

Mission

January 24, 2010
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Opening Words

We are here
as a grey but warmer week holds Central Ohio,
and as quakes continue to shake our island neighbors,
to worship, to approach our whole lives
with thoughtfulness and open hearts,
and to revere all that sets us free to serve.

And so, mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Sequence

Every night and every morn,
you teach me, oh Love.
By never offering me more or less
than reality, as it is, not as I might want it to be.
By never granting me anything more or less
than myself as a response.
 Me with my doubts and fears,
 my hesitations and faltering.
 Me with my knowledge and ignorance,
 me with my sorrow and excitement,
 me with my late night transports
 where I am struck like a bell
 by the inescapable fact that everything is:
 dark night, bright day, door sill and window-frame, carpet and scent of supper
 lingering in the kitchen, eyes to see and skin to feel the cool air.
Every night and every morn,
you teach me oh Love.
By refusing to sit still and suffer my definitions;
by escaping from my need for secure answers;
by pressing yourself close in *every* encounter...
with friends, with strangers, with the hurtful and hurting, and yes, with every song whatever the
style, and even, at last, with this silence....

silence

Every night and every morn,
you teach me, oh Love, in a thousand ways,
that I can never go it alone.
Surrounded on all sides by my life,
I am woven into a great tapestry of communities,
with you, some known to us, others barely seen.
These we recall now, as we strive to name them...
either quietly or in a whisper,
that we might learn the teaching that springs
from every connection, conflict, courtesy and courageous communion in our lives.

naming

Every night and every morn, you teach me about yourself, oh Love, by every expression that rises from the human heart: the colors of paint and photo and fabric, the wisdom of lyric, the joy of singing, and playing, and creating beauty together.

The First Reading *comes from two sources, one from the Hebrew scriptures, and one from the Gospel of Thomas, which was written originally in Greek. It is not found in the New Testament, but since its discovery in mid-last century, it has been regarded by scholars as an important document with some authentic stories apparently told by Jesus but not found in the four canonical gospels. But first, the legend from the Hebrew Scriptures about the prophet Elijah, or Eliyah.*

So the prophet Eliyah went out to the territory of Fisherland, where he found the town of Metal-forge. When he ambled up to the town gate, a widow was there, gathering tinder branches off the ground. He called to her and asked: “Do you have any water I might drink?” She nodded, and went off to get some water. Then the prophet added: “Got any bread you can spare?” She then said to him “Look, I swear, I have no baked goods in my house to share with you. All I have is some flour in a clay pot, and a little jar of olive oil. I am gathering tinder here to make my last meal. My son and I will eat the bread I bake from the flour and oil. After that, we’ll probably starve to death.” Eliyah said to her: “Don’t be frightened. Go and bake your last bread. Then bring me some, and feed yourself and your son. For so says the Eternal: your clay pot will never be empty of flour, and your jar of olive oil will never run out of oil until the very day this drought ends and rain falls so we can grow grain again.” So she followed his directive, and just as he foresaw, together they survived for many days on the food of her household. The pot was never emptied. The jar of oil never ran out.

Now, #97 from the Gospel of Thomas, which is clearly a springboard reflection, what rabbis call midrash, on this ancient tale.

This is what (God’s) sovereignty looks like:

A woman is carrying a clay pot filled with flour. While she was journeying down the road, and was still some distance off, the handle of the jar broke, and the flour spilled out behind her. She

had no idea. She didn't notice any problems. But when she reached her house, and put the clay pot down, she discovered it was empty.

The Second Reading comes from an interview with the late and controversial author, Mary Daly, with who died last week at age 81. Her radical books, like *Gyn/Ecology*, were published by our own Unitarian Universalist Beacon Press...nobody else was willing to, apparently.

It's a strange phenomenon to become an icon. There's nothing of *you* in it. I try to encourage women to think for themselves. I don't care if they like my words. I mean, I love that it they like my words....but make up some of your own.

You know, it seems to me that if you spend a lot of time criticizing rather than creating, that suggests a lack. True, I do have critiques of French feminist author Simone de Beauvoir. There are a lot of ways in which I think she's wrong. But I don't spend a lot of pages on that; I respect her for what she's done.

So I think that a focus on criticism is just a way of leaning on me, or on any village guru -- and that's not what I ever want to be. Instead, branch out! My intention, say, in writing *Gyn/Ecology*, was for it to be a springboard. And instead I get: *You didn't do it perfectly; there's something wrong with what you did*. Oh go to hell! It's just a springboard! *You* carry on, when you have more specific knowledge.

Sermon

I've been thinking about our mission statement every since we created it together last year. It made me proud when I remember how excited our national Association Moderator, Gini Courter, was when she first read it.

I've been thinking about our mission statement all this last week. I've been thinking about how all of its phrases flow together into an articulate whole. It really seems to fully embody this month's theme word, justice. Elegantly, too.

And, I've been thinking about our mission statement these last few days as I have been remembering professor Mary Daly, who died last week, at age 81.

Now, as one might expect about such a polarizing figure, much of what I've read about her on line this past week is simply nonsense. Pure paranoid fiction. Some said that as a radical feminist, she didn't speak to men. Ever. *Not true*. She tutored men one on one. She welcomed them into *some* of her classes, just not all of them. She was clear about her reasons. She was strong and unbending, which always makes folks feel uncomfortable. I understand that. Strength and clarity are often frightening in this modern world of ours where deception, innuendo, greed, deviousness and outright denial have successfully claimed center stage.

Others claimed that she warned her students only to read women's works, women's philosophy. Not true. She taught Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, openly admiring their complex ways of reasoning.

But there is no question she was quite radical in her views, despite the pissy and paranoid exaggerations I can easily find on the free-for-all internet.

Mary Daly's difficult books were alive when I was in seminary. We all read them. Some of us trembled as we did. They made a lot of men mad, and some women too. Her language is a form of true fury.

Having said this, I want to be clear about something. Some of the statistical figures that fueled her rage in 1978, when her work *Gyn/Ecology* came out, have proven erroneous; that is, they have not been supported by facts uncovered by historians totally sympathetic to radical feminist critiques of society. Hear me now. I'm not saying that even accusing *one* woman of being a witch and burning her is anything less than evil, but Daly's figure of 9 million is too high, recent scholars affirm, by about 8 1/2 million.

That's exactly why I had Sydney offer her words about such criticism in the second reading. "My intention," she said, "in writing *Gyn/Ecology*, was for it to be a springboard. And instead I get: *You didn't do it perfectly; there's something wrong with what you did.* Oh go to hell! It's just a springboard! *You* carry on, when you have more... knowledge."

In other words, she is not concerned that anyone accept her word on her authority, but that we each engage in figuring things out ourselves. With more accurate information, if applicable. But each person has to claim their own authority. Exactly. Even if Mary Daly was brilliant...and she was...you still have to figure things out for yourself; female or male or anything else...*you* have to experiment with the way things really are. As I said last week, Gandhi promoted this approach. And King. Experimenting with the truth, not listening to any man or woman tell us that they have final access to the truth, directly from the Almighty, or worse, because they are internationally famous or own half the world.

I was lucky enough to see the astonishing musical *Spring Awakening* recently. One of the leads in it sings these lyrics: *All they say is "Trust what is written." Thought is suspect, and money is their idol, and nothing is Ok unless it's scripted in their Bible. But I know there is much more to find---just in looking through myself, and not at them. I know to trust my true mind, and to say: "There is a way through this..."*

So I think experiential learning...experimentation... is important for figuring out who and what I really trust. I think this is true because I experimented one day... with one of Mary Daly's practices, and I learned a lot. She did indeed keep men out of one of her classes because she felt that many, if not all, of them would dominate the conversation and silence women in the classroom unconsciously...by talking over, talking down, talking out of turn, interrupting. Some would fill the room with their voices, and offer no spaciousness which could draw out the voices

too often stifled by sexist culture. She had experienced this in her life too many times to suspect her own thought on this observation. So, one day I was in New Haven, at Yale, at one of our religious conferences, called General Assembly. Thousands gathered there at the famous campus. Lots of large meetings, yes, but lots of smaller workshops too. I attended one. 23 others attended too. But I was the only man.

I don't remember the topic now. Only that I thought it was the most interesting topic scheduled for that hour. I had lots of ideas, many observations to make about that topic when I entered the room. I was ready to speak. A woman presented for about ten minutes, and then opened things up for a conversation on the topic. As the discussion began, I most certainly had something to say. Wisdom. Nifty quotations to offer. But then, for some reason, I don't know why...I thought of Mary Daly. And so I decided to experiment with one of her approaches. I asked myself to be quiet, so that others in the room could speak. No one knew I did this. I just sat in the back of the room, and tried my best to be as invisible as possible. Every time a woman spoke, I indeed immediately found a response forming in my head, a clever comment, or a decisive question. But I bit my tongue and kept quiet. And I mean, I bit my tongue. It was hard work for me, not just as Mark, but as a man, I discovered. I wanted to say all sorts of things, but then I asked myself "Why?" I stayed in that room for an hour and a half and didn't say a word. I think I actually sprained my tongue that day.

But I also learned something. Mary Daly was not a monster for keeping men out of a classroom where a particular subject was being discussed. She understood something about our unconscious social conditioning and responses, something which I hope I have not forgotten after my little experiment.

Now, I use this story to begin to explain why I think the four points of our Mission Statement are so powerful. As I see it, their power stems from the fact that they blend into a seamless whole. They are not so much a list of four distinct ideas, but rather, four facets on a single jewel.

So let me unpack what I mean for a moment. Here is our Mission Statement: *We are here: • To learn and practice true hospitality • To revere the reasoning mind and the generous heart • To claim our diversity as a source of our strength, and • To relinquish the safety of our unexamined privilege for the freedom to engage in transforming justice.*

Now, regarding my story, you might suggest, right off, that I was clearly "relinquishing privilege" by keeping so quiet. Yes, I suppose I was. That was the original point of the experiment. But, listen, I think I was *also* struggling to practice what our statement calls *true hospitality*. "But you weren't welcoming anyone into the room," you may say. "It wasn't even your workshop!" Precisely. That would be a good, *traditional* form of hospitality, but not by far the deeper, truest one. Traditionally, I can welcome anyone I want into the home I own. But, *I do not own ideas. And I do not own circles of community.* I was simply one part of that community on that particular day. And I felt called to a truer hospitality, by which I mean this: true hospitality is not *me*, one who belongs, welcoming others, who do *not* belong. A truer, deeper, or if you want, more radical way to view hospitality is that it is utterly *mutual*. If you go up and

welcome a visitor into our building for the first time, you hopefully are not doing this as some club member welcoming an outsider. No, if you welcome someone, true hospitality suggests that you *are also being welcomed*, welcomed into that other person's life as much as you are welcoming that person to share community with you, you who may have been coming here for 20 years. Visitors are making themselves vulnerable enough to enter into a circle of what, to them, are *all* strangers. That's quite remarkable when you think of it. They are opening up their door as much as you might be opening ours.

And, I was also *reasoning* in that room in Yale. *We are here to revere the reasoning mind*, we wrote together. I reasoned that it would be beneficial to my soul to experiment with one of Mary Daly's demands. And my reasoning proved sound. Now, our spiritual history touts reason a lot. But it does not lift up what I like to call "tinker toy" reason. In the story of Eliyah and the magic claypot, for example, "tinker-toy reason" can only assert that such things don't happen in the present world, so they didn't happen in the biblical world. "Tinker-toy reason" deals with "yes" and "no," only, and says "There are no magic claypots anywhere, so there weren't any in biblical times either." But our tradition asks us to reason more deeply, ask more and notice more. So notice that the woman in the story is a widow and about to starve to death, since there was no social network in those days. Notice that the prophet, who speaks out of a deep spirituality, doesn't work a wonder to dazzle but to feed. His magic pot of flour is not to convince people of his power, or God's power, but to help a woman in deep trouble survive. Could the fable be only an ancient and beautiful way of asking "If religion is not at least about service to those suffering social injustices, what is it about?"

So, yes, in that room at Yale, I was reasoning. Reasoning that my life might grow deeper, and maybe more generous and kind, if I tried some radical shifts in my behavior. I figured out that experimenting with Mary Daly's practice might *get me through this hour spiritually* much more reliably than would my *often unconscious* habits as a privileged man of many words who talks to think.

And, I was also, looking back, trying to be serious about the deeper meanings of diversity. I was trying to find "strength" in that diversity. Again, diversity in that room was not simple biology... that is too much of a surface understanding. But, in that room of women, some were married, some were divorced, some were remarried, and some were living in stated partnership with a man or woman. Some were grieving deeply for a loss, some were in love, some did not know if they ever were in love; some were suffering chronic pain, others just ran a marathon and won painlessly. Some were mothers. Some couldn't get pregnant no matter what. There were some who experienced very powerful ethnic cultural-shaping in their home of origin, and others who had no idea that they even had any roots at all. When the women started to comment on the topic at hand that day, while I sat silently by, *all* of these diverse realities surfaced in one way or another. And as I listened, silently, I felt empowered and grateful. The revelation of this diversity strengthened me.

What I am saying is that our mission statement is not a sober portrait of what we are right now, but what we are practicing to be and do in the world. It's about our own transformation as well as the world's transformation. In short, it's a summons to practice our religious way of life in four

distinct but completely united ways, each flowing into the other.

But why read those two biblical stories? What do they have to do with anything? The first story is one of a series of folk legends about the prophet Eliyah, (Elijah) whom for the ancient Hebrews was almost a Paul Bunyan-like character, a folk hero around which many tall tales gathered. As I said, it's more of a story about social justice than it is about any bona-fide miracle, or God's intervention in history.

But the author of the gospel of Thomas is worried about how easily such stories *can* be interpreted in a magic way. So the author recalls a contrasting story of Jesus, which turns that story upside down. A woman has a clay pot of flour, but the pot is cracked, and it all leaks out. The poor woman doesn't notice a thing. The author says this twice, just to make sure you get the point. And so when she gets home, her clay pot is empty. Call this story an "unmagic" story if you want. Her pot is *not* magically filled to the top. In fact, it quite un-magically *empties out* because of a crack she doesn't notice.

For me, the story is saying two things: One. Forget any *get-off-the-hook* interpretation of the story where a greater power simply supplies your need by a finger snap. Really. Just forget it. It doesn't happen. Wonders and signs won't help Haiti. Mere human beings will. But, two: The needs of the world...for nourishment, and home, twin symbols of justice...are still real. The woman is on a journey, the story says. As are we all. But the storyteller reminds us that she didn't notice the crack in the clay pot of flour, the vessel of nourishment, she was carrying home. The storyteller doesn't tell us why she doesn't notice. It doesn't matter. It's just a fact. And the author is saying if you don't notice cracks in the system, if you are not mindful, if you don't pay attention to injustice, if you don't live deliberately, or radically, instead of merely habitually, you might lose your very means of keeping yourself and your children alive and thriving. Not just biologically, but spiritually too. Alive in your heart, alive in your mind. Reasoning generously and relinquishing any power you have that tends to keep both you, and others, in the mud. When you live deliberately, experimentally, you might find strength among others in community, like I did that day at Yale, growing a bit more human.

Our mission is also beautifully revealed in the story I told this morning about two fishing families. If you are looking through the lens of categorical diversity, one is a black family. Both members are female. Different ages. The other is a white family. Different ages. Both of them are male. And *both* families are depicted as living in a culture where diversity is not a strength, but a terror; where true hospitality...that is *mutual* hospitality...is forbidden; where the generous heart and reasoning mind are unwelcome, and where the privileged family in the story has no intention of relinquishing any aspect of the system that keeps both families in the mud of Jim Crow. But the little girl in the story *feels* for the boy who didn't catch any fish. In other words, she pays attention to her generous heart. She allows herself to reason more deeply. Suddenly, she sees a potential friendship that is not wrong just because they are different, or diverse, as we say. She knows that she isn't *supposed* to be talking to that potential friend. But she wants to be hospitable to him, to teach him a trick she knows that fetches fish each and every time. So, without any magic, without any super-natural power, she breaks from the pattern that keeps everything and everyone in place. She teaches the boy a new and helpful way to fish. And at the

end of the story, the little white boy relinquishes ever so slightly his position in society, so clearly articulated by his father... by waving back at her. And smiling.

That's not much, you say. That's just a little thing. So is an atom, I say. Hard to see even with the best of microscopes. And yet we are built of them. And justice, I say, is built on small things. On the simple mission claimed by ordinary people like us. Ordinary people? Oh yes. For in the words of poet Adrienne Rich... yet another radical feminist who, along with Mary Daly, taught me a great deal back in seminary...we are the ordinary people who, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world. And I would finally add, reconstitute ourselves; for after all, are we not, each of us, part and parcel of the world?

Offering

Every night and every morn
the rooms of this our common house are filled.
Hearts are encouraged.
Minds are taught.
Community is woven.
Though some give in more modern
electronic ways in support of our center,
others like this more intimate way of expressing
support and encouragement, one woven
into the art-form of our Sunday celebration.
The morning offering is now given and received.

Closing in Unison: the Mission of the Church

We are here:

- To learn and practice true hospitality
- To revere the reasoning mind and the generous heart
- To claim our diversity as a source of our strength, and
- To relinquish the safety of our unexamined privilege for the freedom to engage in transforming justice