depict a beautiful way of being active in the world, hard as the world is these days. He insists that we not only can resist *being* controlled, we can resist trying to grab control of others. He refers to this kind of life, like the Chinese teacher Kung, or Confucius before him, as living a life of *virtue*. Bringing that word from China to the West, he points out that the Hebrew word we translate as *virtue* actually means *steps*, and I think that is a wise metaphor.

Educated in virtue by our Unitarian Universalist community, we choose to be humanized, step by step. Some of the steps we take toward humanization consist simply in our resistance to, and critique of, the systems that dehumanize us. In the words of Dr. Richo: "*I am no longer under the blinding influence of the four main streets that direct so many attitudes and lifestyles: Madison Avenue, Tin Pan Alley, Wall Street and Hollywood Boulevard.*" But he also describes spiritual work of a more affirmative nature, i.e. "I am not caught up in regret or self-reproach because of my mistakes in life." Or, "My question is not 'What can I get away with?' but 'What is the right thing to do?'" Richo, in his remarkable list of affirmations, offers us a clear vision of what it means to be authentically and virtuously human, not manipulative, but engaged; not defensive, but willing to learn; not despairing, but trusting that human beings working together to make the world more just is not hopeless, but the very substance of hope. Not bullying, arrogant or superior, but willing to let people have the time they need to do the work they need to do to come to their own decisions. Not blaming or dismissive, but self-reflective and accountable.

I am convinced that such a vision is central to progressive religious living in the modern world. Faithfulness to living that vision in our day-to-day lives IS the liberation we speak about; it is both the foundation and the ground-floor of any structure of justice we hope to raise in the world.

Devere was right. We live in a world where promises are broken daily, bombast is ordinary, lies disguise themselves as truth, and many people do

things publicly which undercut our willingness to trust at all. Worry and anxiety about all of this is very real, and sometimes as dramatic as the end of the world.

But that does not mean I have given up. In Richo's words: *My work on myself has made me more conscious of the politics and stresses of the world around me. I question authority while affirming, praying and working for an end to war, retaliation, greed, hate and ignorance. This is based on the fact that I have not given up on believing in the possibility of transformation for every person, political and religious leader and nation.*

And, I need add, myself. I too need transformation. I need to be transformed from a man who felt so righteous about his long held convictions about voting and civic duty, that he came to think that if he was huffy and outraged enough, it would be enough to bully a good friend into submission, and thus, to vote. But such an approach, I have learned from our readings this morning...and for that matter, from Jesus, Siddhartha Buddha, Rumi, and Confucius, is dehumanizing, not humanizing. I dehuman-ized Devere. And myself.

After preparing this sermon, when I next saw Devere, I gave him my usual loving embrace, friend to friend. And I told him that he would feature in today's sermon. "It's what happens when you're friends with a minister...you're sermon fodder, day in, day out. But don't worry," I said to him, "the sermon is not about *your* struggles and decisions; those are yours to make, and you take all the time you need to make them. The sermon reflects on me. I think I tried to make you think and feel like I do by withholding my usual affection for you. I wasn't so much respecting your feelings and wrestling as defending my own, and poorly at that. I still think it's important for me to vote. And I can tell you what my process has been over the years to come to that steady decision. But I am not going to dehumanize you...and thus myself... again, by expecting you to think, and feel, just like I do."

Now, I think I learned something important through all this. About virtue. About anxiety. About liberation. And about myself.

The conversation finally ended, as usual, with Devere and I entering into banter, and then word-play, and then jokes; and then I almost fell to the floor laughing.

But then you knew that would happen, didn't you? After all, I told you right off the bat, "My friend Devere is a funny guy."

Offering

Roses for a Late Summer Day

Roses have roots. So do you. So do I.
Roses have thorns. So do you. So do I.
Roses have color. So do you. So do I.
Roses blossom. So do you. So do I.

Roses are mortal. So are you. So am I.
Roses are teachers. Sometimes we are too.
But today, let's be students instead.

Roses root themselves in the deep earth,
not in shallow worry, or easy anxiety.
Roses do not imagine controlling
the plants around them,
nor do they fret when they don't get their way.
Roses don't fear comets in the sky,
or worms at their root.
They simply get on with budding,
and blossoming.
O Rose, may you blossom before us.
May we blossom before you.
May we blossom together.