2008-10-19 The Beauty of it MLB

Opening Words

We are here
welcomed by the bright, open arms of autumn
to yield our illusions for deeper realities,
to link our hands across the generations
and claim our place among all those
who also wondered at their kinship
to farthest star and nearest rose.

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

A rose is a rose is a rose said the poet.
Would it be just as true if I said it
in another language?
Une rose est une rose est une rose…
Or does the flower we call the rose,
but which in Paris they call *la rose*
mean something different in their hearts,
evoke something distinct in their lives?
Among the Inuit people of the far north,
when they look up at the night sky,
someone might point and say *tatkresiwok,* whereas in Paris, they might call the same bright white wheel in heaven *la lune*.
Is it the same thing? Or is a moon like a white grin over a barren and icy tundra a very different thing from a moon that shines through the poetry of Verlaine and Anais Nin over a glass of rosé set on a café table along the
Boulevard des Capuchines?
In Vladivostok right now,
on the East Coast of Russian,
tishina is falling over the city as the night
grows deeper, and the traffic thins out.
Tishina doesn't fall in Columbus, OH.
Silence does, we say, during the middle of the service after a bell sound intones.
But is it or is it not the same thing?

silence

Love is love is love is love.
Nevertheless, sometimes love takes the form

of hugs or letters.
Sometimes it takes the form of a delicious
supper or a tender gift.
And sometimes, it takes the form of names in
the middle of a service, spoken aloud or simply
remembered in the silent heart, names
that express our connections and love and
struggles and love and sorrow and love
and beauty and love.
Let the names be present.

names

Music is music is music is music.
It is all languages and none. It is the beauty
that heals hearts, and blesses our lives.

Readings

The First Reading *comes from retired archbishop Desmond Tutu's deeply moving book No Future Without Forgiveness written in 1999 after his difficult work with the Truth and Reconciliation committee of South Africa.*

On my first visit to Nigeria, I happened to travel to northern Nigeria in a plane piloted by Nigerians. Coming from South Africa where blacks did not do such work, I really grew inches with pride in black achievement. The plane took off smoothly. Then we hit turbulence. At one moment we were at one altitude and the next we had left our stomachs up there as the plane shuddered and dropped. I was shocked at what I discovered – I found I was saying to myself, "I really am bothered that there's no white man in the cockpit. Can these blacks manage to navigate us out of this horrible experience?" It was all involuntary and spontaneous. I would never have believed that I had in fact been so radically brainwashed. I would have denied it vigorously because I prided myself on being an exponent of black consciousness, but in a crisis something deeper had emerged: I had accepted a white definition of existence, that whites were somehow superior to and more competent than blacks. Of course those black pilots were able to land the plane quite competently.

We shouldn't underestimate the power of conditioning. That is why I hold the view that we should be a little more generous, a little more understanding, in judging perpetrators of human rights violations. This does not mean we will condone what they and the white community in South Africa did or allowed to happen. But we will be a little more compassionate in our judgment as we become a little more conscious of how we too could succumb as easily as they. It will make our judgment just that little less strident and abrasive and possibly open the door to some being able to forgive themselves for what they now perceive as weakness and lack of courage. It might then persuade them

perhaps to be a little more willing to acknowledge their frailty and make them more ready to accept accountability.

The Second Reading *comes from The Rose Has No Why, an essay by the political theologian Dorothee Soelle*

What does the rose tell us? *The rose has no why; it blooms because it blooms. It notes not itself, asks not if it be seen.* In this couplet, the poet Silesius summarizes his answer to the question of the meaning of life. Whereas we ordinarily think we are more than a rose, belonging to a higher order of being, he makes the rose the image and exemplar of true being. It is without purpose, not there for some other reason, not for use, but meaningful in itself. For what is beautiful is holy all by itself. It is not a means to something else.

For many years I have been engaged in the peace movement, & the question I am asked most often is, of course, the one about success: *What is the point of it all?* But I have come to realize that any thinking that is oriented solely toward success is essentially cynical. For the rose has no why, and one has to do some things, even when they meet with no success now.

Sermon

I've been trying to lift up varying aspects of the concept of forgiveness this month. Today, I want to continue to do so by telling a story I first told here some 9 years and two months ago. I would wager that most people in this room have not heard me tell the story, since summer services in those days were not as well attended, and there are many, many people who have joined the congregations since then. So I thought it was time to tell this story again, since it remains one of the most moving, most instructive, and most beautiful stories I know from my life.

It is a story more beautiful than even the lovely story of the lemons this morning, a story which says that when confronted with a wound to the spirit, as Rosalinda experienced when her beloved lemons were stolen, it's possible to come up with a totally unexpected solution, one which takes into account the personhood of the one who has done the wounding. Archbishop Tutu, in his moving confession, recognizes that all of us can end up brainwashed from the systemic matrix of hatred and blame that we live in, whether in the States or South Africa. Even a man as great as he is, with a capacity for facing the hard truths of Apartheid head on and not giving into despair, found himself thinking things that are totally irrational, yet clearly implanted in all of our heads by a larger system of degradation and dishonesty that divides the human race into the privileged and unprivileged by birth.

And Dorothee Soelle, a German theologian whom I heard speak many times, prepares me to understand this story I am going to tell by reminding me that sometimes, expressions of forgiveness are not purposeful acts, deliberately chosen to gain some useful and specific result, but *beautiful* actions, springing from the heart just like art and music, or springing from the earth just like a rose. Sometimes, two people can recognize,

like Tutu recognized, that we are all caught up in a web of national and international blame, distortion, innuendo and deception, which sometimes we mistake for real truth, even though something deeper in us, something holy in us, something beautiful in us, knows better.

Tutu felt that this very fact should invite us to a deeper compassion, a sense of actual camaraderie even with folks we have been taught were once our enemies. A sense of mutual recognition, despite any deep cultural differences. Now, please, no action of violence is condoned by such forgiveness. No one need praise those who allow violence to befall their neighbors. But the beauty of this story reminds me that it makes no sense to pack compassion off in a safe somewhere forever, either.

You may have to learn how to speak a new language in order lift up this compassionate forgiveness. You may, as in our children's story this morning, have to learn a different form of generosity, one that is, as they say, counter-intuitive. But I know I myself can't argue with the title of Tutu's great book: without forgiveness, there is no future. And I, for one, would very much like to see one.

So, here it is. From the autumn of 1985 to midsummer 1987 I was lucky enough to chair the Celebration Planning committee for the IARF General Congress in Palo Alto California. IARF stands for the *International Association for Religious Freedom.* It is an interfaith association of relatively liberal and free-thinking religious groups, and its major concerns are world peace and religious cooperation. The Unitarian Universalist Association has been a part of this interfaith community for decades. It also involves Unitarian and Free Christian groups in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, the Unitarian congregations in Central Europe, both Hungarian and Czech-speaking. It involves the few Huguenot groups that remain in Europe, the German Free Religious Association, the indigenous Unitarian Church of Lagos Nigeria, the several Unitarian groups in India and Sri Lanka including the Khasi Hills churches and the Brahmo Samaj. It involves Visayan-speaking Universalist groups in the Philippines, a number of Asian Buddhist groups, the largest of which is the Rissho Kosei Kai. And last but not least, it involves the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, an ancient Shinto temple in Japan.

Now Shinto is not much known in this country. I certainly never heard much about it growing up, or I confused it with Buddhism. But I was lucky. Early in my career I had a chance to meet the High Priest of the Shinto Shrine, Yukitaka Yamamoto, when he came to the States for a visit. He invited several Unitarian Universalist ministers to have a sashimi dinner with him. I accepted the invitation.

Before Yamamoto arrived, however, I read extensively about Shinto practices and Japanese customs so I personally would not cause an international incident during supper. Somehow I got through the incredible four-hour feast with my cultural sensitivities intact.

So you can see that as I was working on this IARF Celebration Commission I had at least some working knowledge of the Shinto religion. I knew that the Tsubaki shrine had never cooperated with the wartime government of Japan, and I learned that Shinto was only one

of a hundred religions in Japan, including many kinds of Buddhism, Christianity, and newer religions, like Oomoto, and Ittoen.

Let me tell you just a little about Shinto for a moment, for those of you who might like to know. Shinto is an ancient indigenous Japanese religion. It has no scripture, no savior, no prophets, and no universal theological texts. It has no written creed, but it does use an elaborate ritual. Shinto altars are often crowned, interestingly enough, with a mirror. Offerings, like sake and sacks of rice, are often present. Chanting the prayers or *norito*, bowing to the *kami* or spirit in the shrine, and offering the *tamagushi,* or evergreen branch, are typical practices of Shinto worshippers.

The Shintoists celebrate the *kami*, which is a word at once singular and plural. *Kami* is sometimes translated as god or goddess, or even God capital G, but all the Shinto priests I know...and I know quite a few by now...translate the word *kami* as Great Nature; this seems most sensible to me, considering the non-western origin of the tradition. "God" is such a western metaphor, after all.

But I'm so glad I knew something about Shinto when I started my work for the IARF because I had to work with Shinto leaders while planning the Celebrations. And Buddhists, too, and "unitarian" Hindus and Hungarian-speaking Unitarians. The planning involved translators, and *outrageous* theological subtlety...you see, the Hungarian Unitarians pray to the one God, the Shintoists to *kami,* which can be plural, the German *Frei Religiose Gemeinde* routinely refuse all God-talk, and the Buddhists don't even have a concept of God. The diversity at an IARF Congress outstrips the diversity of this or any UU congregation a thousandfold.

For example, my planning committee at first wanted to honor the four elements, earth, air, fire and water, in the common Worship Celebrations. But my Shinto friends told me that the Japanese have *five* elements, (earth, air, fire, water and *metal*) and don't like the number 4, so that didn't work. I think we went back to the drawing board at least a hundred times.

Eventually we got it all together. It proved to be one of the greatest experiences of my life. For example, I was privileged to work with the great poet Maya Angelou, whom we engaged as our main preacher at Stanford Chapel.

I was exhausted by the time the meeting started, but the week-long conference came off with only small hitches. My committee finally worked out the theological problems in the services we prepared by walking theological tightropes strung tighter than the strings on a violin. But, in the end, all our care, our attention to authentic detail, paid off. The Celebrations were all beautiful and meaningful for all involved. Hard work often does, indeed, pay off.

During the week, conferees also met in small groups, predecessors, I'd say, to our own Covenant Groups. Since my big work was finally almost wrapped up, I attended the group assigned to me. My group, like the others, was supposed to meet for six days from

10 to 11:30 in the morning to participate in structured interfaith dialogue. My group consisted of folks from what was then Czechoslovakia, some women from Japan, both Buddhist and Shinto; a Brahmo Samaj from Calcutta, a Canadian Unitarian woman, a Transylvanian Hungarian speaker, a Filipino minister, a Nigerian Unitarian and a Huguenot from Switzerland. A number of us spoke English, but over half of us did not, or did so with very limiting accents. Translators were supposed to come to every group to help facilitate our interfaith, international conversation. Unfortunately, there was an organizational glitch, and our group was the only one that did not get any translators.

We wondered what to do. But we couldn't talk to each other about what to do. We couldn't even discuss whether to break up and join other groups with translators.

Then one woman suggested something wild. She suggested, with gestures, that we meet anyway, but that we come up with our *own* language, one common to us all. It took a while for her to make her point, but we suddenly all got it. It seemed zany, but together we set out to create a new language. We used pictograms and symbols...you know, squares, circles, zigzag lines, triangles....that were easy to draw. I wrote them down on the board, taking people's suggestions. We conveyed their meanings by mime until everyone understood.

We came up with symbols for birth, and death, and marriage, and divorce, and children, and work, and catastrophe, and love, and grief, and school, and graduate, and religion, and anger, and peace, and prayer, and meditation, and God, and Great Nature, and doubt, and faith,, and farm, and city, and home, and sickness, and war, and community and family and parents and relatives and friendship and move and stay and old and young and ecstasy and despair. All together, we created almost 80 symbols together in a single day.

For the next six days, each of us had 20 minutes to tell the stories of our lives using the common language symbols writing them on a horizontal timeline on the blackboard.

Now listen. Maya Angelou is great, but these stories were even greater. My work for two years putting together three worship celebrations in twenty languages was difficult and wonderful, but these morning autobiographies were even *more* difficult and wonderful.

I heard one man describe the sound of the tanks on the cobblestones as the Soviets rolled into Praha/Prague. I heard love stories to rival Romeo and Juliet or David and Jonathan, and family horror stories to make the biblical stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar look tame by comparison.

I choked at the loss of children and the breaking of lives by war and poverty. I heard of religious experiences in temples or churches that transformed lives, and I heard of betrayals and misery too big for my small heart to bear.

I don't know if this made-up language freed people to go deeper than they would have gone in their own language, but all the folks who shared their lives were very forthright and honest and self-revealing. It was beautiful.

One morning the Canadian Unitarian rose and told the story of how she had went to school in the States and met her American sweetheart. They got married in 1939. The war was clearly approaching. He entered the service, and ended up stationed in Hawaii.

Dec. 7th 1941 came, and Pearl Harbor went up in a cloud of smoke. So did her husband's life. She wrote the symbols for death and catastrophe on her time line and wept a bit. We all wept a bit too.

Later that morning, the Shinto woman got up. She told of being born in Hiroshima, but meeting her husband in Tokyo where she summered with her grandparents. The war came, bringing difficult times for her and her family. Her husband was in the armed forces. He was stationed first in Osaka and then toward the end of the war in Nagasaki. Then she wrote the symbols for death and catastrophe on the board, drew a line through the symbol for *husband* with a little atomic mushroom cloud next to it. She too wept a little as she did this. And so did we.

But then she paused, and glanced over at the Canadian woman. She walked toward the place she was sitting. And the Canadian Unitarian woman who lost her husband at Pearl Harbor understood at once, and got up and came over to meet the Japanese Shinto woman who lost her husband at Nagasaki. Then they simply looked in each others' eyes for a moment, recognized each other, and embraced and fell over each others shoulders and wept a good deal and for a very long time. And so did the rest of us.

This event was the center of the IARF conference in 1987 for me. Not Maya Angelou. Not my hard work with my committee for two years. Not the thrill of helping to lead worship in 20 languages. But this. *An embrace and some tears between two strangers who all at once recognized that they were not strangers.* No theology of forgiveness could express that basic truth any better. And I for one understood immediately why I am involved in the liberal church. The liberal church for me is *the institution that supports me as I struggle to proclaim that strangers are not really strangers. And that such a message is not only useful, but as utterly, utterly beautiful as the best of roses.*

Offertory

We give to support the circle that supports us. We give by contributions of time and money and welcome and heart, but we give.

By way of computer banking on some Tuesday, or by a check on Sunday, we give.
We give for the purpose of support.
And we give just for the joy of giving,
like Rosalinda giving away her lemons.
But we give.

Autumn Norito (in the form of a Shinto Prayer, with claps)

The sermon is over.
The readings are in the past.
But here we are now
under the warm wooden pyramid
designed by the architect
so many years ago,
on a carpet woven for this place.
Below that the foundation,
the clay, and the faint traces of the people
who opening their eyes on yellow trees
centuries ago, the Hopewell and Adena.
It is autumn for us now. The earth's axis
is tilting just so,
even though we cannot feel it
in our bones.
Inside, roses. Outside, the leaves blow red
and brown and orange
across the green grass.
Within our hearts, the images of the morning
blow across the fields of our inwardness.
Light outside. Light inside.
Light in poetry. And light in singing.