Portraits From Life
May 6, 2012
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Gathering, Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words:

We are here
after a week of rain and warm sun,
to worship, to go deeper and soar higher
than our day-to-day life often encourages.
Here we strive to name our hopes
and stoke our gratitude, and face our fears
so that we may live lives of deeper 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 whole-heartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Sequence:
When I stop to think about it,
when I stop to feel how I feel,
the flow of time offers me no blueprint
for how I live my life, no final plan.
Sometimes, I go for it. Sometimes, I let it go.
Sometimes, I take on more.
Sometimes, I jettison a lot of baggage.
Sometimes, I think things through.
Sometimes, I risk taking a chance.
Sometimes, I create clear boundaries.
Sometimes, I have to cross them.
Sometimes, I study to learn and teach things.
Sometimes, I honestly say I don't know.
Sometimes, I feel whole and at peace.
Sometimes, I feel as if I have fallen into pieces.
Sometimes, I stir the paint and apply it.
Sometimes, I stop and just let it dry.
Sometimes, I want to be all alone.
Sometimes, I want to be with others.
Sometimes, I even want to be alone and with others at the same time.
I know each moment is unique, but all of them
are the moments of my life.
I know each breath goes in and goes out,
and that nothing stays the same for long.

And I know that after all the doing, and telling, and naming, and moving and speaking comes something else…being, simply being...being in the silence for a time.

silence

Sometimes I am caught up in the demands of the world, both its woes and golden dreams; sometimes I am caught up in the words of great prophets and singular heroes and sheroes that shine in history: but sometimes I turn to my own unique little life, remembering all the people I know, or love, or miss, or mourn, or worry about…join me if you will in doing the same with your own unique lives…letting this moment be one of recollection, thanksgiving and care as we quietly name those who live in our hearts…aloud or within.

naming

Sometimes the silence is the best grace. And sometimes, like right now, the ancient magic of music is a more compelling grace that blossoms, soars, flies and grants me a glimpse of myself.

The First Reading *comes from Karen Tintori's book about the great Cherry, Illinois mine disaster of 1909. The book has been opted for a movie. Cherry Illinois is the town where my mother Elisa was born and raised, and this almost unknown story is entirely caught up with hers, mine, and well, yours, whether you know it or not.*

In 1910, in Cherry, Illinois the life expectancy averaged 47.3 years, with diphtheria, malaria and typhoid leading the causes of death. Babies were born at home, parents doctored their children with cod-liver oil. There were no vitamins, just tonics. There were no antibiotics.

Housewives boiled the laundry, scrubbed it by hand and hung it to dry. Everything had to be ironed. They baked their own bread, and canned fruits and vegetable for the winter. William Howard Taft was the president, Pius X was the pope, and Nicholas II was the Russian czar. Robert Perry finally reached the North Pole. It was the year the NAACP was founded.

No one had a radio. Only 18 in a thousand had a phone. Mail was delivered three times a day. Italians and Slavs predominated in Cherry's growing population. Miners worked along side men they could not understand, and neighbors communicated with nods and gestures.

There were two churches, one Catholic, one Congregationalist. But it was the saloons, which excluded women and numbered 17 of Cherry's thirty-five businesses, that flourished.

Miners drank because they worked hard. And it was dangerous. Miners were regularly maimed and killed. Families worried more than the miners. Women and children lived in constant dread of the piercing shriek of the mine alarm whistle.

Faces smeared black, men and boys worked for eight hours at a stretch, breathing in a variety of noxious fumes, and a coal dust so silty it coated their lungs.

The Second Reading *comes from Wilkinson and Pickett's The Spirit Level, a 2010 book with the*

subtitle "Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger."

The press brings societies fears and concerns around teenage motherhood into sharp focus. Often described as "babies having babies," teenage motherhood is seen as bad for the mother, bad for the baby, and bad for society.

But are all the bad things associated with teenage birth really caused by the *age* of the mother? Or are they the result of the cultural world in which teenage mothers gave birth? We will show that teenage birth rates are strongly related to relative deprivation and to inequality. Teenage birth rates are higher in communities that have low levels of trust, high unemployment, and poverty. Teenage motherhood is a choice women make when they feel they have no other prospects for achieving the social credentials of adulthood, such as rewarding employment. It is the discouraged among the disadvantaged who become teenage mothers.

Sermon

I don't remember what their names are now, but I remember that in the spring of 1973, I accompanied some friends to a theater in Birmingham, MI, to watch a film. We were going to see the Academy Award winning foreign film that year, Federico Fellini's *Amarcord.* I told my friends that I had heard my own grandmother utter that phrase in dialect many times "amar'cord"..."I remember." And so because I alone knew what the name of the title meant, I really figured the film might speak to me in a very intimate and particular way.

And boy did it! In ways I could never have imagined before I saw it. My emotions during the film were as up-and-down as any roller coaster up at Cedar Pointe. I laughed so hard, and wept so plainly, that I'm sure my friends were beginning to worry that I was beginning to lose my mind.

Oh, when it was over, my friends agreed that it was a very fine film indeed. But for me, the film offered something more – not just entertainment – but a whole new understanding of who I was.

The film offered me the first glimpse of the gift of my identity. Federico Fellini, the director, you see, came from the same state in Italy that my grandparents came from. He was from the seaside, my grandparents were from the mountains, but the culture in the two areas was almost identical. And in Fellini's film, I saw for the first time, in any film, a family exactly like my own. A perpetually angry and threatening father, a long-suffering mother, a bemused grandparent who made funny sounds and inappropriate comments; a communist and conservatives surviving at the same sumptuous supper table on Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving and New Years. None of my friends had families quite like mine. And actually, I had always felt as if my family was strange, or, to put it plainly, embarrassing.

But the film made clear to me for the first time that what we call "families" are simply parts of larger families, that is, the cultures in which they thrive. The film convinced me that the cultures can shape the behaviors of the family even more than the individual psychologies and personalities of the members.

And so, today, some reflections on how changing culture has changed family life, as seen through the lens of my own family. Reflections on how everything in the last one hundred years has changed completely. And I will do this by focusing specifically on the idea of children.

In my family a hundred years ago, there were no children. Oh, there were human beings who were nine years old, or five or even three. But children, in the deprived culture of poverty my grandparents knew, were seen as they were mostly seen in the Middle Ages, namely, as miniature adults. They were not growing and developing creatures who were still in formation. There was no need for schooling or learning about things like history or math. Reading and writing were for other classes of people.

So, my first portrait: My grandmother worked as a shepherd from the time she was eight. She took the flock out into the mountains every day. She never went to school one day in her life. You can see her in a long skirt, a blouse and coat, her head covered with a shawl, like her mother and her mother's mother before her, a child dressed as an adult. You'll notice the blue sky and a snow covered peak rising above her, the greatest mountain in the area, Cimone. You can also see the mountain lake, Lago Della Nimfa, glinting not far in the distance. She had entirely adult demands placed on her from very early – cooking for the family, boiling the laundry, crocheting and sewing clothes with her sisters – after they had carded and spun the wool from the sheared sheep she had led into the fields a few days earlier. There were no clothing stores – they made all their clothes. Her brothers learned to repair shoes from their father, a cobbler.

Her eventual husband, also from the same village, when he reached age 9, travelled – by foot and by boat – with his brother, aged 8, all the way from their family house in the mountains of Emilia to the island of Sardegna off the west coast of Italy, where there are rich coal mines. There, in mine shafts 18 inches high, the two boys worked together, shimmying down the narrow, claustrophobic shaft to dig out the coal, then sliding back on a wheeled board with their black treasure to earn a few pennies each day. Most of which they sent home to their parents to help feed the family.

When people visit the area where my grandparents grew up today, they find ski lifts and chalets, national parks, expensive hotels, and food tourism. Wealth is evident, poverty a thing of the past. But my grandparents *hated* living there a hundred years ago. No school, little time to rest, every meal hard-won, hunted and gathered rather than bought. Their lives were tough in a way I can barely comprehend. How often I heard my grandmother weep when she remembered their struggles. How often I heard her weep when she told me the story of what it was like to say good-bye forever to her mother and father, and how she had to anyway. Don't get me wrong – they did what they could to live lives beyond the context of their daily struggle – grandma regaled me with stories of all their neighbors dancing on the dirt floor of the family kitchen, circle dances brightened by a concertina, an instrument something like an accordion; and she told me of joyful pilgrimages up the mountain to the shrine of San Pellegrino, where she slept under the stars. But the tough culture of struggle and deprivation in which they lived spurred both grandparents to escape, to find some sense of dignity elsewhere which they could not find in their own unsupportive culture. Once they had settled here, my father's parents, unlike many other Italian immigrants, refused to go back to visit the old country, even though my father offered to pay for it all, since the experience of their so-called childhood and their destitution

was so painful yet in their cringing souls.

Portrait number two: The town of Cherry, Illinois. The town where my mother was born in 1923. Five hundred people. Nothing much, believe me. I've been there.

But it was almost 2500 citizens when it was founded, just a few decades before she was born, as a "company town" for the St. Paul Coal Mining Company, which was in charge of the largest bituminous coal mine in the Americas. (I know, makes no sense to me either that coal should be found under cornfields as flat as pancakes instead of folded nicely into the mountains of West Virginia, but there you have it. That's where it was.)

When I visited Cherry as a kid, I was always amazed by the large blue "mountains" I saw rising from the nearby cornfields. They weren't mountains of course, but slag dumps, that is, piles of the stuff dragged out of the mines that wasn't coal. What I didn't know then was that the husband of my mother's mother, Giovanni Guiderini (my great grandfather in other words), had been one of the 259 men *and boys* who died in the largest mine fire in American history, the one at the St. Paul Mine in Cherry, Illinois.

Karen Tintori, in the reading you heard, contributes her color to my portrait from life very generously, describing the town and the era on the day it all happened. Taft (a conservative Unitarian) as president of the USA; Commander Perry at the North Pole; a far lower life expectancy that we have now, and a well-built company town surrounding a model, and by all accounts, fabulously safe mine, a town with two churches and yes, 17 saloons. My great grandfather, Giovanni, used to down whiskeys at these saloons – I can see him doing that by using his photo portrait that I brought here – a handsome young man, a hard worker, but a person in my ancestry I will never know *anything more about* than the horrific circumstances of his death, and this single remaining photo.

Now the top brass at the St. Paul Mining Company knew about the horrible fire but refused to call the men out of the shafts until it was too late. They died from lack of oxygen and what miners called "the black damp," as the mine was sealed off to block oxygen getting to the fire, and inevitably, to the men and boys trapped there.

The heroic rescue operations that saved twenty of the trapped miners reminded me of the brave actions of the firefighters in NYC after 9/11...courage and dramatic tenacity rarely seen in modern day-to-day life. But after seven rescue trips, many of the rescuers themselves died.

The fire devastated Cherry. Not only were hundreds of young women widowed and hundreds of children orphaned, but the mine had to be closed, and the income stream for a company town disappeared. The poverty was terrible, and my widowed great grandmother Ersilia and her daughter, my future grandmother Anna, along with her two brothers and her sister lived in abject poverty as well as consummate grief. It was a town of weeping and lamentation and few wanted to stay in it. The company town of 2500 dwindled to 500 in short order, and that's how big it was when my mother was born there.

But some things that affect you and me still came out of the tragedy...the famous silver lining.

The relatively new child labor laws in the states, i.e. children are no longer allowed to be miners like my grandfather was in Sardegna – or do any other kind of dangerous work suffered by adults – was routinely ignored by many of the coal companies of America, who wanted to make a profit at any cost, including the cost of human lives.

All of that changed after Cherry. The childhood labor laws were enforced absolutely, and the nature of childhood in poor families began to change. My grandmother's brothers went to school instead of the mine shaft. The Red Cross (founded as many of you know by the great Universalist Clara Barton, based on ideas set in motion by the great Unitarian Henry Whitney Bellows) established a relief fund to help the widows of Cherry, including my great grandmother. This fund, when eventually explored by state legislatures of the period, eventually turned into what we now call Workman's Compensation.

Portrait Number 3. My grandmother Anna grew up, as I said, in grief and poverty, and wanted to get away from Cherry. She had attended school, made it all the way to eighth grade. But there was nothing in Cherry for her. A man named Eduardo Pozzi, who came from a nearby town, was enthralled with her beauty as a teenager. They were quickly married and she bore my mother. Things were looking up. Eduardo Pozzi had a job offer and was going to move to Detroit to work in the auto industry. Many Italian immigrants who were former miners were moving there for work. But within a short time after my mother was born, Eduardo Pozzi died of spinal meningitis at the Mayo Clinic, and my mother was orphaned and my grandmother widowed. Again, their life was tough, a bare survival trajectory. Picture my grandmother, washing or ironing clothes for other people to make a few pennies, or baby-sitting. That's all that was left.

I thought of my grandmother and her dire situation when I read a recent essay about teen mothers, which, as the second reading states so boldly, has been studied at length in our modern age with the following results: *Teenage motherhood is (often) a choice women make when they feel they have no other prospects for achieving the social credentials of adulthood, such as rewarding employment. It is the discouraged among the disadvantaged who become teenage mothers.* The authors are not talking about every situation, of course. Teenage motherhood crosses the class lines all the time, and there are a thousand stories which are exceptions to the general rule. But the common utterance, quoted by the authors, "babies making babies" is rueful and superior, as far as I am concerned, and I won't use it. It says nothing at all about the conditions, context, class and culture, and women's health issues native to the majority of such pregnancies. That's the real story, not the youthful age of the mothers, which, since the day the 13 year old Mary of Nazareth gave birth to her child Jesus, has been the most *common* practice of human sexist civilization, *until the modern era.*

Fourth and Last Portrait: I often wonder what my grandparents would say if they came back to life, and saw what childhood can mean these days. In 2012, more than a hundred years after the great mine disaster and the immigration of my other grandparents. I am thinking especially now about our own School for Young Children. Heather Schumaker, a graduate of our school, and fellow Unitarian Universalist, has written a book coming out in August about the philosophy of child development embraced by our remarkable school. It's called **"It's OK Not To Share, and other Renegade Rules for Raising Competent and Compassionate Kids."** Let me read you a few of the "rules" recorded in the table of contents: *Kids Need Conflict. "I Hate You" Is Nothing*

Personal. Let Her Hog That Toy All Day. Ban Chairs, Not Tag. Bombs, Guns and Bad Guys are Allowed. Boys Can Wear Tutus, Kids Don't Have to Say Sorry. Love Your Kid's Lies. Let Kids Hit and Kick. All Feelings are OK; All Behavior Isn't. Goof up!" You shocked or surprised by any of this? Many are. I understand. Most of us were raised differently. But I have seen the great accomplishments of the school and am glad for this book. It makes complete sense to me, since children are not little adults, but grow step by step within their own developmental levels. And it makes sense to the amazing teachers at our school who have been living out this philosophy, in conversation with parents, for a long time, many of them for decades. With remarkable results, too. And they're not doing it for the money, I assure you.

The present era, even though we are still in recovery from a deep financial crisis, is an era of relative prosperity when compared to the world my grandparents knew as children. Today we don't send our children to dig coal or herd sheep... we have studied the developmental stages of children in every way for decades, and we know for a fact that they are not little adults, (even though sometimes, yes, they *can* be our teachers, young as they are.)

Childhood seen outside the terrible compress of destitution and systemic deprivation is an amazing time of self discovery and heart-learning. Its something my grandparents, at least, never experienced 100 years ago in their mines and fields. Things have indeed changed. And, in just a mere century, too.

And finally, the portraits I have offered you this morning are pictorial examples that illumine for me the two justice themes our congregation voted on at our Mid Year Meeting, namely, Women's Health Issues and Poverty Alleviation. Do you begin to see how they might go walk hand in hand? Do you begin to see what can happen to children and families when we address both issues positively and with compassionate analysis?

With any luck, some future Fellini a hundred years hence will produce a film with the title, in English, "I Remember." It will also be about family. And children. Maybe someone like me in a hundred years will watch that film and know his own identity, that of a person raised with respect, kindness, understanding and a whole lot of love and care. Maybe he too will laugh and cry.

But for far more hopeful reasons than I did when I first recognized my family in Amarcord.

Offering
We offer this time for gifts for the work of the congregation. Most people give by pledges electronically these days, but this ancient time is important to many. Since the church is us, we both give and receive the offering.

Closing Prayer
Prayerful words by Federico Fellini, 1957, arranged from a letter to Dr. Charles Reinhart, a Jesuit priest, who asked him about the spiritual nature of his art.

All I can say is this. I am like so many others, living through my own experience,
someone who regards things around me respectfully, and with a curiosity and with love.

This love produces the compassion and tenderness I feel for people I meet. I am not a pessimist and don't want to be one, but I find myself turning preferentially toward those who suffer the most, the ones who are the victims of deceit, injustice and exploitation.

I have a profound need to reply to the voices which rise from these contacts, without betraying their hopes. Perhaps my spiritual world is the instinctive wish to do good to those who have only known evil in their life, to offer them a glimpse of hope, a chance for a better life, and to find in everyone, even the worse intentioned, a deep core of goodness and love.