

Cracks in the Theory

March 11, 2012

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Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words:

We are here
to worship,
maybe a bit bleary from less sleep,
but ready to wrestle with deeper questions,
and to remember that we
are children of this common cosmos,
equally invited into beloved community.

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.

Praising, Storytelling, Departing, Welcoming and News, Affirmation, Sequence for the Day:

Open your gates, heart, and receive the world that is one with you.

I see a woman named Devorah folding *kre-plach* for supper to celebrate the feast of Purim. As she folds the dumplings, she finds herself wondering why the book of Esther in the Bible never mentions God even once.

I see a boy named Antonio Assante, whose friend Shelayne's father is taking him to the Hindu temple for the feast of Holi. The full moon brings the rain with it, so the bright colored powders that are part of the ritual will not be used, disappointing Antonio.

I see a woman named Demetria Anag-nastakis. She loves the golden icon of St. Michael the archangel slaying the dragon at church, and the flickering candles reflecting off its varnishes, but somehow begins to wonder if St. Michael is ignoring her prayers about her ailing mother Venetta. Then she stops: Who's prayer for anyway? she asks herself. And continues praying.

I see a man named Zhang Shuyan in suburban Beijing, watching the first daffodil shoots breaking through cracks in the sand-choked soil of his garden. For some reason, the main theme of Tan Dun's last symphony flows through his mind like a comforting poem of his mother's favorite, Dufu.

Poems, beliefs, doubts, hope, traditions, holidays, psalms, joy, sorrow, stories and wonder...behold the human condition, as always, framed within this elegant parentheses of silence. *silence*

I see many lives near and far, all related to every life in this room through common ancestors, each person part of a world community as yet unnamed, but each with unique experiences and relationships. Thus, we set aside this moment to lift up those we personally love, or who love us, or whom we miss, or engage

with, or who knock at our heart's gate. Silently within, or whispered aloud, we welcome them by naming them. naming

Poems, beliefs, doubts, prayers, scriptures, holidays, psalms, joy, sorrow, wonder and more wonder...the human condition, as always, made even more radiant by music.

Anthems

The First Reading *comes from the Scroll of Bereshith, as it's called in Hebrew, or the Book of Genesis, as the Greek translation is known in English; it was put down in writing from earlier oral legends around 500 years BCE. Many of us have heard this story before, but not with this translation. Please do what you can to hear this legend and yes, satire, as if for the very first time. This is from the Yahwist strand, meaning, it's from a strand of writing that uses the word YHWH instead of Elohim as the name of divinity. It's earlier in origin than the equally famous "In the Beginning..."*

Now the dragon was the most wily creature which Yahweh had made. The dragon spoke to the woman: "Do I understand that you've been warned about eating fruit from any of the fruit trees in the orchard?"

"Oh, not at all," said the woman. We're welcome to eat anything we want... except, we're supposed to leave the tree in the middle of the orchard alone. We've been clearly warned by Yahweh, "Don't eat from it, don't even touch it, or you'll drop dead."

The dragon responded "Oh, nonsense. You won't die. Yahweh knows that the moment you eat of that tree, you'll see things as they really are; in fact, you'll be just like a God, knowing everything, ranging from good to evil, pleasure to pain.

The woman did indeed notice that the tree looked like good eating, and realized what she would get out of it...she'd know everything...so she took some of the fruits and gave them to her companion, and they ate.

Immediately they saw things as they actually are...and could see that they weren't wearing any clothes! So they twisted some fig leaves into some makeshift clothes to hide their nakedness.

The Second Reading *is a beautiful and quite striking poem by Ellen Bass of Santa Cruz, California, written in 2007.*

What if you knew you'd be the last
to touch someone?
If you were taking tickets, for example,
at the theater, tearing them,
giving back the ragged stubs,
you might take care to touch that palm,

brush your fingertips
along the life line's crease.

When a man pulls his wheeled suitcase
too slowly through the airport, when
the car in front of me doesn't signal,
when the clerk at the pharmacy
won't say *Thank you*, I don't remember
they're going to die.

A friend told me she'd been with her aunt.
They'd just had lunch and the waiter,
a young gay man with plumb black eyes,
joked as he served the coffee, kissed
her aunt's powdered cheek when they left.
Then they walked half a block and her aunt
dropped dead on the sidewalk.

How close does the dragon's spume
have to come? How wide does the crack
in heaven have to split?
What would people look like
if we could see them as they are,
soaked in honey, stung and swollen,
reckless, pinned against time?

Sermon

I've referred to David Richo's definition of a spiritual life many times, and I am going to begin this sermon by quoting it again. *Whatever we do to shed our illusions...that's our spiritual life.* We can do this by meditating, reflecting thoughtfully on our life stories, practicing a spiritual discipline of some sort...yoga perhaps, or contemplative prayer. Therapy, and deep conversations with trusted friends can help too. But whatever it is that helps us to shed our illusions will do the trick. There are many ways, not a right way.

Back in 2005, my best friend Richard and I shed some of our illusions via a moving conversation. We were reflecting on our lives between 1985, and 1995, the AIDS decade in California (as well as many other places in the world). Richard had buried dozens, and I did so many funerals for folks I loved I almost lost count...John Zimarowski. Amen. Alex Stevens, Amen. Mark de Wolfe. Amen. Frank Siskowski. Amen. John Sikes, Amen. And most central to my soul, Stephen Mistler. Amen and Yit gadal v'yit kadash... I could go on for an hour more with this litany, easily.

So Richard and I were talking, and he said to me, "You know, I'm starting to feel different these days." And I asked, "What do you mean 'feel different'?" And he said, "In the decade between 1985 and 1995, the year Stephen died, it always felt to me like you and I were in the trenches, you know, like world war one trenches, death all around us, fire and smoke everywhere, bullets flying overhead. We were scared all the time, burying everyone we loved, and yet fighting to

survive every day. Suddenly, when the meds were developed in 1995, the death rate dropped drastically. Since then – have you noticed? – the sky has been clearing. The birds are started to chirp, and just today, I dared to poke my head above the edge of the trench and check things out because it finally seemed safe. And you know what, Mark? The whole time you and I were down there, millions of people had been shopping at Macy's, cutting their lawns, and going on vacation and we didn't even notice that. We only noticed where we were all the time, hospitals and funeral homes – the trenches."

I thought it was an apt, accurate, if dramatic metaphor. But the conversation helped me to realize I had been in a hole of grief for a decade, a low grade but real depression siphoning off energy from my every action. And I have to admit, part of my grief was resentment. Our friends were all under 40, i.e. young. People aren't "supposed" to die young, right? And annoying television pastors were shouting to us all who were weeping on a daily basis: "And good riddance too, you hell-bound sinners!" So my grief was enlarged by resentment and my resentment was swollen with rage.

But I finally left that life to come here; and reflecting on it these last years with Richard, I've come to realize that all that time I had let resentment and anger compound my grief because I had forgotten my spiritual roots, and taken up a terrible illusion which I had to shed. You see, I had unconsciously bought in to the theories of St. Augustine, and rejected the wisdom of the heretic Pelagius, by whose name Unitarians and Universalists were damned for years. "You fool Pelagians, you!" served as a curse on our way of life.

The children's story this morning offered you theories of Augustine and Pelagius in simple form. Let me give you a more thorough version of what Augustine said: When the earth began, he said, it was perfect. No volcanoes, earthquakes, meteorites. No tornados wiping Kentucky towns off the map, no viruses killing off our friends, no headaches, no mosquitoes, scorpions, vipers, poison ivy or thorns on the roses. No death, either; immortality was everywhere and universal. Then the so-called first people ate from a tree they were told not to eat from, and everything in the entire universe cracked as soon as they took that bite. Earthquake faults snaked through the earth, scorpions and mosquitoes stung, viruses spread like pollen, killing off whole populations, and volcanoes buried cities and their innocent children under fiery ash. And all human beings, from birth, were permanently bent toward cruelty, violence, murder, lies, bigotry, and arrogance forever. And worse, immortality disappeared; all life now had an end...every thing that lived became mortal. The perfect world had now permanently cracked and fell into pieces as a totally imperfect world. And Augustine preached his theory everywhere, and bundled the whole of his teaching under the phrase "original sin," something not biblical at all, but his invention.

Pelagius, an Irish monk, came to visit Rome at the time of Augustine. It was around the year 405 for those of you who like to date things. Pelagius was horrified to hear this doctrine. Sure, he agreed, human beings could be cruel and violent and uncivil. History had plenty of examples. But, he said, this had nothing at all to do with the fable of the first two people eating a fig in an ancient orchard. "Death and pain and scorpions and tornados have always been part of the universe, from the very beginning. The world is not broken...it is what it is and has always been. And, further-more, I myself am responsible for my own life, not people walking around naked long ago in an orchard. I am free to choose, to cultivate my life so that I live it in the spirit of love and kindness, not cruelty and incivility. I don't have to lie or destroy...I can actually tell the truth and build things up, not tear them down. If I have been hurt or crippled by shame, my grace

is to work through such unfortunate circumstances and, step-by-step, step by step, live a better, kinder life. And I need to do this even if I may limp for the rest of my days because of the struggle. My calling as a human being is not to live a politic life bent on currying personal favor, but a life of integrity lived in community, the whole time imagining a world to come where no one will be favored, belittled, ridiculed, murdered, overpowered or lied to. Where no one is railroaded into believing they belong to an inferior class, gender, group, or culture.

Augustine wasn't going to hear any of this. The world was cracked, by God, and he was going to defend his theory with passion. He and another man who was eventually sainted, Jerome, did everything they could to make Pelagius' life miserable for teaching that human beings bear the responsibility of freedom, and are not damned by their own birth. Death and disease were not natural, but punishments for sin, which not only some act of bad behavior, but something that polluted everyone when they simply slipped through the birth canal. Pelagius, sadly, lost to the great saints. Theirs was not an argument or a disagreement, but a spiritual massacre. His writings were burnt, his reputation besmirched, his name now a curse word.

But, he was right. Augustine and Jerome saw the world through their own glasses, on which they themselves painted cracks, and insisted that what they preached was reality. But I assure you, they were wrong. And their twisted vision has distorted Western Civilization for 1600 years.

I fell for their illusion. I fell for the distortion. I was resentful that I was part of a group who experienced more death than many other groups, forgetting that in many parts of the world back then – Bangladesh, for example, and parts of Africa – people experienced far more death and loss than I. I was angry that people were saying "sin" killed my friends, and that they brought it on themselves by not rejecting their natural birth in order to be born again into a supernaturally shaped world. In short, although I did accept Pelagius's basic idea that all human beings are mortal, I fell for Augustine's ploy that we are indeed all being punished for some reason, and I was resentful that if the punishment was universal, it was not acting universal. My peers were getting the brunt of all this, it seemed, quite unfairly, and I felt that at the very least I should be entitled to experience my grief spread out more fairly. I felt entitled to not have to deal with cruel and ignorant preachers, politicians and pundits around every corner. I felt that my loss was bad enough, and that I shouldn't have to also fight for what was right...I should be granted fairness at every turn because, after all, I *am* a nice guy, and Augustine taught that though the world was broken, nice people earned grace to keep them safe.

I fell for an illusion. I was feeling sorry for myself. I was overwhelmed with grief, yes, naturally; but I then overwhelmed *myself even more* with expectations that I had an excuse in that grief to bow out of the fight for good. Sure, when you grieve, you lose energy...believe me, I know that at least as well as anyone else in this room. But from that authentically depressive grief I allowed myself to fall even further, and I lost myself for a while in a trench I had dug for myself. I forgot the healing power of the religious heritage I claim. I forgot that all of us are worthy from birth no matter our circumstance. I forgot the power in that affirmation. I aimed my resentment and anger at those who ground their power in ignorance, ideology, distortion and cruelty. And guess what? It did nothing to lessen their power. It only robbed me of my own.

The composers of the Yahwist tale in Genesis were reflecting on the same issues, I think. They had been in exile in Babylon for generations. There, on many public buildings, they saw the image of the dragon, like the one on the front cover. They knew of snakes that slithered in the

rocks, but were amazed by this image of a serpent with legs favored by their overlords. It was everywhere. They associated this image with the power of their overlords, the power that kept them as exiles in a foreign land, to make them work on projects not their own, for almost no wages, to give birth to children who were born without dignity in servitude. They were forced migrant workers in a foreign land, and they had their ages-old culture yanked from them daily. Many of their friends and family had died during the massacre that brought them there as grieving survivors. Like me, they piled on the anger too, and the resentment. One of them wrote plainly of what that feeling actually felt like. "Along the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept and wept and wept. Our captors mocked us sarcastically, saying, "Why don't you sing us one of your famous happy songs?" But how could we sing one of God's songs in so foreign a land? Oh, that we could get back at you for all you have done to us! Ah yes, a reward to the one who grabs one of your own babies, and cracks their heads against the rocks!" (Tehillah/Psalm 137) Instead, the authors and editors of Genesis framed a story to help them shed the illusions that gained their steam from their anger and resentment only. They crafted a story about the first people walking away from the orchard. Walking away from the orchards they had to tend for the powers that planted that orchard in the first place. Walking away from painfully giving birth to their children, who were foreigners in a foreign land. They portrayed themselves as walking away from the dragon that tried to make them think their assimilated life there was sweet as a fig. They were willing to leave their resentments and rage for the reality of the random world outside the orchards of the controlling empire, which claimed for itself alone the power of life and death. It would be hard... the work outside the orchard would be unorganized and seem like a punishment; women would know difficult childbirth without the barest medical care in the great city. But they also imagined that their captors would find their downfall eventually...they imagined the dragon, symbol of uncivil power and the cruelty of empire, would also leave Babylon with them, leaving the tree of life and its false promises, and being forced to crawl without legs on the ground, where, the text later said, you could step on it, and kill it before it poisoned you to death with its slick ideas. And eventually, history tells us, they do leave Babylon, returning to the city of Jerusalem in ruins. And they told the story of their departure using Babylonian imagery in this satirical story. Sadly, many of St. Augustine's spiritual children, including Luther and Calvin, interpreted this story for generations in a negative, not positive way, to make it a story of death not life, of sin, not freedom, of blame, not responsibility. They also used it to set up the right of men to overpower women.

No, Pelagius was right...death and suffering are part of reality, and they are not distributed fairly according to any human judgment, and yet reality is not, in and of itself, broken because that is so. Reality is what it is, not what we wish it was. Viruses do not single out people, and when people are cruel to others, the perpetrators are responsible for their own behavior, and the victims do not "deserve" it in ANY way. When Mr. Limbaugh continued his attack against women who think for themselves, this week, something he began with remarkable hurtfulness back in 1992 with his consistent and brutal use of Tom Hazlitt's term Feminazi, he himself is entirely responsible for his own incivility. People dining on a fig in an ancient orchard didn't make that happen. (And for the record, as far as I am concerned, *anyone* who uses the word Nazi to apply to anyone who is not a member of the historical Nazi party of the early to mid twentieth century has already utterly invalidated any argument they are trying to make.)

But in fairness, Mr. Limbaugh is not the inventor of male incivility against women. A hundred years before the Genesis account was put to paper, a Greek named Archilochus was saying the exact same things about a certain woman as Mr. Limbaugh was saying against Sandra Fluke; and

though he had neither radio nor sponsors, his incivility is still remembered 2600 years later. Another Greek named Demonax, about a hundred years after that, was so uncivil in his ridicule of two people he hated that reportedly, they actually committed suicide, going a long way to prove that words can actually have the power of those infamous "sticks and stones." (Of course, we all know that, right? All you have to do is visit the graves of those who have been bullied in recent years, and then took their own lives, in response to the loss of standing in their community, conveniently arranged by the bully.)

It is Augustine's theory, not the world, which has cracks in it. And to crack it apart till it no longer distorts and effects Western Civilization, we have to turn in any resentment and rage we have sunk ourselves into, and exchange them for organized care and compassion. Death and illness are natural in the flow of life, so to put cracks in Augustine's theory that they are unnatural, we have to do this: support medical research and good hospices, support medical, nursing and pastoral care practitioners whom we arrange to train well and holistically. We have to see health care made available to all, not just those who can afford it, the poor being damned to death by those who are not poor. Tornadoes and other calamities are natural too, not the result of sin or lack of proper prayer, as the self-anointed Augustinian Pat Robertson insists, so, in order to fight the Augustinian creed, we have to support disaster preparation and raise funds through common taxation to help folks restore their lives. And yes, sponsors have indeed to withdraw from supporting folks like Limbaugh. And now, to balance things out, how about if I conclude my sermon by giving you an actual example of how truly civil persons behave? After all, Limbaugh and Demonax are examples of bad behavior. Let me give you a good example, an example of real civility. I was talking to Tim Ahrens this week, pastor of First Congregational Church downtown, and he told me the documented story of the famous Washington Gladden, minister there for 30 years around the turn of the last century.

A man named Joseph Jeffrey was a member of his church, a wealthy member who made his fortune in the coal mine industry. (One of the 1% we would say today.) The United Mine Workers of America was formed here in Columbus in 1890, and early in the last century, they threatened to strike for a living wage, better health care, etc. Mr. Jeffrey was naturally upset about the strike and promised to fight its demands. Washington Gladden, his minister, (and no Trinitarian, by the way) intended *to support* the strike in one of his evening social sermons. So he walked down to Mr. Jeffrey's mansion, and asked himself in for tea. He told Mr. Jeffrey what he was going to do. That he was going to support the strikers and all of their demands. He gave reasons why he was going to do this, based on the common good. He said he was going to actually use Mr. Jeffrey's name in the sermon, but that it was only fair that he should know that, and that he wanted to give him a chance not to come and be hurt by his sermon. Mr. Jeffrey was not happy about this, but listen, there were no fights, no name-calling, no righteous outrage. It was all very civil. Mr. Jeffrey did not go to church that night, but on Tuesday, Mr. Jeffrey accepted the demands of the Union and settled on everything. He and Gladden grew closer, because of that civil honesty. and in 1929, Mr. Jeffrey gave \$250,000 to help build the building that now houses the present church. This is a beautiful example of civility, responsibility, honesty. This story alone puts a big crack into Augustine's basic theory that we are all worthless from birth, and can do nothing to improve the world by our own decisions and free will.

We are all mortal naturally; we are all human. We are not neatly divided into sheep and goats, nor angels and devils. We are all human. All wounded, all graced, all aware of the dragon that promises us illusions that we can figure out a scheme that explains suffering and mortality; but

how easy it was, I found out, to fall for such theories, and to live in resentment and rage, instead of honesty. The poet Ellen Bass must have been reflecting on something in her life the way Richard and I did that day. She wrote a poem about sudden death and mortality, but she ends it with this stunning verse, which invites us to shed every single illusion and to move toward a more honest, and deeper life, not centered on ourselves, but on our fellow humans, all of whom, even the ones that drive us crazy or worry us, are mortal, and thus worthy, from birth. Like the Genesis storyteller, Ellen Bass too uses the dragon as a symbol of the illusions we'd best flee, and then paints a beautiful portrait of our common woundedness and our common health (sweetness), *How close does the dragon's spume have to come? How wide does the crack in heaven have to split? What would people look like if we could see them as they are, soaked in honey, stung and swollen, reckless, pinned against time?*

Offering

Not because we must give, but because we can.
Not because we can give, but because we affirm.
Not because we affirm, but because we love.
Not because we love, but because we are grateful
that life is a gift, this moment is a gift, and
every opportunity to love is a gift...and so we
give to be a part of that stream of free and joyful
giving which began 13 billion years ago and
now flows into us. We give, that even more wonder might be created, and that love might find a
sturdy house in which it may begin to do its holy work, and then move beyond these doors into
the world.

Natural Prayer

Light from the sun! Amen.
Light from the moon. Oh Yes.
Light from daffodils, and crocuses,
and a pot of pansies. Salaam. Shalom.
Light from blades of grass. Shanti. Shanti.
Light from the eyes of squirrels and robins and our very own children. Alhamdulila. Alleluia.
Blest are you Light, that shines through our own eyes whenever we dare to notice the light
glittering off river water and dew drops, or shining in both tears and laughter-brightened eyes,
shining whenever life itself dares to shed its fear of death and become light.

Singing, Blessing, Celebrating