

Beginner's Fortune

September 16, 2012

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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
not to list and proclaim our diverse beliefs,
but to decide how best to live out strong lives
in service with, and for, others and ourselves
to promote justice that unites instead of divides.

(And so) **Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming ever deeper wisdom as our authority, and daring to bear joy, burden, loss and insight in deliberate community, we awaken at the call to live just, tender and courageous lives in peace.**

Singing, Ingathering (*the Transitions Ritual*)

Greeting: announcements

Affirming:

The joy in the world is to begin. It is good to be alive because living is beginning, always, every moment. *Cesare Pavese*

Communing;

School supplies passed around at local classrooms, in this building and around the Columbus area...

*September memories of teachers
writing on a green board with chalk.*

Two high towers of light on the south end of Manhattan; videos of the jolt of that day

*September memories of a balmy day
when fear and horror rose to the sky
on a pillar of cloud and smoke.*

Cooler nights, rain and the sweetness of late summer corn.

*September memories of sun slanting through
our bodies at the exact angle it's slanted
every 16th of this month for all our lives,
grounding us to our days.*

Revelations of tragic deaths in faraway Libya, prompted by viral foolery and long embedded conflicts of decade after decade...

*September revelations that sincere
compassion and understanding can still
exist in a season soured by impolitic politics.*

Love, this moment is what we have,
 not an hour, not a day, not a month,
neither a memory, nor an anticipation,
 but this blink of an eye,
 this pause between our breaths,
 this full-blown eternity well disguised as
 a single heartbeat.
Let us share this gift in silence.

silence

Bringing our lives to the presence of this moment, hearts spill over in the spaciousness with love, with forgiveness, with resistance, with gratitude. Embracing the people who knock at our heart's door right now, we imagine their faces before us in our mind's eye, or simply name them in the shared silence which makes us one.

naming

The horn of the September equinox will sound this coming Saturday, as the season begins its yearly shift. Arise, arise; let the new beginning of the next moment move forward borne on the exaltation of music.

The First Reading is from Richard Dawkins' 2011 book *the Magic of Reality*, which in many ways strikes me as his best book.

People sometimes say, "Everything happens for a reason." In one sense, this is true. Everything *does* happen for a reason – which is to say that events have causes, and the cause always comes before the event. Tsunamis happen because of undersea earthquakes, and earthquakes happen because of shifts in the earth's tectonic plates. That is the true sense in which "everything happens for a reason," the sense in which "reason" means "past cause." But people sometimes use reason in a very different sense, to mean something like "purpose." They will say something like "The tsunami was a punishment for our sins" or "The reason for the tsunami was to destroy the strip clubs and other sinful places." It is amazing how often people resort to this kind of nonsense.

Maybe it is a hangover from childhood. Child psychologists have shown that very young children, when asked why certain rocks are pointy, reject scientific causes as an explanation and prefer the answer: "So that animals can scratch themselves when they get itchy." Most children grow out of that kind of explanation for the pointy rocks. But quite a lot of adults seem unable to shake off the same kind of explanation when it comes to major misfortunes like earthquakes, or good fortune such as lucky escapes from earthquakes.

It is true that if you toss a penny 1,000 times you'd expect approximately 500 heads and 500 tails. But suppose you've tossed the penny 999 times and it's so far come up with heads every time. What would you bet for the last toss? According to the widespread

misunderstanding of the “Law of Averages,” you should bet on tails, because it is tails’ *turn*, and it would be so *unfair* if it came up heads yet again. But I would place my bet on heads, and so would you if you were wise. A sequence of 999 heads in a row suggests that someone has tinkered with the penny, or with the method.

The Second Reading *consists of excerpts from Julia Vinograd’s funny but very serious poem Playing the Lottery from 2002.*

I’m playing the lottery.
When I win I’ll be so rich
that “war” will be only a short, obscure word
still in the dictionary but mainly useful
for morning crossword puzzles.
I’ll be so rich
that panels of experts on tv
will cut The New York Times
into strings of paper dolls
because nothing happened today.
I’ll be so rich
I’ll buy hangovers from street drunks,
collage them into a modern symphony
and everyone will go once a month
in their best clothes
because they’ve gotten bored with feeling good.
I’ll be so rich I’ll make grade schools teach a special course called: no, you *won’t*
understand when you grow up. I’ll be so rich
I’ll give a hundred comfortable rocking chairs
to every welfare office so no single mother
ever has to stand in line again.
I’m playing the lottery.
When I win I’ll be so rich
everything will be all right
the way they always promised me
when I was a child
and scared of the dark.

Preaching

Two summers ago, while flying to California to visit my friends in the Bay Area, my Southwest flight took me through Phoenix. The first leg of my flight was jam-packed, not a single empty seat. The second, from Phoenix to Oakland, was also, as the attendant warned us, "a totally full flight." I was sitting by the window, and a man came and sat on the aisle. We didn’t say anything – I usually am pretty introverted on planes – and anyway, both of us were waiting for someone else to plop down between us. Suddenly, the attendant shut the door of the plane. And the one empty seat on the whole plane was between me and the man on the aisle. We both looked at each other, and accepted the gift

of extra room by high fiving each other. "Excellent!" We introduced ourselves. He was Marco Antonio. I told him my name was Mark, but that my closest friends, (the men whom I call my brothers) and my grandparents had always called me Marco, never Mark. Marco Antonio was going up north to visit friends. I was going out west to visit friends. We discovered we both like sushi a lot. We talked all the way through the flight which flashed by like lightning because we were so engaged in the conversation. As I exited in Oakland, we promised to keep in touch.

And despite the odds – after all, it was a single two hour conversation – we did.

So this last year, at the Phoenix General Assembly, we naturally decided to get together for another face-to-face conversation and a drink after he left work. We had a wonderful time. As we talked more about our lives, one of the things I told him was that I felt like a very *lucky* person – so many good things had befallen me in my life – I’ve come to love the most amazing people I can imagine, starting and finishing with my son Tony; I’ve enjoyed good, engaging work that has both taken me deep into the human condition, and helped me to travel around the world. Marco Antonio then said to me:

“I understand what you are saying when you use the word *lucky*, but I don’t use the word ‘lucky’ any more, or the word *luck*. I prefer to say *fortune* and *fortunate* instead.

“Hmm,” I hummed. “I think of them as meaning pretty much the same thing,” I suggested.

He answered: “I understand that they are often used interchangeably with each other, and with the word *chance* too, but the words *luck* and *chance* sound mechanistic and cold to me. I associate them with the addictive life of casinos and the magical thinking associated with lotteries. However, the word *fortune* is surrounded by other meanings, like *abundance*, for example, and *rich*. And by *rich*, I’m not talking just about bank accounts, of course, but also the rich world we live in, a world of rich culture and abundant natural beauty and remarkable resources. *Fortunate* suggests the richness of life in friendship, love and joy, in food and delight, health and healing, and even in grief.”

After our conversation, I decided to think about the subtle difference between the words *luck*, *chance* and *fortune*. And to do so, I took up as a spiritual experiment not saying the words *luck* or *lucky* anymore, but substituting the word “*fortune*” instead (as well as its opposite word “misfortune”).

And this simple experiment during the summer set a lot of my wheels turning in fresh ways.

I began remembering my resistance when I was told as a child – as I indeed was – that I should feel “lucky” because I lived in the best country in the world, and unlike the folks in other countries, I had food and was not starving to death with one of those bloated bellies. I had an allowance (to save or spend) and was not begging with a bowl on the street like other children. I had good schools instead of having to work in fields in order

to barely survive. And I was in a country with a fair justice system, instead of a place where you could be jailed for not telling the police your parents were still stubbornly attending an underground church.

Even as a child, I kept on thinking and feeling that this was not fair. "Who are those kids with the begging bowls and bloated bellies and sore feet from working in the fields? Did they do something wrong to deserve such a different life? Are they like me? Why was I so lucky...or, as I was told, blest by God to live in the best country in the world? What kind of a God, I wondered, said "Starve to death" to some children, and "Eat pizza" to others? Consider it the first significant theological question I ever asked.

But I am not exaggerating one bit.

It used to keep me up at night, me imagining holding a bowl out at the end of my own arm on some dusty street in a country with an alphabet on all the signs I never learned to read. I wanted to try to imagine what it was like, as the proverb puts it, *to walk in someone else's shoes*, or in this case, to go barefoot in someone else's feet. The poverty I witnessed in my own city of Detroit near my grandma's house verified the things I was told about other countries. The vast gulf between poverty and wealth we talk about today is not something new. I could experience it as a kid. The fact that one of our Justice Action Ministry concentrations these next two years is *poverty alleviation* fits with my natural childhood instinct seamlessly.

As I grew older, I learned more about statistics. The kind of thing that Richard Dawkins talks about when he tells us that if a penny is tossed 999 times and shows up tails, it would be foolish to bet that it will not fall that way the thousandth time. Some one has clearly rigged the penny. It is not and never has been the penny's "turn" to fall heads. There is no natural fairness in reality. There is no such thing as an invisible ectoplasm of luck that you can influence by thinking it's due you, or squishing up your face intently at the gambling table.

Unfortunately, the new and ridiculously huge casino they are building way on the west side will last a thousand years only because people really do believe that luck is due them, that their time has come, that "it's bound to happen this time." Dawkins makes this very clear: not only is it a waste of time to say "It's bound to happen this time," there is also no good sense in saying "Everything happens for a reason," unless you are talking about cause and effect alone. If you push a car downhill and the brakes are off, the car will roll downhill. Cause and effect. If the brakes are on, it won't. If you think it's your turn to suffer misfortune, or your turn to be fortunate, you have missed the whole wisdom offered by what my late pen pal Arthur Clarke called "Statistical theology." Neither wishing or begging or fervent traditional prayer will make nature change its course just because it's inconvenient or painful to you. You are not being singled out. You never have been. There is no "singling out." To think that the world is out to get you because you have suffered a great deal of calamity, or, conversely, that you are a good person because your "luck" happens to be remarkable, is simply false theology. My friend Andrzej teaches similar things at OSU in his economics class. He teaches, and I quote:

"whatever we cannot predict accurately in a mechanical way gets tagged as "chance."
Ah, see, once again, it's all about what we pretend to control when in fact we don't.

What they are all saying is that nothing is stacked up *against* us by fate, nature, God, the universe...pick your name for ultimate reality. Nothing is stacked *for* you either. God, Fate, Chance or Whatever did not put me in the United States and say "Live!" and say to a young girl washed away in a Bangladesh tsunami, "Die!"

And, as you and I have undoubtedly both observed, you can be rotten to the core and still have "good luck." You can be a saint and suffer calamities without ceasing. This is not some new idea, either, since the Scroll of Job in the Hebrew testament, which wrestles richly and profoundly with this reality, was written over 2500 years ago.

When I fly in a plane ten times in a row without turbulence, it doesn't mean that turbulence is due me. Each flight I take is a new beginning. Each flight I take shares an equal capacity for turbulence. No One Somewhere owes me turbulence, or is keeping track to make sure I have been shaken up fairly. Chances for turbulence do not build up.

What *does* build up however is my concern for the poor, the same concern rooted in my childhood sense that starving children in some other country was intolerable and unfair. In this election season, when the popular conversation is contrasting the beleaguered middle-class with the multi-billionaires, the poor and destitute do not get quite as much airtime. The terrific poem by Julia Vinograd, although written well before this election season, cleverly mocks this kind of omission from the conversation. After announcing that she is going to win so much money from the lottery because of her undoubted good luck, she then tells us that she will thereby use her gajillions of dollars to eradicate all war, whisk all world calamities away from the New York Times' headlines...no more troubles in Tripoli once she is fabulously wealthy. She's going to deal with the drunks on the street, and the children in our schools...but note, she is not going to do anything for the poor welfare mothers but get them rocking chairs, so they don't have such an uncomfortable wait standing in line. She eradicates war and shootings, but the poor she only comforts with a cushion on a soothing seat.

Vinograd, I think, is brilliantly playing with the whole thoughtful insight lifted up by my Phoenix friend Marco Antonio. The chance or luck that leads to billions, whether via the market, venture capital successes, inheritance, or the lottery itself, is just an empty, cynical and mechanistic lens for regarding our common world. The word *fortune*, with its echo-words of *rich* and *abundance*, make me think of the riches of the world as proclaimed by the Eskimo or Inuit people who speak of the "riches of the world as intelligence, fearlessness, and love." Such fortunes don't just drop on our head with the spin of a blackjack wheel or jazzy Wall Street speculation; they can be cultivated. Fortunes like that can deepen, change for the better, and focus not just on personal benefit, but also on those women in line in difficult financial straits, whether or not they have rocking chairs to sit in. The fortune Marco Antonio helped me to focus on was not the kind that enables me to fly to Paris just for supper at LaTour, but the fortune that helps me to notice the riches of the world that belong to each of us, no matter what

country we live in, no matter what physique or color we were born with, no matter what kind of house we live in, street we beg on, songs we sing, food we eat, prayers we chant, silence we keep. The riches of the common sky above us all, with and without its storms, the riches of a world that is capable of supplying so many needs of water, food, beauty, and even the possibility of social unity and cohesion. The *riches of life*, as the Innuits say.

No matter who we are, the joy we have is not beginner's luck, but beginner's fortune...the capacity of knowing that the next minute is new, that the whole parade of minutes and days before us cannot safely or finally predict what will happen next. Each coin toss, each plane flight, each moment is fresh and new, and this is remarkable spiritual beauty as far as I'm concerned. At least, I find it more comforting than the idea of luck. We are all, each of us, fortunate to be alive, fortunate to be able to grow our capacities to love others, and fortunate to be able to support others as they strive to thrive and live out their best lives, no matter their circumstances.

So yes, it's true, what I often hear: the fact that we exist at all, and that each of us is mortal and that each of us breathes, and that each of us enjoys pleasure and suffers grief certainly proclaims our unity, our oneness in our life here on earth. But equal to all of this is the *statistical fortune* that embraces us all, never blessing us or cursing us because of what we do or do not do, but also not standing in our way as we nurture our capacity to improve the fortunes of others, to dismantle the effects of systems and circumstances, to join together to say "the world belongs to us all, to each of us, and no one can be written out of that vision by mere mechanical luck, or heartless chance."

Thanks, Marco Antonio, and Richard, and Julia, and Arthur, and Andrzej and you Innuits for helping me with my comforting theological meditation this morning, which has helped me to realize not how lucky I am, but rather, the blessing of my fortune.

Offering

Fortunate to be alive. Fortunate to live now, not some other time. Fortunate to be here with friends or family or strangers. Fortunate to be able to give and receive that the life of this our common house of life and love might deepen, be well sheltered, be open to all, be a place of solace, be an institution well cared for, kept clean, kept open, with a growing vision and a rich life of the spirit for all. Though some give electronically, many prefer this more communal way of supporting something we love.

Returning

This fall, the BREAD team, part of our Interfaith network for local justice work in the metropolitan Columbus area, will be inviting people for a series of One on Ones, that is brief conversations, one person to one person, to lift up the local concerns that may keep you up at night, that may suddenly grab you during the day as you are driving. These are not long conversations, but important. When someone from the BREAD team calls you or emails you to schedule such a conversation, please say yes. Or even sign up today to

arrange a few calls yourself. Would those that are here who are part of the BREAD team please rise in your seats. May we give them a round of applause as a blessing on their – and our – commitment to help make a better world where fortune has more say than misfortune.

Prayer:

Love, I belong to the world. You are of the world, known in our struggles and in our intimacy here. We belong to the world, every single story we tell. The world belongs to me. And to all of us. It's on loan. It's a passing gift. It's a wonder and a marvel and more than we'll ever understand. We are of the world, our understanding of the world therefore also rises from the world, from which we are inseparable. Grateful for the riches and fortune of being alive in this world, I therefore sing in praise and thanks.

Singing # 19 Blessing