

Resisting Authenticity

January 29, 2012

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

**Greeting, Centering,
Kindling, Opening Words**

We are here
on a sunny day after a wet and gray week,
to worship. Praise the gift of another day!
Praise that we can think, feel, move,
grieve, rejoice, and freely be together,
that we might grow more alive in love.

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.

Sequence

Ah, the great build up, the anticipation rising in the blood of millions. Ah, the pre-game programs, the wagers, the predictions, the talk-back, the very food shows on the networks teaching the art of finger-food so no one next week has to leave the television for the table...the annual mid-winter ritual begins But these rituals have no reality for many I love.

My friend Mark called me from Montpellier, in the south of France, where he lives. No talk of football, soccer or the fisticuffs of politics, but just sweet words about his wonderful girlfriend up in Gent.

My friend Doug loves football, but emailing me this week from Melbourne where he's covering the Australian Open, he's much more focused on interviewing Victoria Djokovic and Rafael Nadal to care about the Superbowl build-up or politics.

My godson Ben from Portland, Oregon and I talked this week about his grandmother's Alzheimer's and his med school dreams, not candidates fighting.

My friend Bonni called this week from Chile, entirely focused on getting new looms to weave her farm's alpacas' fur into cloth. No debates there.

My old California mentor Keith told me this week that he's been dancing in Ghana at the new arts complex there. Soccer news there, not football.

My life is local, and too often I am grabbed by the immediate, the loud, the dramatic and the blaring. But friends saved me this week from losing myself. O Love, deeper than the demands of

*our local life, fill the silence for a moment that we might embrace the far as well as the near, the different as well as the familiar, the tender as well as the loud, that our lives might be whole. Silence, befriend us, now. **silence***

Opening from this local moment to the wideness of our love, may we whisper aloud or name in the silence those for whom we grieve, those we miss who are far away, those with whom we struggle, and those whose love inspires our own.

naming

Music, bring us back gently to the reality of this place and time. Announce your dreams with beauty, and invite us into wholeness by singing your “yes” and your “no,” your laughter and your tears, and all your love.

Anthems

The First Reading *comes from William Ellery Channing's second most famous sermon, Likeness to God, which he delivered in 1828 at the Ordination of F.A. Farley at the Unitarian Church in Providence, Rhode Island. Channing is usually considered the best articulator of Unitarianism in its early institutional days in the 19th century.*

The idea of God is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged. God is conceived by us only through knowledge of ourselves. God is another name for human intelligence raised above error and imperfection. The same is true for God's goodness. How do we understand this but by the principle of love in the human breast?

In these remarks I have spoken strongly. My only fear is that I shall dishonor this great subject. Whenever we invigorate the understanding by honestly and resolutely seeking truth, and by withstanding whatever might warp our judgment, whenever we encounter peril or scorn with moral courage...then divinity is growing within us. True religion then blends with the common life.

The Second Reading *comes from Wislawa Szymborska, whose poetry I've been reviewing lately with great satisfaction. This poem is called Surprise Encounter and goes back earlier in her career, to 1981.*

So we're very cordial to each other,
telling each other how nice it is to meet
after all these years.

Our tigers prefer milk.
Our hawks hug the ground.
Our sharks drown in their water.
Our wolves yawn in front of their open cage.

Our snakes don't bother to resemble lightning bolts.

Our monkeys don't bother to entertain us,
Our peacock don't bother to have feathers.
And bats...it's been ages, hasn't it...don't bother to nest in our hair.
So we fall silent right in mid-sentence
smiling without a net to catch us.
Our people
don't bother to actually converse with each other.

Sermon

Forty years ago, my mother kindly bought my grandmother Carmalina a pasta rolling machine, hand-cranked, with shiny metal rollers. My mother knew that my grandmother, then in her eighties, had lost some of her strength, and if you watched my grandmother make pasta with her wooden dowel, as she had all of her life, you would notice how hard her arms had to press into the lump of dough to make the golden sheet thin enough to read the newspaper through... the test of *any* good pasta, according to her.

My grandmother thanked my mother but never used it. Why? Because it wasn't authentic. Her grand-mother and her mother had used wooden dowels and by God, she would use them. She was convinced that pasta made with metal actually *tasted* different, and that only wood imparted just the right texture.

I thought she was fooling herself. Turns out, it was the way Emilian people like my grandmother *all* thought. The great Italian chef Maria Batali had perfected his techniques not very far from my grandmother's village, and he affirmed that even today, if Emilians suspected that a restaurant where they were eating had served pasta made with metal rollers and not wooden ones, they would get up in a complete snit and walk out. He saw it happen many times, he said. "I guess there is only one right way to make truly authentic pasta," he grinned.

Of course, that is simply not true. Oh, it might be a personal truth, but it's not a universal truth. Every cook in Emilia, whether a family-trained grand-mother like Carmelina, or a cooking-school trained chef like Batali, has her or his own "authentic" sauce for pasta, her or his own "authentic" way of making artichokes, her or his own "authentic" way of making broth. The thing is, every dish is delicious no matter who makes it, and the authentic recipe, with all its variations, turns out to be *all* of them.

Authenticity is like that. An authentic Van Gogh will cost millions; a skillful copy, when discovered, will be worth only the materials, yet both *look* completely authentic to almost everyone, including museum curators. It takes truly specialized experts, who use the x-rays of modern technology, to ferret out the fake from the authentic.

Trying to live an authentic spiritual, religious, or just plain human life is a bit like that, except that each of us is called to be the expert on our *own* life. The "technology" we use to do that is pausing to ask questions of ourselves, pausing to listen to what we say to others in conversations, and then measuring our integrity by matching our inner life with our outer life, to quote Sokrates.

We "x-ray" the art of our own lives, so to speak, by trying to bring mind, heart, spirit, and emotions together. Congruency is the fancy word for this: to live authentically, instead of being a mere pawn to shame, guilt, social custom and social pressures, I have to live congruently. I have to think for myself, question myself, love myself, all within the context of a trusted, deep, loving and safe community.

Mary Benard, the editor at Skinner House, the press that published my book, asked me to write why I am a Unitarian Universalist. She wanted me to write, what she called, a "wallet-sized" response that she might publish. This is what I sent to her:

I move through my life in a Unitarian Universalist way because: my mind , heart and body are one "me," and need not compete in the ministries of mercy and justice. I can say that great words, like God, are too limiting for me, and the next day, say they are quite moving, and I don't then have to marginalize myself because my faithfulness is lively. I can continue to converse with others, instead of stopping for good to believe that something is so, or not so.

I can retreat from defensiveness, and leave aside ideas like "proof" and "either/or" for honesty's sake. I can discover I was wrong, and see that revelation as an opportunity for wisdom. I can be happy measuring life's depth rather than its length. I can be all of me, in religious community, and still be loved as I love.

Because of the deadline, I wrote those words in one sitting, almost trancelike, and when I read it, I realized that I was also talking about living an *authentic* life. I also noticed, however, that what made it more than that, what made it a statement about my Unitarian Universalism, was that I used the line "*I can continue to converse with others*" and the word "*community*." That's because I think I can only learn to be an expert on myself by staying in communication with others who freely enter this particular community of memory and hope, heritage and vision, that is, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

When people to their delight discover one of our congregations, and tell me they then feel as if they had been a Unitarian Universalist most of their lives without knowing it, I usually say, "Well, yes, you certainly may have thought for yourself, and lived a questioning and congruent life all these years, but to be a Unitarian Universalist is to worship and work and study as part of a Unitarian Universalist community, whether you join institutionally or not."

Not everyone gets it when I say that, but I'll keep trying to find ways to say it better. After all, the census told us that over 650,000 people think of themselves as Unitarian Universalists, yet less than 250,000 are involved in our congregations as members or friends. That's a revealing statistic, isn't it?

We have many communities, of course, outside this Unitarian Universalist one. Neighborhoods, families, friends, affinity groups like bridge-players or quilters, theological study groups, or book clubs, gamer websites, dancers, parent support groups, retiree lunch conversations, and professional retreats.

But because most of us try to live authentic, deep and congruent lives in no way implies that we live deeply and authentically in any group we are part of; nor, probably, can we. The courtesies of civilization itself mitigate against it. If someone I care about runs into me at Kroger's and asks me how I am, I am most likely going to say "I'm doing fine" even if I am struggling about many things, even if I am grieving, even if I am upset or riotously joyful about something.

Conversations rising from our deep authentic selves are not always warranted, after all, and deeply vulnerable and revelatory conversations while standing near the artichokes and the escarole are often not even appropriate. Simple cordiality is not necessarily shallow, but a rational structure to protect the heart. It's a kind of sabbath.

Szyborska tells the story of two people who haven't seen each other in a long time running into each other in a public place. We don't know what their history is: if it was loving, or tumultuous, or bitter, but clearly, no authentic communication is going on here. Even if it's common knowledge that tigers prefer bloody meat to a glass of cold milk, that hawks fly rather than walk, and that sharks make their home in the water rather than drown in it, Szyborska suggest that this particular cordial meeting with small talk is actually *inauthentic*:

Our tigers prefer milk.

Our hawks hug the ground.

Our sharks drown in their water.

She concludes sadly at the end:

Our people don't actually bother to converse with each other.

But notice the date of the poem, 1962. It's back in the days long before *Solidarity* opened things up in Poland. It dates from back when the official state often oppressed people who expressed unapproved opinions, so that small talk and cordiality were not a form of sabbath, but the only safety people could know. I know folks from the States who lived there in those days, and they were astounded by how everyone was walking on egg-shells, and found ways to say green is actually red to protect themselves, while smiling cordially the whole time.

But years of experience in the ministry has shown me that many of us live in similar situations, if on a smaller, less national scale. If you express a good opinion about the President, for example, you may find that in certain family gatherings your opinion is looked upon as almost naive or evil, both very clever ways of shutting you down to safe and cordial and an inauthentic form of small talk. If you believe with William Ellery Channing that the word God stands for *the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged*, and you actually say this aloud at some family reunion, or in some work lunch room, you may very well be squelched from any further exploratory conversation by people preaching the once and for all only truth of God as Creator and Christ as Redeemer. Or if you even *mention* God in some supposedly progressive circles, people might ask "What? How can you believe in something so ridiculous as God?" and straightaway you are cowering back in cordial small talk to avoid more shame, humiliation and anger. No one, you see, has to visit Poland in 1962 to resist actually having an authentic, open-ended conversation with someone else.

Now, believe me, Channing's sermon was VERY radical for 1828. It was however, his authentic and deeply felt expression, after much thought and conversation, and he caught heat for it.

People denounced him as an infidel, or, at the very least, a heretic, for saying *God is another name for human intelligence raised above error and imperfection*. Even today I sometimes find myself thinking exactly what Channing preached, and, in many places, it would still be considered radical.

But Channing's sermon brings me to another aspect of authenticity. Most small talk is not a way of resisting authenticity; no, not at all. It's simply a kind of resting place for a few moments from the deep questioning and thoroughgoing honesty living an authentic life demands.

But there *is* one activity associated with the word "authenticity" which I hope to convince you to resist with all your heart. It's whenever people try and tell you that there is one authentic way to be anything. Whether it's practicing Unitarian Universalism, or some form of Christianity, or Judaism or anything else. Or even one authentic way to be an atheist.

Here's what I mean. Channing's sermon - he called it a discourse, not a sermon - took him over an hour to deliver all by itself. The rest of the service contained some 18th century music, some singing of hymns no one has sung again for over a hundred years, and two other discourses, called charges which went on at length. The ordination prayer went on for fifteen minutes. There was no chalice to light, no suits and ties, since they had not been invented yet, no women even near the pulpit, no stoles, no meditations, and no quotations from secular Polish poets. But the fact that Channing was the chief articulator of Unitarian theology in that part of the century, indeed, one of first persons in the States to use that word publicly freely, instead of with shame, does not mean that the way of preaching and worship he favored is a more *authentic* form of Unitarianism. It is not. Nor is ours the authentic form for all time. Our children's children may express themselves quite differently than we do, and maybe better for them in every way. But even that does not mean that our way is inauthentic.

The Jewish priests, in the days of Hillel, and Jesus slaughtered animals and sprinkled their blood on a stone altar as an expression of their biblical understanding. Modern Jewish religious leaders do no such thing. In fact, I know more Jewish vegetarians than I know Gentile vegetarians. Killing animals is not a more authentic version of Judaism because it's closer to the origins.

I have a book in my office by Frank Viola and George Barna, called Pagan Christianity, which posits that authentic biblically-based Christians would *never* meet in a church building, would *never* have professional clergy, would *never* have choirs, or worship leaders, would *never* have special clothes or listen to sermons or preach them. They would never celebrate communion without a full multi-course supper, or use professional musicians for the music. They would never ritually proclaim Christ as their "personal savior," since (and the two authors are most certainly right about this) none of that is found in the New Testament. But then again, neither was the New Testament found in early Christian congregations. It wasn't even considered "scripture" until after 300 CE. And when pieces of it *were* read, none of the early church teachers taught they were to be taken literally, but only metaphorically. Treating the Bible as something to quote as the final literal authority didn't really come together until the Reformation, when the human pope in Rome was replaced by the reformers (and Herr Gutenberg's famous printing press) with a *paper* pope on everyone's shelf, namely, the scripture. So there is no honest way for

the authors to claim that they know *authentic* Christian life, and that all the Catholic and Protestant and Anabaptist and Evangelical and Orthodox congregations in the world can just go fish. Worse, accepting the anti-Semitic lens of the gospels without criticism, as they do, demeans Christian practice, and in no way blesses it.

I really am convinced that proclamations of all forms of institutional authenticity are dangerous, whether it's writers like Viola and Barna telling us they know what the authentic early church was like, or whether it's other folks insisting that the Bill of Rights and Jefferson's "clear intention" means they can carry a pistol into your church or your house as they please. I say it's dangerous when some hothead prates on and on that because the phrase "separation of church and state" is not found in the constitution itself, our only "authentic" authority in this nation, they say, it's therefore OK to promote evangelical prayers in public schools and teach in biology class that the notion of the earth being created in six twenty-four-hour days in the year 4004 BCE is somehow "equal" or "equivalent" to all the magisterial collection of evidence underlying the universally accepted fact of evolution in the scientific world.

On the covers of your order of celebration you can find a famous, often reproduced, optical illusion. If I look at it one way, I can see a beautiful young woman like my mother in 1945, elegant, dark haired, well dressed. If I look with a different lens, I can see an older woman much like my grandmother, with a lacy babushka on her head, a larger nose, and a fake-fur coat. Both images are real, authentic portraits. But you can only see one at a time. It's impossible to see both together.

It's a reminder that there are many different ways to live authentic, deeply congruent lives, just as there are many different authentic ways for the Emilian grandmothers from the hills, like my own Carmelina, to cook authentic mountain sauces for their authentic pasta made with wooden dowels.

There are also many ways to live a deeply congruent, and authentic life, a life of depth, honesty and self-reflection as a Unitarian Universalist. But there is no way I can think of to proclaim any form or any institution as once and for all authentic, and it's that kind of self-serving proclamation I have to resist if I am to work on my own authentic religious life. As I wrote to Mary Benard earlier this week: *I move through my life in a Unitarian Universalist way because: my mind, heart and body are one "me," and need not compete in the ministries of mercy and justice. I can say that great words, like God, are too limiting for me, and the next day, say they are quite moving, and don't then have to marginalize myself because my faithfulness is lively. I can continue to converse with others, instead of stopping for good to believe that something is so, or not so.*

I can retreat from defensiveness, and leave aside ideas like "proof" and "either/or" for honesty's sake. I can discover I was wrong, and see that revelation as an opportunity for wisdom. I can be happy measuring life's depth rather than its length. I can be all of me, in religious community, and still be loved as I love.

Offering

Simple Prayer (*Levertovian Form*)

That our inner life and our outer life
move closer to union every day of our lives.

That we never take ourselves to be
grown up, but *always growing* till our last day.

That the struggle to live a deeply
authentic life, in our world wed to superficiality
and entitlement, might be seen as a gift,
not a burden.

That love will be our path, our goal, our pleasure, our healing, and at last, our legacy.