

Resisting Our Power

January 22, 2012

Rev. Eric Meter

Welcome

Centering Kindling

Opening Words

We are here

in the midst of the variety of Ohio winter days

freezing rain, icy roads, then just enough sunshine to thaw things before the rain and snow return

we gather together to worship once again

drawing upon the energies that are ours

to make our world more worthy of our deepest longings

where justice and beauty are at home to stay

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.

Praising #1012 *When I Am Frightened*

Ingathering *The Civil Rights Family*

by Paula Young Shelton, as told by Mark Rudoff

Mark will be working with the children on creating an original musical composition based on the story he told this morning. It will have its world premiere here next week. You won't want to miss it.

Gathering

Affirming #648 *Beginners* by Denise Levertov

But we have only begun to love the earth.

We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope? – so much is in bud.

How can desire fail? – we have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,

Only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings with beast and flower, not as oppressors.

Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet – there is too much broken that must be mended,

Too much hurt that we have done to each other that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding, that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud.

Sequence

Denise Levertov writes of beginners. I guess she means people like us. Or people we may long to be.

While we're a couple weeks into the new year, I still like to be reminded that the beginnings of things are crucial times, and people who risk beginning anew, well, there's courage there to be found.

To begin again. To start something new. There's a freedom that comes in being a novice.

So often we pride ourselves in being expert of some skill or area of expertise.

While first new steps are awkward at best, any new venture brings with it the excitement of new discoveries.

In the reading we've just given voice to Levertov holds the tension between what is known and accepted and what might yet be discovered,

We have only begun to imagine justice and mercy. Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?

Ah, but rivers are always hastening into the sea. But along the way... so many twists and turns, so many new horizons.

The river of justice has just started its journey, and there are other rivers as well: rivers of integrity, rivers of hope. It is a mighty thing to leave the safety of the riverbank behind and join others on the voyage of a lifetime. Is there a river calling in your life?

bell

Let our hearts flow together into this moment of memory and care, where we name aloud, or name silently within, the beautiful names of those we love, those with whom we struggle, those who are far away, and those whom we remember with love....

naming

Let music now flow as well, gathering our spirits, restoring our dreams and hopes of a world growing more just and fair, as we are both simultaneously veterans and beginners, and now the calls for justice are given grace to by the harmonies of music.

Readings

Our first reading is from the art and cultural critic John Berger's book *Hold Everything Dear*.

Before Jolinda shares it with you, I want you to know that Berger makes political claims which lead to a reflection on society I will return to later in our time together. These are his views. You don't need to share them.

"I want to say at least something about the pain existing in the world today. Consumerist ideology, which has become the most powerful and invasive on the planet, sets out to persuade us that pain is an accident, something that we can insure against.

Everyone knows, of course, that pain is endemic to life, and wants to forget this or relativize it. All the variants of the myth of a Fall from the Golden Age, before pain existed, are an attempt to relativize the pain suffered on earth. So too is the invention of Hell, the adjacent kingdom of pain-as-punishment. Likewise the discovery of Sacrifice. And later, much later, the principle of Forgiveness. One could argue that philosophy began with the question: why pain?

Yet, when all this has been said, the present pain of living in the world is perhaps in some ways unprecedented.

I write in the night, although it is daytime. A day in early October 2002. For almost a week the sky above has been blue. Each day the sunset is a little earlier and each day gloriously beautiful. Many fear that before long, US military forces will be launching the 'preventive' war against Iraq so that the US oil corporations can lay their hands on further and supposedly safer oil

supplies. Between the announced decisions and the secret calculations, everything is kept unclear, since lies prepare the way for missiles. I write in a night of shame.

By shame I do not mean individual guilt. Shame, as I'm coming to understand it, is a species feeling which, in the long run, corrodes the capacity for hope and prevents us looking far ahead. We look down at our feet, thinking only of the next small step."

Our second reading today is a well known passage from *The Transformation of Silence into Action and Language*, a speech Audre Lorde gave in December 1977, as it is collected in her later book *Sister Outsider*.

"I have come to believe that what is most important must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.

Less than two months ago I was told that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that the tumor was malignant. Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.

But within those three weeks, I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me still shaken but much stronger. This is a situation faced by many women, by some of you here today. Some of what I experienced during that time has helped elucidate for me much of what I feel concerning the transformation of silence into language and action.

In coming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in an merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I *ever* been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words. and I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into perspective gave me great strength.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you."

Sermon

Earlier this week, Jolinda Stephens and Brian Hagemann made sure I had seen the latest nugget of gold making its way through the internet. It was so good I want to pass it on to you, and it so keenly matches what I've been wanting to talk with you about this morning that I'm going to start off with it.

On January 3, this is what 20-year-old Kristen Wolfe wrote in her blog, *Sweet Up 'N Down* (hosted on Tumblr.com). Kristen is a 20-year-old shift manager at a video game store, and given the nature of what she writes about here, it is worth adding that she is married to a US Marine.

This may be old news to some of you, but this is what she posted earlier this month:

Dear Customer who stuck up for his little brother, you thought I didn't really notice. But I did. I wanted to high-five you.

•*Yesterday I had a pair of brothers in my store. One was maybe between 15-17. He was a wrestler at the local high school. Kind of tall, stocky and handsome. He had a younger brother, who was maybe about 10-12 years old. The only way to describe him was scrawny, neat, and*

very clean for a boy his age. They were talking about finding a game for the younger one, and he was absolutely insisting it be one with a female character. I don't know how many of y'all play games, but that isn't exactly easy. Eventually, I helped the brothers pick a game called Mirror's Edge. The youngest was pretty excited about the game, and then he specifically asked me. "Do you have any girl color controllers?" I directed him to the only colored controllers we have which includes pink and purple ones. He grabbed the purple one, and informed me purple was his FAVORITE.

•The boys had been taking awhile, so their father eventually comes in. He sees the game, and the controller, and starts in on the youngest about how he needs to pick something different. Something more manly. Something with guns and fighting, and certainly not a purple controller. He tries to convince him to get the new Zombie game "Dead Island." and the little boy just stands there repeating, "Dad, this is what I want, ok?" Eventually it turns into a full blown argument complete with Dad threatening to whoop his son if he doesn't choose different items. •• That's when big brother stepped in. He said to his Dad, "It's my money, it's my gift to him, if it's what he wants I'm getting it for him, and if your (sic) going to hit anyone for it, it's going to be me." Dad just gives his older son a strong stern stare down, and then leaves the store. Little brother is crying quietly, I walk over and ruffle his hair (yes, this happened all in front of me). I say, "I'm a girl, and I like the color blue, and I like shooting games. There's nothing wrong with what you like. Even if it's different than what people think you should." I smile, he smiles back (my heart melts!). Big brother then leans down, kisses little brother on the head, and says, "Don't worry dude." They check out and leave, and all I can think is how awesome big brother is, how sweet little brother is, and how Dad ought to be ashamed for trying to make his son any other way.

Now, right off the bat, while in no way do I want to condone the father's actions in this story, we are not here to pass judgment upon him. This may well have been part of a pattern in his behavior, but we don't know that.

We can wonder, however, about what is motivating him. In the reading Wes shared with us earlier, Audre Lorde, facing as never before the truth of her own mortality, asks herself what she had ever been afraid of. In the face of her death, possibly coming sooner than later, all her former worries paled in comparison. All those old concerns vanished in light of the new one. What had she ever been afraid of before?

In light of that, we can ask what might this father be afraid of?

Does he feel his son's gender expression reflects on his own, on what it means to be a man, as opposed to what it means to be human?

Maybe. But the truth is we just can't say.

What we can say is that it looks like the father in the story doesn't seem to understand that it is our uniqueness that brings what we have to the table, as the young Paula Young and Uncle Martin so clearly understand in the story Mark Rudoff told earlier. The trick is bringing those separate voices together in something like a symphony. And that, as you can imagine, takes artistry, practice and a willingness for everyone to be part of the show, not the whole show itself.

As you know, this is not something that happens every day.

What I love about the everyday story from Kristen's blog is that it is a snapshot of someone caught doing something great. And a witness is there to tell the story, of a moment of family pain, a moment of brotherly love and courage. "Don't worry, dude."

How often have we witnessed similar moments where someone does NOT step up to say, *"It's my gift to him, if it's what he wants I'm getting it for him, and if you're going to hit anyone for it, it's going to be me"*?

How often have we failed to step up when it is us or a loved one in pain?

So often the norm of our days is, as John Berger writes, a sense of just getting by, of shuffling along, our eyes far from the prize ahead in the distance, but focused, if that much can be said, down at our toes.

"Shame," he says, "as I'm coming to understand it, is a species feeling which, in the long run, corrodes the capacity for hope, and prevents us looking far ahead. We look down at our feet, thinking only of the next small step."

While Berger's understanding of shame may not be as clearly defined as we might hope, the sense of looking only as far ahead as where our next step will land is familiar. Whether we look to the next step, the next paycheck, the next medical bill, or the next distraction, this seems an apt description of our age.

What I remember about the months before the invasion of Iraq was a depressed sense that moral outrage wasn't going to make any difference at all. Yes, there were protests, and powerful speeches in opposition to the looming war, but nothing said and done was able to turn the tide from what was clearly more and more inevitable.

That kind of situation teaches conformity to a lie, teaches conformity to a certain image or will.

At first I was amazed that during the 2004 presidential campaign John Kerry never called Bush out on the lies he had used to move us into war, the lies that prepared the way for the missiles, as John Berger put it. Either there was some vast conspiracy to hide some hidden truth about Israel and the missing WMDs, or the powers that be, those with the money to influence our campaigns if not manage our government, made it clear that this was not territory to be charted publicly.

We may talk of the mighty river of justice, but we know there are other tides, other rivers as well.

The kind of tide that says that there is only one way to be a man. The kind of force within culture and history that can lead people into an unjust and unnecessary war.

There are many powers at work in the world.

Despite what we may tell our children, the lesson seems to be that lying is okay. Just listen to Newt Gingrich and notice where it got him in the South Carolina primary yesterday.

But lying remains risky at best. Even though we all tell some lies, lying remains a slippery slope.

It's another form of practicing power over, of doing just what the father in the story tried to do to his son.

He was trying to get his son to contort himself into a box labeled "manly boy." Just as, when someone lies, they are putting a box around a false presentation of reality and attempting to sell it as the real thing. They are wanting to be in control of what is considered to be true.

But lies are always hard to sustain. The energy that it takes to maintain them is corrosive.

And don't forget those other rivers, those of justice and self respect.

Let's return to Audre Lorde now: "While I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words, I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into perspective

gave me great strength. I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.”

The teenage boy found the strength to stand up for his younger brother against their father’s bullying.

Had he read Audre Lorde? It’s possible, but I doubt it.

I wonder where he found the strength to do what he did. Was it that his father had finally pushed him to a place he just couldn’t abide the bullying any longer? Was it that in his wrestling coach he found a model of another way of being a man or that the wrestling itself had given him greater confidence? Was it his mother who always told him to stand up for himself and protect his younger brother? Was it in school or in church that people bully when they, themselves, are afraid?

I don’t doubt the young man showed initiative and backbone. He’s a mensch in my book. But in most stories of heroism there is both the hero and some person or group demonstrating another way of being.

Another way of being certainly seems necessary. It’s hard to imagine the father in our story just having a bad day. He seems to have fallen into a trap he can’t get out of.

Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston’s Graduate School of Social Work, whose work our own Tim Hooks introduced me to last summer, has spent most of her career studying women and shame. It was from her that I learned the expression *shame triggers*; those areas each of us have that are most sensitive to the judgment of others. And while she has spent most of her time studying women, Brown has worked with enough men to feel confident saying that shame is universal, at least in our culture, among men as well.

Perhaps the father’s shame trigger is gender identity; perhaps it is control, like my father’s was.

It seems clear he hasn’t yet learned the lesson Audre Lorde talks about, that learning to put fear into perspective gives us great strength. I hope he’ll take a lesson from his sons. They have much to teach him.

One final point, towards the end of her book *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn’t)*, Brené Brown talks about a moment in which she learned from a mentor.

She was at the 2006 awards dinner of the Feminist Majority Foundation (I had no idea there was such a group, I have to admit), when the closing speaker, a woman named Mavis Leno said, “We can all make a difference,” before pausing and looking out at the audience.

She had them. What was this thing they could do that would make a world better?

Finally, she continued, “If you want to make a difference, the next time you see someone being cruel to another human being, take it personally. Take it personally because it *is* personal.”

The young man did just that. He chose what river he wanted to be part of.

You can, too.

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.

Returning

Singing #1017 *Building a New Way*

Blessing

The worthy road ahead is not found by simply looking at where our next steps will land. Look at those next to you now. Together, we know the better way. Remember, the river is mighty and it flows toward justice.