

What Does It Take to Do It

January 13, 2013

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
after a week both very cold and very warm,
to worship, to give our attention
to how we do things, act, speak, celebrate;
accountable to the spirit of truthfulness;
Now we may deepen our questions,
even as we let our spirits soar. So...

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Singing: 123 Spirit of Life

Ingathering: Balloon Acrobatics by *Pedro Pablo Sacristan*

The day finally arrived. It was time for the great acrobatic balloon competition. Every insect in the garden had been training hard, and now they were preparing to begin their routines. The balloon competitions were always something really special, since they could only happen after the children of the house had had some big party. There was only a short window of opportunity too, before the parents came round to collect up the balloons.

Each time, the flying insects, like dragon flies and ladybugs, were favorites to win, because they could grab the balloon strings and fly off in all directions, creating all sorts of patterns in the air. However, on this occasion there were some rather unusual insects taking part: a group of ants. Of course, no one expected that they'd do anything special. They were so light that no ant had ever bothered to take part, but it was quite impressive to see all the ants all perfectly organized and prepared.

So the competition began, and the different insects took their turns, performing beautiful maneuvers with the balloons. As always, the butterfly and the dragonfly and the Ladybug left everyone amazed with their twists and turns, and their wonderful colors. When it was time for the ants to perform, it seemed like the competition had already been decided. For the first time in living memory, the ants shared just one balloon between them, and one by one they climbed up the balloon string; forming a thin black thread of ants. When all the string was covered, the last ant climbed over his teammates to reach the balloon. Once there, he climbed onto the top of the balloon.

This strange spectacle attracted everyone's curiosity, and they were just about to witness the most important moment: the ant opened his jaws as wide as he could... and then he stabbed the balloon with all his might! Pssshhhhhhhh!!!

The result was tremendous! The balloon began blowing out its air, flying madly about, here and there, doing a thousand pirouettes, while the perfectly synchronized ants, made all kinds of beautiful shapes out of the string. Of course, that acrobatic flight ended with quite a hard landing, but it didn't matter. The originality and teamwork of the ant performance was so impressive that the crowd didn't even have to vote for there to be a winner.

From then on, in that garden, everyone understood how much could be achieved by working together. In the years to come, the balloon competitions were full of displays carried out by teams, and they put on some wonderful routines; something those individual insects could never have achieved on their own.

Greeting (and announcements) special announcement on Auction Feb. 16th

Affirming:

**Hope is folding paper cranes even when your
hands get cramped, and your eyes tired,
working past blisters and paper cuts, simply
because something in you insists on opening
its wings.** *Elizabeth Barrette 2003*

Singing #15 The Lone Wild Bird

Communing:

Spirit. Latin for breath.
Breath, English for the life
that lives between a few heartbeats.
Heartbeat, English for one of the
regular contractions of
the heart muscle; or more apropos,
the pulse in my metaphoric heart
that follows any experience when I
say my heart just skipped a beat.
Beat. English for the way I feel
sometimes when I read the news,
hear talking heads on tv, or on my
computer screen, blathering on
with bitter preachments, senselessly;
or, beat, the beat that means the
news circulating on the streets,
or, beat, the pulse inside me that
tells me that I am my alive.
Alive. The English word that means
a lot more than my heartbeat and

breathing combined, but *with* them,
a vital sense of grateful wonder
and hopeful love which tenderly
embrace all the grief that has
pitched its tent inside my spirit. Spirit.
Latin for breath, in the influx of which,
every moment makes me capable of resisting the garish seductions
of the present era: greed, gripe and graft.
And so now, dear Love, I can find my deeper
strength here on Sunday as I lay back for a moment
in this deep pool of restorative silence.
Silence, which is simply the Latin for being
quiet and still. *bellsound*

Community. The Latin word for groups of
human beings which choose to be together
for any number of reasons. Reasons. Plural,
from the old French rendition of the Latin
ratio, meaning proportion. And so in
community we remember the proportion
of our days, the names of those people in
our lives who embody our griefs, our gratitude,
our love, our struggles, and both our memories
and hopes. May we name their names in our
heart or see their faces in our imagination, and
thus, bring them into this hour.

naming

Music. An English word almost unchanged
from the original sound and meaning in Greek,
Latin, French, Spanish, Portuguese,
German, Italian, meaning, the great art inspired
by the Muses, as we might say now,
"divinely inspired."

Musical Selections

The First Reading *is from Victoria Safford, who serves our congregation in White Bear Lake Unitarian Universalist Congregation in suburban Minneapolis Minnesota. This is a story she told in a sermon published in a wonderful book I recommend to all of you called "The Impossible Will Take A Little While." 2004*

In the fall of 1988, the Pine Ridge girl's basketball team played an away game in Lead, South Dakota. It was one of those times when the host gym was dense with anti-Indian hostility. Lead fans waved food stamps, yelling fake Indian war cries and epithets like "squaw" and "gut-eater."

Usually the Pine Ridge girls made their entrances according to height, led by the tallest seniors. When they hesitated to face the hostile crowd, a fourteen year old freshman named SuAnne offered to go first. She surprised her teammates and silenced the crowd by performing the Lakota shawl dance, and then singing in Lakota---graceful, modest and show-offy all at the same time. She managed to reverse the crowd's hostility---until they even cheered and applauded. And of course, Pine Ridge went on to win the game.

The Second Reading *is from an essay, also found in the same book, by Paxus Calta-Star, an activist who, after traveling the world and living in various nations, lives at the famous Twin Oaks Community in Virginia.*

The time is the winter of 1996, the place is the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. Polina is a student who has recently got involved in activism. She is eighteen-years-old.

Unlike most of the rest of Eastern Europe, Bulgaria did not throw out its Communist rulers in the revolutions of 1989 and 1991. Instead, some minor reforms were enacted, including some freeing of the media. In the late 1990's, the Bulgarian government is widely distrusted, disliked and recognized as deeply corrupt.

The Belene nuclear power plant is an unfinished reactor complex in the eastern part of the country. Partially built during the Cold War, it was stopped by popular protest in 1990.

In December of 1996, the government put together a deal with the Russians, the United States and the European Union to complete these reactors. After a number of serious accidents, the reactor complex had been identified by the US Department of Energy as one of the ten most dangerous in the world.

Polina is part of an ecological organization which is fighting against the completion of Belene. They convene a national conference to discuss how to stop this complex from being finished. Several suggestions are made, appealing to alternative models for generating electricity. Finally, Polina is recognized. "If you want to stop the construction of the Belene reactors, you need to overthrow the government," said the 18-year-old student. Participants smiled politely, as if to say, "What a nice thing for this child to say." They continue talking about return on investment and various schemes.

But Polina is not deterred. She goes with 20 friends to the steps of the Parliament and starts a daily protest against the government. The media thinks it's charming and puts them on TV. This is December 1996. Three months later, in March of 1997, there are 20,000 people on the steps each day. Bowing to popular pressure, the government resigns. Shortly thereafter, the first democratic reform government is elected. A couple of months after that, they release their energy policy---canceling the Belene project.

Preaching

Been kinda warm, lately, huh? I saw more people running yesterday in tank-tops, shorts--some men even going shirtless--than I'm sure I have ever seen before on a Saturday in January.

And *we* are above the equator. Below it, where it's summer, in Australia, for example, record heat and drought is stoking fires in several areas, including around Melbourne, where my friend Doug is covering the Australian Open, one of the most important tennis events in the world. Had it been held just last week, instead of this one, it might have been canceled. After all, Federer can't dash around on a clay court when the temperature is in the 90s or the even the 100s. Our state itself has broken all records for heat this year.

And the heat is not just in our weather, but in our politics. For after getting chastised by both Al Gore and the scientists who teach at the venerable Massachusetts Institute of Technology, President Obama has listed the issue of global warming (note, *not* just global climate change) as one of the three central issues he hopes to tackle in his second term.

And he's taking these three things on as he finds ways to sideline all the ridiculous assaults on his character, policies and person, which, as you know, have continued unabated since his first election. I'm thinking now of the recent blast, by a spokesman for a conservative religious organization, sarcastically suggesting that he take his oath next week, not on the Lincoln Bible, or the Martin Luther King Bible, but on *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx's book. Name-calling and bating...a well-honed practice here in the States, I think.

Yesterday, a member of this congregation, Victoria Parks, sent me a poem she had written which referred to recent tragic events here and far away. Writing of the children killed in Connecticut by a man with a gun, and the children just as killed, but in Islamabad (and other places as well, but over 178 children alone in Pakistan) by pilotless US drones. One set of children we memorialize, she writes. The others we are told "to forget." Like "Pavlov's dogs" she writes, "We jerk our knees

our redirected focus on *l'outrage du jour*
served up on a silver tongued propaganda platter
told to swallow
problem-action-solution
drone good
gun bad"

She's pointing up several things here...all the things we are served up by the media which redirect our attention toward some things, and not others somewhat like them; and the disproportion in our interpretations. If we memorialized the children in Pakistan, like we understandably did for those poor children in Newtown, would there be any outrage about those deaths, and the use of drones, like the outrage that has now more clearly surfaced about how we monitor gun usage among civilians?

But the world is big, you may tell me. Huge. Way too huge. What am I supposed to do about things like global warming? Islamabad is far away, you may tell me. I'm not really sure I could even find it on a map very quickly. And all these wars and drones? All the name calling? What can I do about that? The old military industrial complex President Eisenhower talked about 50 years ago is even more complex, and it's a lot bigger too. What am I supposed to do about such things? The head of the NRA wants to put guns in our schools, and he yelled about it a lot this

week. Someone could yell back, I suppose, but his organization is shored up by a mountain of money I can't even see the top of. And I'm barely able to pay my mortgage, my dentist and pledge to the church. What kind of power do I have? What can *I* do?

And if that wasn't bad enough, a few months ago, that guy with a chalkboard who used to be on TV, Glenn Beck, told his audience to run away from any church...like this one perhaps?... that talks about "social justice" issues like war, global warming, education, or health care, or poverty, or anything like that. That's a "Jeremiah Wright-type" place, he said, and he's not really religious at all, just a con man. Religion is about praising Almighty God and letting God take care of things. God's got all the power. We're just weak and sinful creatures made of clay. It's hubris to say we can do anything.

Well, first, I have to believe that a view of God like that is one of the main reasons that atheism and agnosticism are at an all time high, percentage-wise, in this famously most religious American culture.

When you look around and see the poverty visibly on the streets, or feel the 62 degree air on your bare January arms, or read about "wars, rumors of wars" (Mark 13, 7), and the death of children here and there and everywhere, the God who has all this almighty power does not seem to be using it much. And please, I am not dumping on the word God itself here; as I suggested last week, there are plenty of people, including in this church, and especially including our own ancestors in Poland and Lithuania and Ukraine, the Socinians, who refused to have faith in such an omnipotent God with power to control everything... just for this reason...children dying, wars raging, people taking what doesn't belong to them. They justly criticized the idea of an omnipotent God as bad theology. But they still used the word God to mean that deep and ongoing inspiration and accountability to Truthfulness, Loving-kindness and Non-violence, regardless of how others around them were using that word. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi both used that ancient word in precisely this manner.

No, it seems to me that if there is to be justice, or fairness, or even charity in the world, it seems to be up to us, inspired by Truth and Love, if we care to use those words, but in any case, it's up to us.

So the question I've been asking throughout this morning is this: once all the concerns about justice have been raised, their complexities outlined, their urgencies acknowledged, what does it take to do it?

Three responses:

1. Justice can be achieved only if we work together. Together always offers more possibilities than alone. And organization helps, while disorganization usually doesn't.
2. However, working together for justice often does begin with one person who gives voice to what others are only feeling inside, having neither vocabulary nor courage to speak it. Appreciate the inspiration of that one person. They don't grow on trees.
3. That one person does not have to be especially gifted with extraordinary wisdom, power and

strength, but only with the simple desire to be who she or he is without shame, *including* religiously and spiritually.

Let the stories you heard this morning illustrate and maybe even confirm, what I just said.

1. As the ants in the children's story this morning demonstrated clearly, even if you are tiny, and weigh nothing, when you work together, with a cool organized approach, more helpful than your passion; and when you are organized carefully, each person knowing where their best gifts are best received, you can do things no one else ever thought you could do. This is an ancient message, which you have heard from this pulpit a hundred times, but, still, good news always needs to be repeated.

2. As the story of Polina of Sofia demonstrated clearly, one person may at first appear simply cute, or even someone daft and amusing. But that does not mean they are powerless. Within months, 20,000 were doing the same thing she was doing. Daily. No one describes Polina as begging people to go with her, or shaming them because they were not doing as much as she thought they should be doing. She simply went and stood before the Parliament Building by herself and voiced her concerns... namely, that the reactor complex at Belene was being built so close to one of the main fault lines in Bulgaria. An earthquake only seven miles from Belene had killed people just a few years earlier, making the plant (which was also bankrupting the economy anyway) a danger both to the health of persons, and the whole countryside.

Paxus Calta-Star writes that before all this happened, Polina had attended a conference where people were discussing this urgent issue. "Finally," he wrote "Polina is recognized. 'If you want to stop the construction of the Belene reactors, you need to overthrow the government,' said the 18-year-old student."

The government did change. They resigned after all the 20,000 kept showing up day after day. The new government put a stop to the complex. And then, not long after, the government changed again. The new government reversed the former order, and tried to get the complex finished again. But they couldn't find any European investors in a project that had the potential to hurt not just Bulgaria, but Ukraine and other nearby nations as well...some of you may remember how far and wide the Chernobyl effects were felt. I was in Moscow just two months after the big Chernobyl nuclear incident...and believe me, the radiation had made a great deal of the agriculture there unsafe, and the farmers market stalls along the pedestrian mall, called The Arbat, were empty. And Moscow is 700 miles away from Chernobyl. 700 miles, not seven. As of Spring this year, the Belene plant is no more. It's being dismantled. An act begun, not by a mighty army, or drones dropping bombs, but by an 18-year-young college student who voiced what others could not.

3. SuAnne the Lakota basketball player, was four years younger than Polina. Her team, all Lakota, goes to Lead, a town in South Dakota, to play a game against another school. Immediately, the locals start to taunt the visiting team in the standard racialized way we excel in so well in the States: as I said before, name-calling and baiting. Victoria Safford summarizes: *Lead fans waved food stamps, yelling fake Indian war cries and epithets like "squaw" and "gut-eater."*

SuAnne was 14. She ordinarily would have been the last to go on because of her height. But she asked to be first. Refusing to be ashamed of being a Lakota young woman, she donned a makeshift "traditional" outfit by wearing a shawl she had brought with her, and came out and danced. And danced. And danced, singing in Lakota. Safford writes: she was "*graceful, modest and show-offy all at the same time. She managed to reverse the crowd's hostility---until they even cheered and applauded.*"

Reversed the crowd! By a dance. By chanting in her own native language. Not by calling them names in return. Not by pointing a gun at them. A dance and a chant. Something that for the Lakota people is *always* a spiritual thing, an expression of both their cultural and religious identity. Another example of what I said last week, that honest justice and honest spirituality overlap almost entirely, no matter what Mr. Beck thinks.

There's a lot more to say, of course. About patience. About doing something because it's right, not because it's guaranteed to work. But right now, despite the rain, I'd like to stop, so that sooner or later today, I can go outside and enjoy all this warm, warm weather.

Offering

It takes a single person, or just a few people, to start a movement or community. 73 years ago, a couple dozen people started this community, and now it has grown to about 630 members, with hundreds in the Sunday School, and many friends of the church as well. All of them have given of their time, their wisdom, their presence and their substance to develop this encouraging community. The offering time in the celebration is merely one place where we offer our supportive gifts. We do much of our support in more electronic ways these days. But this time is still important to many. Let the ushers come forward, please.

Returning: *The Affirmation of Rabbi Ben Hei Hei*

The work we do is its own reward.

And we are here to do,

and in the doing, learn.

And in learning, coming to know something,

and in knowing something,

coming to experience wonder,

and in wondering, starting to attain wisdom,

and in attaining wisdom, beginning to find a deeper simplicity,

and empowered by that deeper view,

starting to actually pay attention

to see what we need to do.

Singing: #1024 You Gotta Do What the Spirit Says Do

Blessing