

The Bread of Paradise

November 20, 2011

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Greeting
Centering
Kindling
Opening Words

We are here
to practice the art of thanksgiving
by expressing gratitude for what we can do
and sharing the good gifts we've received,
in peace, with care, that love may prevail.

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 all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Hermione and the Hogwarts House-elves A Harry Potter Parable

As the scene opens Hermione, Ron, Harry and several friends from Gryffindor are sitting at the Gryffindor table. They are hungry.

MC: Welcome to Hogwarts, the school for wizards and witches in England. Harry, Hermione and Ron are just beginning their 4th year. They have just arrived at Hogwarts for the beginning of the year feast. They are sitting very impatiently in the vast old hall, under the magical ceiling that matches the sky, with the students of all four houses. And the feast is late! Where is the food? Nearly Headless Nick, the official ghost of the Gryffindor House, has an answer as he drifts up to the Gryffindor table.

Nick *[shaking head back and forth which makes it wobble]:* Peeves, of course. The usual argument, you know. He wanted to attend the feast - well, it's quite out of the question, you know what he's like, utterly uncivilized, can't see a plate of food without throwing it. The bloody Baron put his foot down.

Ron: So what did he do in the kitchens?

Nick: Oh, the usual. Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits.

Hermione *at the word house-elves she sits up to attention so fast she nearly falls out of her chair and Harry and Ron help her:* There are house-elves *here*? Here at *Hogwarts*?

Nick: Certainly! The largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred.

Hermione: I've never seen one!

Nick: Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they? They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning...see to the fires and so on...I mean, you're not supposed to see them, are you? That's the mark of a good house-elf, isn't it, that you don't know it's there?

Hermione *[just stares for a moment]:* But they get *paid*? They get *holidays*, don't they? And, and sick leave, and pensions, and everything?

Nick *[chortling so much that his head nearly flops off]:* Sick leave and pensions? House-elves don't want sick leave and pensions!

[Hermione picks up her silverware and places them across her plate and then pushes the plate toward the center of the table.]

Ron: Oh c'mon, 'Er my knee. You won't win them sick leave by starving yourself.

Hermione *[Shaking her head as if she still can't believe it.]:* Slave labor. That what makes this feast and all the food we eat. Slave labor.

[The group leaves the table and goes onto the chancel, standing and sitting around, as if in the common room. Hermione has a can and a few badges or buttons that say SPEW.]

MC: Hermione did not go on a hunger strike but she decided to form SPEW, making badges and trying to collect a small amount from each student as dues. She didn't have much luck.

Harry: Spew? What's this all about?

Hermione: Not Spew. S-P-E-W. The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.

Harry: Never heard of it. Sounds weird.

Hermione *[Goes to Ron and rattles her cup]* I've been researching it thoroughly. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can't believe no one's done anything about it until now!

Ron: Hermione - open your ears. They. Like. It.

Hermione *[Moving on to another prospect.]* End elfen slavery. Just two Sickles.

Student 1: If we freed the house-elves, then who would clean for us?

Hermione *[Moving on to another prospect.]* End elfen slavery. Just two Sickles.

Student 2: Everyone knows they like to work for us. They're very loyal.

[Everyone freezes, Hermione with her can out.]

MC: No luck. Everyone had the same facts Hermione had. Well, maybe not in such depth, but they knew the important basics and they failed to see injustice that Hermione saw.

This Holiday season you will have an opportunity to learn more about people around the world that our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee works with to make their lives better. Everyone of every age is asked to contribute to UUSC during the holidays. But then everyone is asking for contributions, right? The most important reason I can think of to make a UUSC donation a top priority is that UUSC is like Hermione. It looks for the injustices, the hurts, that everyone else overlooks. Often that's the children. For instance, after the Haitian earthquake UUSC helped the children who had been sent by their parents in the country to live with and work in the homes of city families. They had been abandoned by the city families. In New Orleans, after the hurricane and flood, UUSC helped families with same-sex parents to get the federal and other aid they were denied because of whom they loved.

Sequence

Great Mystery. Wakan Taka. Orenda. Manitu.

The natives of this land gave you many names, and knew that all of them were provisional, local or ephemeral. They called you grandfather on some days, but knew that even calling you a *you* was a convenience for the heart, not a fixed truth for the mind.

Things have changed in this land. Now people debate you and write books proving you either are, or are not, and with great passion too.

You are dressed up in blood-red last judgments and the glass beads of tradition, mummified in scripture, sliced up by superior sarcasm into something too thin to offer nourishment, or claimed by nation, creed, politics or clan as their very own.

Yet, oblivious to our foolishness, you remain the great mystery, fountain of orange sunsets and blue mornings, geyser of lovemaking and justice work, signed by the height of mountains and the depth of the sea, summoned by the constellations of night, flashing in the moments when children are born or loved ones die. Great Mystery, woven of a thousand lesser mysteries which bend our knees and close our chattering mouths, silence us now so that we might be like our ancestors who once roamed these hills before the nation of Ohio was born.

Silence

Great Mystery, open the book of our memories, and read there, through our own mouths and minds and hearts, the names of all those we love, remember, struggle with or mourn. Our lives are bound with them, and there is no present moment untied to the experiences of the past. We name and embrace within our own lives.

Naming

Great Mystery, no one yet has figured out why music does what it does, or how it touches the heart and mind with such power. Books are written, studies done, but the mysteries of melody embrace us in ways we cannot name. I'm grateful for that...

a n t h e m s

The First Reading *comes from the personal journal of William Christopher, the "undocumented" spouse of the great American painter, George Tooker. More about how I got my hands on such a precious document, written in pencil, during the sermon.*

Of a dinner one evening in Alabama, Christopher wrote:

"The tall head-waitress glares at us. Two, then four, then six State Troopers came in for dinner. She actually goes from one to the other pointing us out, that we had been with negroes. It is hard to believe, but it happened. They turned their eyes to our table, glaring, and kept it up. Then three men in jackets came in...un-uniformed; she went to them. They glared. What a meal!"

Of a lunch they ate at a hotel restaurant: "So pleasant, one waitress; the others, so bitter. What are they doing to their lives?"

While listening to Martin Luther King's eulogy for the Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb, who was killed with a club by three thugs, while leaving a restaurant with two other UU ministers, Orloff Miller and Clark Olsen, Christopher described yet another meal:

"King's eulogy is wonderful. What a speaker. The beauty of Dr. King's voice, the heat, the people listening, looking tired, nuns in muddy habits from sleeping in the streets; but everyone's eyes are alight with the spirit." "We go into a backroom...we have cool aid (sic) and sandwiches. We haven't eaten all day. There are young and old, blacks and whites coming and going, all smiling, all intent on their mission. It is extraordinary. Nowhere do any of us find any temper, any dislike...but just plain brotherly love. I have never experienced this before. I cherished each minute of it. I have never seen so many smiling faces filled with radiance than this afternoon. The young people are of extraordinary beauty, hand in hand, or just sitting and listening."

A page later, he portrayed the conclusion: "the entire place is in song, the church, the streets, the houses, 4000 people singing. All time has stopped. All hands are joined. The experience is devastating...it forever shatters fear, distress. The wall of non-belief is broken down with the swell of all these voices."

The Second Reading is the chorus from a song in the film *Home of the Brave* by Laurie Anderson.

Paradise
is exactly like
where you are right now,
only much, much
better.

Interlude

Sermon

I almost fell to the floor a month ago when Melissa Wolfe, the curator of the American Collection at our Columbus Museum of Art, a person I had never met, called me out of the blue at the office and asked me to write an essay about a painting.

“For the new catalogue,” she said. “We are asking people from around the country to respond to eight particular pieces in our collection. We want you to be one of them.”

Like I said, I almost fell to the floor. She explained further: “We are looking for folks who are not professional art historians to write these essays. A 2000 words essay is what we’re looking for.” Amazed beyond words, I nonetheless managed to ask, “What painting?” And she said “George Tooker’s *Lunch*.” Again, I wobbled. “Did someone tell you that George Tooker is my favorite American painter?” I asked. “No, but that’s good, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say.” This prospect excited me more than I can explain in mere English. I went over to the museum immediately to see the work. Melissa had explained to me that I could come in to the curatorial offices and review some materials from the papers of George Tooker, copies of interviews, journals, that sort of thing. What I found just blew me away. I was a pig in mud, as I have said to many.

When I looked at the painting (its egg tempera, by the way, a notoriously difficult and slow medium), I could see men and women eating single slices of bread. Not looking at each other. Not even acknowledging each other. Just eating bread. White bread slices to be exact. Only one man is drinking from a cup. There is no evidence he is holding the cup...it’s as if someone else is, off frame. The overhead florescent lights are dull. The tables have been foreshortened so much they are no longer tables but - for all the world - they look like communion rails in an Episcopal church.

And that’s when I began to understand the painting. It’s a reflection on eating bread together. Bread in its meaning as communion.

The word “communion” was applied to a revised form of the ancient Mediterranean custom called “the breaking of bread” by Greek spiritual writers. They also called it the Thanksgiving

Meal, or *eucharist*, in Greek. Contrary to the most common present understandings, it was never about remembering the death of the Galilean: it was about celebrating a possible future for all people, based on the egalitarian meal practice of Jesus. The earliest texts we have for its celebration do not mention the Last Supper, or blood or body, anything like that. Those later additions were an attempt to tie the supper to the Passover Seder, the freedom meal, where the “body” was the sacrificed lamb, roasted on a spit. Jesus is depicted as breaking bread and saying something like...no need for killing animals...this bread will do fine, a “body” with which to celebrate liberation. But all of this was later, and Pauline. Originally, the meal was a forward looking practice, not a memorial; a rehearsal, an enacted anticipation, if you will, of the good life to come. So-called Roman civilization, you see, systematically kept women apart from men, slaves apart from citizens, the poor apart from the well-to-do, the educated apart from the uneducated. The communion supper embodied a vision of a future time when all those separations would be devastated, and removed by the power of *agape*, or love, and the practice of thanksgiving. Not just tolerating differences, mind you, but being downright thankful for them. Looking into each other’s eyes. Embracing. Sharing gifts. It was a revolutionary practice. Naturally it got distorted over the years. Civilization doesn’t seem to tolerate too much revolution and vision.

The elements of the meal itself varied according to geography: bread, fish, a cup of honey mixed with milk, a cup of wine, and a cup of water, all were used, but eventually, they were reduced by the power of conformity to bread and a single cup with wine mixed with water, which themselves became the focus of the celebration. The horror of Jesus’ death was written into the supper over its original celebration of equality and vision.

Over the years, there were exceptions to this difficult and slant understanding, stressing the remembrance of suffering. Our own ancestors in Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania, the Socinians, understood the breaking of bread as both a thanksgiving supper, and a promise to live their lives in such a way as to create a paradise of peace on this, our common earth.

When I read the painter George Tooker’s own understanding of his work, I began to see the connection of this painting to the ancient custom of the breaking of bread even more. Tooker said in an interview: “In one painting, I’m trying to say, ‘This is what we are forced to suffer in this life’ while in other paintings, I say, ‘This is what we should be.’ I oscillate between the earthly state and... paradise.”

His paradise paintings, filled with light, lanterns, and people of every color making love to each other, are clear enough. But, just as he claimed, Tooker never flinched from painting what he describes as “what we are forced to suffer in this earthly life.” Homeless people in underpasses, people arguing in rage, frightened people in subways... you’re not likely to want to hang any of his more disturbing “earthly” masterworks over the couch in the living room.

Lunch is one of his “earthly” paintings. You see some people eating lunch. But there is no nourishment in sight, either food-wise or emotionally. They are holding the traditional elements of communion - bread and a cup - but they refuse to hold, touch, or even notice each other. The lines on the folding wall behind them look like jail bars. These lunch-mates are all imprisoned

by their unwillingness to communicate with each other. But for Tooker, a devout Episcopalian, there are other possibilities hidden in plain sight. He hints that paradise might still be possible, if they would but open their eyes. The bread and cup are there. They simply have to break out of their jail and break the bread and share it, instead of eating sanitized factory-sliced Styrofoam pieces of white-bread in isolation. Tooker is the only artist with European ancestry in that era who routinely painted African Americans and Latinos in his canvasses. In *Lunch*, by showing people of color isolated from each other and eating the same “white-bread” food, he suggests that everyone of every color in this country was equally imprisoned in the same system, the Jim Crow system that dominated that era, a system that does no one any good *whatsoever*.

Tooker painted this work in 1964. He was already therefore reflecting on the situation in our nation. When Martin Luther King called folks of religious conscience to come down to Alabama, Tooker and his lover, William Christopher, who knew King, went. So did a full third of all Unitarian Universalist ministers, including James Reeb, Clark Olsen, and Orloff Miller.

While Tooker and Christopher were down there, they ate a number of meals, which Christopher described in his handwritten journal, the one which I was lucky enough to read in the curator’s office:

“The tall head-waitress glares at us. Two, then four, then six State Troopers came in for dinner. She actually goes from one to the other pointing us out, that we had been with negroes. It is hard to believe, but it happened. They turned their eyes to our table, glaring, and kept it up. Then three men in jackets came in...un-uniformed; she went to them. They glared. What a meal!”

This was no communion supper, just a rancid dish of fear and trembling.

At a well-known restaurant, they partake of another lunch. *“So pleasant, one waitress; the others, so bitter. What are they doing to their lives?”* writes Christopher. What indeed. Again, a meal that disturbs, not nourishes.

At Walker’s Café, a well-known African-American restaurant which welcomed all colors in its door, the three Unitarian Universalists also had a meal, a good one with camaraderie. When they left the restaurant, four white men assaulted them with clubs; James Reeb was hit in the head, and died within a few hours. The others escaped, and after treatment, left the state for their own protection, as witnesses to a murder. (The assailants were eventually acquitted by an all white jury, sad to say, despite Clark’s clear witness in the courtroom.) Although Reeb was a UU, it was Martin Luther King who gave several eulogies for him. Tooker and Christopher were there for one of them. Listen:

“King’s eulogy is wonderful. What a speaker. The beauty of Dr. King’s voice, the heat, the people listening, looking tired, nuns in muddy habits from sleeping in the streets; but everyone’s eyes are alight with the spirit.”

Then Christopher describes the meal, awed to the bone: *“We go into a backroom...we have cool aid (sic) and sandwiches. We haven’t eaten all day. There are young and old, blacks and whites*

coming and going, all smiling, all intent on their mission. It is extraordinary. Nowhere do any of us find any temper, any dislike...but just plain brotherly love. I have never experienced this before. I cherished each minute of it. I have never seen so many smiling faces filled with radiance than this afternoon. The young people are of extraordinary beauty, hand in hand, or just sitting and listening.”

Later in his diary, he offers up thanksgiving for the amazing effect of this simple supper: “*The entire place is in song, the church, the streets, the houses, 4000 people singing. All time has stopped. All hands are joined. The experience is devastating...it forever shatters fear....*”

Here, finally, Tooker and Christopher had an experience of communion, of true participation in community, walls shattered, bars broken, lives changed. It is the exact opposite of his painting *Lunch*. The love he describes in Alabama is “devastating,” he writes. This is not a weak and fluffy love, but the kind that tears down, brick by brick the city of tears, and builds the new Jerusalem, embrace by embrace, story by story, meal by meal. Sandwiches and paper cups in the back room, true emblems of what could be: listening, the holding of hands, the meeting of ages, colors and genders, peace, radiance. In Tooker’s concise word: Paradise.

Please don’t get all confused and think I am preaching some form of pie in the sky. As performer Laurie Anderson puts it so very clearly: “Paradise is *exactly* like where you are *right now*, only much, much better.” The bread we break is the bread right in front of us, not above us.

The Guest at Your Table boxes we distribute traditionally on Thanksgiving are a way to enlarge the simple sharing of this local table, inviting stories from around the world to be told at your own home table.

Melissa Wolfe probably didn’t know that when she called me, she was actually speaking to many people. She was calling you too. Calling you to reflect on what it means to participate in community...the full meaning of the Greek word *koinonia*, so often translated as communion. How do we participate in paradise now, and lift up injustices (like Hermione did in this morning’s play), so they can be seen, and faced and transformed? But the call has indeed now gone forth, and the paradise play is now being written by the choices we make with our lives.

Offering

Investing in the future of our common house, and our compelling vision of life and love for all people, we offer this time to bless the choice we have made to participate in this beloved community.

The Breaking of Bread: Table Prayer 2011

(Eric) **Bread of the world, be for us now
the bread of paradise.**

First Reader: East

May this bread be for us our *joy*. Joy before the good gifts of sun and soil, seed and water, sowing and harvest, kneading and baking. Such gifts are the ground and source of our lives, for which we are most grateful.

Second Reader: South

May this bread be for us a *blessing*. May it speak to us of the sacred meals of our ancestors when the bread they ate was more than bread, signing that they knew in their hearts they were more than their separate selves.

Third Reader: West

May this bread be for us a *promise*. May it speak to us of a day to come when we have worked to see that there is ample healthy food for every human being on earth.

Fourth Reader: North

May this bread be for us the *dream*. A dream when all people of whatever gender, color or culture, and all children shall come from north and south and east and west and sit down together to eat together in peace, united at last by their diversities to work for the common good.

(Mark) *here, breaks bread*

Only bread is for the breaking. The human spirit, and human bodies are not for the breaking. By breaking this bread, I issue a call to establish paradise. A call to share the bread as much as eat it. For such bread does not disappear when it has been eaten, but remains present whenever we welcome each other with honesty, care, and respect and gratitude.

(Jolinda) **And so, blest are you, Love, our joy, our blessing, our promise, our dream and our call. You gather us here at the welcome table which anticipates paradise.**

(here, already prepared baskets are passed, beginning with the one in the center of the table. the rest will be under the table)

Hymn *We're Gonna Sit At the Welcome Table*