

Making the Best of It

August 28, 2011

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Greeting, Centering, Kindling Opening Words

We are here
after a week of many beautiful days
to celebrate the wonder that we live at all,
and to remember that we have the power
to receive each day of life as a gift
and can offer each other the equal gifts
of love and truthfulness.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and everyone with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Story *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* is the title of a 1999 book by Simms Taback that won the 2000 Caldecott Medal.^{[1][2]} The main character is Joseph, a 40-something Jewish farmer, who has a little striped overcoat. When it is old, Joseph makes it into a little jacket and so on until he makes it into a button. Then Joseph loses the button and makes a story out of it. The moral of the story is "you can always make something out of nothing."

Sequence: (thanks to Marguerite Molk for the bouquet of cattails)

There you are, you late summer cattails,
slowly revealing yourself as a particularly fine chapter in nature's holy book,
open and ready to teach how we might best live.
You teach the equal beauty of straight line and wavy, the comparable loveliness of soft seeds
and crisp stems. In hurricanes, you bend, not break.
You offer all your beauty, and refuse to demean any part of yourself.
May we be more like you.
You offer yourself totally for our nourishment-
every part of you is delicious, the pollen,
the seeds, the stalks. You refuse to be seen as
a weed for the pulling or poisoning. You insist
that all parts of your living self have something to offer to the rest of us.
Your generosity is without peer.
May we be more like you.

From your leaves, I hear, we can make a glue that holds things together,
or weave baskets to carry our abundance.
From your seeds we can stuff pillows for our comfort.
You never waste a moment denying your usefulness, your gifts, or your capabilities.
May we be more like you.
In the silence before us, we begin our discipleship.

silence

Remembering that the silence is populated with the faces and voices and songs of those people with whom we share this earth, or have shared it, we set aside some time to free the silence by naming and claiming those we love, those we miss or for whom we mourn, those with whom we struggle. We name them in our silent heart, or whisper their names into the common air, as pleases us.

naming

From the comforting silence to the soaring melody of a great work of the human heart, a work struggling to turn every aspect of life into song. And may we too soar, and thus be more like that song.

Anthem

The First Reading *is by the late star of film and the television show Saturday Night Live, Gilda Susan Radner. It's from her autobiography, which she wrote during a reprieve from cancer treatment.*

"I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity."



The Second Reading, comes from a very different source. A book on Russian architecture, of all things. But it at least might help you to understand why I might have put that photo on the cover, the photo of that magnificent wooden church, the Church of the Transfiguration, on the island of Kizhi. Hubert Faensen wrote these words back in the early 80's around the time I visited these monuments.

The much praised instincts of Russian architects for proportion, rhythm, outline and decoration derives ultimately from traditional simple peasant structures, and of pantheistic surrender to the forces of nature, by which a pre-Christian sense of community was evoked. The piety of the people was permeated with a sense of closeness to nature which interpreted Christian rebirth quite literally as the beautifying of earth and the transfiguration of human life. The people often did not assemble inside the churches for services, but outside in the open air, watching the action through the open doors. They wanted to feel at home both inside and outside the church. As they put their imagination into their buildings, they unfurled and developed their own selves,

transforming menacing forces into familiar ones, and in the world made by their own hands, they could contemplate and experience something that was nobler, and more beautiful than the circumstances in which they lived.

Sermon

There is so much going on in the world right now, isn't there?
Events that clutch at the heart, and furrow the brow.
Hurricanes on the Atlantic seaboard.
Surprising earthquakes in unusual geographies.
Droughts in one area, flooding in others.
Religious fanatics insisting that each of these natural occurrences signs the beginning of the end, and it's your own damn fault for not believing the right way.
Their way. Your way doesn't count.
Ah yes, events that clutch at the heart, and furrow the brow.

Public discourse these days breaks the heart as well, and revs up both fear and pessimism. One politician confuses the unswerving teachings of her Wisconsin Synod Lutheran upbringing with both science and politics; another blames border-crossers for apocalyptic fires without a whit of evidence; while still others calmly assert that all of the numbing economic and unemployment figures of our age are all you-know-who's personal and singular fault.

And then there is the constant media litany of ominous words that many people barely understand, if at all...*sub-prime rate, default, Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae*, and the overly graphic *dead cat bounce*.

And even closer to home, this very congregation has been reeling from localized loss: so many beloved movers-and-shakers moving away for work, or to retire to warmer climates. Dozens. Every one of them missed both for who they were, but also, for the gifts of experience and skill they brought to the mix of this place.

Oh yes, it's hard for me to be an optimist sometimes. It seems especially easy to be a pessimist these days.

But then, while thinking on these things this week, happily, I stumbled across these words of William Arthur Ward, a lay Methodist theologian. "*The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The realist adjusts the sails.*" And that set me to thinking about the words, first coined, I believe, by Benjamin Franklin: "to make the best of it."

I first started thinking about this phrase when I was on my first sabbatical, back in 1987. I was in Russia, then called the Soviet Union, diligently practicing the Russian I had learned in college (to not much avail!). I loved exploring the great architecture and remarkable art collections of the major cities, and admiring the vast layouts of their incredible subway systems, an idiosyncratic obsession of mine as some of you know.

I had seen a photo of the Kizhi churches in my Russian text book, and knew that one day I wanted to see them with my own eyes. While in Moscow, I arranged for a special tour of the place. I took the eleven-hour sleeping car train trip overnight to the quaint city of Petrozavodsk in Karelia, a Finnish speaking area of Russia, now an independent republic.

There, I boarded a superfast hydrofoil, a boat that skimmed on something like aluminum skis across the waters of Lake Onyega. Lake Onyega, a Lake Superior-sized body of water to the north east of St. Petersburg, and not too terribly far from the Arctic Circle. But please don't imagine Dr. Zhivago snow drifts ... I was in Karelia in the early summer, close to the time of the midnight sun. So please picture green grass, dandelions gold in the white-hot sun, and a vast array of flat islands and peninsulas splayed toward the center of the deep blue lake that stretched past the horizon like an ocean.

You could see the wooden churches in the distance right from the pier, which was nested close to the shore then in a corral of cattails. But I assure you, nothing could have prepared me for the magnificence of those buildings when I got up close. Eighteen stories high, the Church of the Transfiguration with its log-cabin-like understructure rose into the air, like a huge bonfire made of wood. The twenty-two onion domes, crafted from wooden shingles, mesmerized us all for a great length of time, rendering all of us chatty folk, who had traveled on the boat for an hour and a half, speechless. Inside, the relative tiny interior of the church boasted, like all Orthodox sanctuaries, a screen of icons or holy pictures that blocked the altar from view. The icons were painted with very untypical colors... chartreuse, orange, lavender... but they were very beautiful.

As we studied this collection of 18th century buildings, churches and homesteads, we learned that flat islands in the middle of lakes aren't great sources for metal ore, so the churches were built without nails of any kind. They were all fitted together like jigsaw puzzles. While smaller buildings had been built that way before in Russia, this was by far the largest and most extravagant such structure ever built that way. Engineers and architects still shake their head in disbelief when they see it.

And, since metal was so rare, money so scarce, they didn't have lots of saws and fancy tools from the cities. It wasn't an 11-hour train trip back in 1714, it was a *week-long* trip all the way to the hardware shops of St. Petersburg. They just had a few axes with them, that's all. So they built the entire thing with what they had, a few relatively clumsy tools, and trees from the nearby mainland.

The icon screen was painted untraditional colors, not because the artists were experimental or avant-garde, but because the berries and roots and minerals that supply traditional paint pigments simply didn't grow that far north. So they used the plants and berries and minerals at hand from their own land.

As the reading from the book of Russian architecture said, most people didn't even *see* the icon screen, anyway. They were standing outside the church, sometimes on their own little homestead islands across the channel. The harsh bells would ring, they would face the church, offer a few prayers, and then get back to their farming or fishing, diligently laying things in storage, and

smoking and salting the fish for the long dark winter ahead of them, a winter where the sun doesn't even rise much above the horizon for a few days.

Many people saw the colors on the icon screen in their original form, out in nature. In Hubert Faensen's words from the reading:

The people often did not assemble inside the churches for services, but outside in the open air, watching the action through the open doors. They wanted to feel at home, both inside and outside the church. As they put their imagination into their buildings, they unfurled and developed their own selves, transforming menacing forces into familiar ones, and in the world made by their own hands, they could contemplate and experience something that was nobler, and more beautiful, than the circumstances in which they lived.

The circumstances in which they lived. What were those circumstances? Hard winters; demanding summers; having to build their own houses by their own hands in a distant land just to escape the wars tearing apart the cities; and lesser resources than most other geographies.

And yet, these people built, without nails, with axes and muscle alone, the single most revered and beautiful example of Russian Orthodox architecture in the world, now a United Nations heritage site. Well is this great building named: Церковь Преображения Господня (tserkof pryebrazhyenia gospodia) "Church of the Transfiguration." With their stubborn realism, they *transfigured* their circumstances, and made the best of their situation. They didn't merely cope, or tolerate, or put up with it. They didn't complain, and they didn't pray to be spared. They want to both transform their lives and be transformed by their vision of something "greater than their circumstances." And, they didn't want their religion to be something that happened just *inside* an incense-filled building, as beautiful as that was. They wanted to live deep lives, both inside and outside the door. They wanted to make the best of *all* of their life.

They were neither romantic optimists, hoping that maybe winter wouldn't be coming that year, nor sour pessimists, wringing their hands and complaining about it all. They were realists who refused to deny, avoid, or even to try and walk *around* reality, as if that were even possible.

The late star of Saturday Night Live agrees heartily. *"I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it."*

Right. She should know too, facing cancer as she did at such a young age. She's right. Some poems *don't* rhyme. Sometimes summer balm turns into hurricanes. Sometimes greedy schemers destroy whole national economies for a billion bucks or two. Sometimes loudmouths do take the mike and say irritating things about evolution, gays and lesbians, or God.

And sometimes, even, people we love and can't imagine living without, move away in droves. Sometimes difficult people take up all of our time. Sometimes, even, oh yes, you and me...we can be difficult people too. The real story, after all, has to include us, or we're only fooling ourselves.

And it seems to me, when I look at the teachings of so many spiritual teachers across the ages, they were saying what I am trying to say. Take Jesus for example. “Red sky at morning, sailor take warning,” he said one day, quoting a version of a well-known proverb famous even then. “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight.” Then he added: “You can interpret the weather pretty well. Why do you have such a hard time interpreting your lives? Why don’t you decide what’s right and live that way?” (Luke 12:54-57)

What’s right? To love your neighbor as yourself, even though Bernie Madoff and a few hundred banks and investment companies did crooked things. What’s right? To love your neighbor as yourself, even though some political upstarts make you sick to your stomach. What’s right? To love your neighbor as yourself, even though storms come without warning, and loss is never parceled out equally or happily, ever. What’s right? To love your neighbor as yourself, without hiding out in the false shelters of either a wishful romantic optimism or whiny self-aggrandizing pessimism. Keep your eyes on the prize, not on the escape or the excuse. Like the guy in the children’s story this morning, or like the Buddha, 2500 years ago for that matter, keep aware that everything wears out in the end, but that you can transform your ever-changing situations... and be transfigured yourself...by your loving and thoughtful and creative decisions to do the right thing anyway, to do your absolute best.

I’m not always a fan of the word “realist.” I too often hear it used in a way that pats the user on his or her own back, or puts a swagger in their step. You know: “I’m a realist...you live in a fantasy world of wishes and wants and fluffy theology, unlike me, your rational and natural superior in all things.”

But I am not sure of a better word at this juncture, so I’ll use it.

“The realist adjusts the sails,” concludes Ward’s proverb that I began my talk with. I know a little bit about adjusting sails. I used to sail with my friend Bonni and a friend of hers on a catamaran with a hydrofoil attached, on Lake Huron, and I am here to tell you that adjusting the sails is no small feat. It’s pretty scary when you’re hanging off the edge of the boat to begin with, and the waters are choppy and you’re in a wetsuit. It required both strength and skill and tight cooperation. But I remember few things more exciting from those days than doing that hard work with focus and persistence. We sometimes doubted, at least fleetingly, that we would ever make it to shore, when the brewing storms rose up suddenly off the lake, or the waves were so wild we went through them, not over them. But we made it to shore, and built the fire on the beach, and ate the supper we had carried with us the whole while in the boat.

Times may be tough, aggravating and disappointing, and circumstances may sometimes change the wind, making the sails flap dangerously. Sometimes the wind drops completely, and your sails, and your soul, droop for a while. But when you adjust the sails to the circumstances, and wait instead of expect...and there is a difference in those words I hope you’ll meditate on...I assure you, you will eventually, in all likelihood, get to shore.

At least, that’s the image I’ve been using to get through these times, without veering either toward optimism or pessimism. How do you do it?

Offering

During the time of the offering, we try to express our realism about the actual costs of a place like this, but we also want to be realistic about the modern world, where some share with the community electronically, and others through the mail. Still, this ancient way of doing it is poignant to many, and so we receive your gifts for the health and welfare of this our chosen community, and our common house of life and love.

Returning: Personal Affirmation of Miriam Makeba 1987

There are three things I was born with in the world, and there are three things I will have until the day I die: hope, determination, and song.