

Mother's Day: Do It For Me

May 12, 2013

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Gathering Welcoming Centering Kindling Opening

We are here,
after a week both sultry and warm and rainy,
to worship, to celebrate not just our lives,
but the full, rich context of our lives,
to lift up, not just our visions and hopes,
but our every present breath and moment.

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 #1002 Comfort Me

Ingathering a version of Koala Loy by Mem Fox

There once was a baby koala so soft and round that everyone loved her. Her name was Koala Lou. The emu loved her. The platypus loved her. The kookabura loved her. The echidna loved her. And even tough little Koala Klawns who lived next door loved her.

But it was her mother who loved her the most. One hundred times a day, she would shake her head and say "Koala Lou, I love you!"

As the years past, other koalas were born...brothers and sisters for Koala Lou. Soon her family was so busy that her mother didn't have time to stop several times a day to tell Koala Lou that she loved her.

Although, of course, she did.

She wanted her mother to say those words, "I love you," but her mother was so busy. So when she heard about the Animal Olympics, she knew what she would do. She would enter the gumtree climbing contest, and she would win, and then her mother would notice her, and say, "Oh Koala Lou, I so love you."

So Koala Lou trained for the Olympics. She jogged, she lifted weights, She did push ups till it hurt. And she practiced climbing the tallest trees.

At last the day arrived. Her main rival was Koala Klaws from next door. She could see her mother in the crowd, and knew that soon she would be hearing her say, "Oh Koala Lou, I love you."

Koala Klaws went first. She made it up the tree in a record breaking twenty-two meters in seventy seconds flat. Everyone cheered and yelled.

Then it was Koala Lou's turn. Kookabura said: "On your mark, get set, go!"

As Koala Lou climbed as fast as she could, the people all roared and clapped. Higher and higher, she went, higher and higher.

But she wasn't fast enough. In spite of all her training and practice and hoping, it was Koala Klaws who won the gum tree climbing contest. Koala Lou came in second. Koala Lou was sad, and ran off to the forest nearby and hid. She cried her heart out.

But when the first stars came out, and the moon rose, Koala Lou went home in the dark. Her mother was waiting for her. Before she could say a word, her mother hugged her for a long time, and kept on saying, "Koala Lou, I do love you! I always have and I always will."

Greeting (and announcements)

Affirming

**Let us cultivate boundless good will,
never looking down on another, or lying to them.
Let none of us wish another harm,
in rage or envy.
Care for all beings,
like a mother might care for her only child.**

Metta Sutta, from Pali Canon, c. 400 BCE

#184 Chant Be Ye Lamps Unto Yourselves

Communing

I wonder. What is it like, O Love, to step out under the star-pocked night sky and feel, not small and insignificant, but rather wonderful, part of a greatness larger than this moment? A vastness of stars and time?

I wonder. What is it like, O Love, to comprehend this day, not as a festival of particular human mothers whom we love, or miss, or wish we had, or wish we could have been, but as a marking of motherhood everywhere...in the barking of seals and their pups in the Pacific Ocean near Monterey, the flight of eagles over their large nests in the Rockies, and the Shenandoah Valley, and central Ohio, or the burrows of rabbits just outside this building?

I wonder. What is it like, O Love, to read the great texts of the Pali Canon, or the Book of

Ecclesiastes, or the Gospel of Luke, or the poetry of all the nations, and find there, not the stories of *other* times and places, but mirrors in which I can see my own life, feel my own longings, and hear my own questions?

I wonder. What is it like, O Love, to sit here, in the year 2013, under this warm wooden gable, in a post-modern building, built on land that was once under water 240 million years ago; land that was once crossed by warriors who called the large river south of us Oheeyo, Great River, in their Tuscaroran dialect; land that was once a family farm only a short walk from the zoo? Only the silence can tell us....

silence

I wonder. What is it like, O Love, to know that my life is one of many lives which are as important to them as my life is to me? What is it like to name the bonds of love and loss and worry and boundary that weave me into the whole of human life on this planet? -- It's like this: when I name those I love, miss, question, fret about, haunt me...I acknowledge that their lives and my life are one. Now I begin that naming within my heart, or on my lips in gratitude that I can do so in community...

naming

I wonder. What is it like, O Love, to be blessed by beauty as great as stars and rivers and time itself? The music begins to answer....

The First Reading comes from Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and professor from Georgia who is generally considered one of the best preachers in the USA of any religious persuasion. These passages come from her beautiful book, *An Altar in the World*, 2009

According to the rabbis, those who observe Sabbath observe all the other commandments. Practicing it over and over again they become accomplished at saying no, which is how they gradually become able to resist the culture's killing rhythms of drivenness and depletion, compulsion and collapse. And yet those who practice Sabbath, a little or a lot, know that there is another kind of resistance at work.

One of my favorite prayers in *Gates of Prayer*, the New Union Prayer Book, is called "Welcoming Sabbath" and it goes like this:

*Our noisy day has now descended with the sun beyond our sight.
In the silence of our praying place we close the door upon hectic joys and fears, the
accomplishments and anguish of the week we have left behind.
What was but moments ago the substance of our life has become memory; what we did must now
be woven into what we are.
On this day we shall not do, but be.
We are to walk the path of our humanity, no longer ride unseeing through a world we do not
touch and only vaguely sense.
No longer can we tear the world apart to make our fire.
On this day heat and warmth and light must come from deep within ourselves.*

If you can hear the welcome in that prayer, then perhaps you can hear the dis-ease in it as well. How is your own deep fire doing, by the way? Are you pretty confident that you have enough heat and warmth and light within yourself to get you through the night? Once you have turned off the computer and hung up the car keys, once you have decided to take one whole day off from earning your own salvation, are you ready to wrestle with the brawny angels who show up?

The Second Reading is a recent poem by California poet Dan Gerber, called ***Driving Home***, which begins with the words "It's perfect." I dare say it is!

"It's perfect," I said one day,
the thought coming out of nothing I knew,
to no one sitting beside me,
while driving home from the market...

said this without thinking, it seems...
but could there be such a pure expression
with no intention to express?

The fields were incomparably green,
the sky incomparably blue...lupine and poppies almost blared from the hillsides.
At least that's the way I thought it.

"You were made for enjoyment," Ruskin said,
and the world is filled with things you will enjoy,
but every day I stumble
over cries I can't still.

"The world is suffering."
Say it twice, and it's not the same
suffering.
"The world is suffering."

Disease, eviction, envy, grief,
loneliness, rejection, dementia,
judgment, self-judgment...
when those I love may not love each other,
or me...
anger, suffocation, helplessness...
this helplessness,
my suffering of choice at the moment.

My friend's daughter, the pianist,
whose index finger, lost to sarcoma,
I can't replace,
my daughter whose breast I can't replace,

my dear friends whose murdered son

I can't replace,
all, over which, I'm at this moment suffering,
though they may be, at this moment, not.

Closer to home,
I pull off along the side of the road,
staunch by the fleeting,
incomparable beauty of the world
in which everything happens

Preaching

On this Mother's Day, I have to admit that neither my sister, my brother, nor I, were perfect children. We could leave our beds unmade, pile our dirty clothes high on the floor, instead of throwing them down the chute, or find ways to get out of drying the dishes with great skill. My father was at work a lot, or helping his parents, and so it was mostly up to my mother to deal with her rascally offspring.

She wasn't one to yell...that territory was pretty soundly sewn up by my father, who had no problem exploding like a volcano when he was upset.

So my mother would *try* and be stern, but you could tell just by looking at her sometimes that she herself was embarrassed at having to be stern about anything. Now if she was really upset, really frustrated, she would sometimes just get teary, and then you can be sure we all felt terrible, and scurried around doing more chores than there were to do. But every once and a while, when she wanted us to do something we really didn't want to do, and we offered her the typical teenage protest called "reasons," she would just look at us in exasperation and say, "Oh, just do it for me."

When we were very little, this tactic would make us uncomfortable, and we would do whatever it was she wanted us to do, but we would roll our eyes to make sure she knew it was a real imposition on us, and that ALL of our friends...yes, every single one of them...were waiting impatiently outside for us to join them, since THEY didn't have to do such things.

But when we grew older, and had turned into **wiser-than-the world** teenagers, and she would try that same tactic, we would each look at her and whine "MAaaaa" as if to say, "You really don't think that's going to work, do you?" And she would then smile, and act tough at the exact same moment, and say, "Just do it, then."

You're right. We were all brats. Sorry, Ma.

But over the years, I have thought about that phrase. "Oh, just do it for me." I have thought of how often that idea...with a slightly different meaning...has become a defining practice of our modern culture. Doing things for others, no matter what.

Nothing wrong with that right? Nothing wrong with cooking and serving food for homeless folks down at Faith Mission, like we do on alternate Fridays. Nothing wrong with helping someone move, or driving them to the doctor when they can't do so themselves. Nothing wrong with showing up at a lobby day down at the Statehouse, or working on our interfaith BREAD team, researching specific immigration issues here in Columbus.

Of course not. But we are not doing *any* of these things for them without taking ourselves into consideration first. For instance, I cannot drive a friend to the airport so he can attend his grandmother's funeral in New York right now, because I am preaching. I am speaking in this quilted pulpit right now. My covenant, my agreement, is with you first on Sundays, and not other people. I have to be clear with myself when I can do things and when I can't. Even absolute desperation on someone else's part would not make me leave this pulpit to do an undeniably very good act. As the book of Wayiqra or Leviticus famously says: דומכ דערל תבהאו

KaMOkha lere' akha veaHAVta As you love yourself, so love your neighbor.

You live inside your own skin, your own body. You must begin there. You cannot live inside anyone else's body or skin. So you must start with yourself. Do you want food and health and love and happiness? Yes? Do you do what you can to make that true for yourself? Yes? Then work the same to make sure others can eat, can have access to health, the possibility of love and the journey toward happiness. You *always* have to begin with yourself first. This is not selfishness, as some are afraid it sounds like, but rather, self-compassion. You realize that you yourself are a person on earth no different than any other person. Only a human person can love another human person. So you must always begin with yourself. You must say yes to yourself in order to say yes to others. I think of the Greek Orthodox legend which holds that Jesus was born lame and limped all his life...his critics lambasted him by taunting him, "Healer, heal yourself." All my life I've noticed that the opposite is more often true myself....those who have suffered are almost always quicker to respond to the suffering of others, so I think their proverbial criticism is weak.

But listen...

So many times in my ministry I have dealt with folks who say *yes* to others, even when saying *yes* clearly doesn't really help the other. The famous word "co-dependence" is the classic example.... friends and family give money to the gambling addict, totally overlook alcohol misuse, or make excuses...sometimes silently...for the sexual predator inside the family or out. I certainly have had to wrestle with codependence issues in my life...most ministers do, in fact, since our work is usually a form of saying "Yes" to others. But if, say at a wedding, I pour a relative struggling with alcohol issues a glass of beer, my **yes** to him is actually a **no** to his life. This remains true even if he tries to make me feel bad, or worse, guilty, if I don't pour him a drink..."C'mon, it's a wedding! Everyone's drinking!" This is true even if he threatens to get loud, obnoxious and make a scene...even then. My **yes** to him will actually be a **no** to him...not love, but fear.

It's natural to want to help in a time of crisis...the people who responded heroically against the Nazi regime, even though it cost them their actual lives; the women and men who went in to aid after 9/11, or Katrina...all of these were enacting their empathy and putting into practice their compassion in ways that were costly, but moving. They were not doing it to be liked, or loved, or even because being useful can provide some self-satisfaction. They had made a covenant...an agreement...with themselves...an agreement where they promised themselves to work together with others, where possible, to alleviate suffering that can befall anyone. They felt compassion for themselves, they loved themselves enough to know they themselves wouldn't be happy to suffer in either fire or water, so, as they loved themselves, they loved their neighbors...yes, complete strangers mostly...and worked to help these neighbors who were unfortunate enough to suffer because of fire or water or unjust laws.

There are strangers, neighbors if you will, in larger Columbus, who come here from time to time looking for some sort of help, mostly financial. I understand. I have needed help in my days, including financial help, when I was out of work for six months in my twenties. Now, when I was a younger minister, I felt the same amount of empathy that I have now, I think, but I had a *lot* less experience. So yes, I confess, I have said **Yes** when **No** would have been a far greater form of love. I admit that I've fallen for a few of the long rambling stories offered me by strangers. I usually don't any more. I've learned my lessons the hard way, the way I learn most of my lessons.

Like for example, a man comes in here recently. He's weeping... he clearly has real problems, shelter, health, family...but his breath is sour with beer, and his emotions are flowing in a way that *all* of my experience associates with alcohol, so I send him away. He was mad, and he's been back twice, telling the same story, still reeking of alcohol, and I've sent him away twice more. I'm sorry, I didn't feel mean.

Another man came on a Sunday a few months ago, and this time many of you talked with him. He too had difficult problems. He spoke of them, but never asked for any kind of help. I have to say, I was proud of so many members of this congregation because you noticed him, and listened to him with compassion, and many of you consoled him. When I heard his story after the service, I immediately felt compassion for him as well, and, after trusting my own instincts, I offered to help him out. We discussed what would make the most sense, and I paid off his school loan in the name of the church, and bought him a bus ticket back to Indiana. He still texts me every weekend, telling me he is restored to his family, has found a good job, one he likes even, and that he and his family are in the process of buying a house. He is thankful. But I always tell him that I am thankful to him as well, for being honest, and for having enough compassion on himself to know he needed to be with people who could really see and hear him...like us. He was right.

I do appreciate those who actually ask for help...since that's hard to do for many of us. For clearly, codependence culture in our nation exists right beside a culture of *independence*. "No, I don't need your help. I can do it myself." Sometimes people act as if they are almost insulted that you offered your help. But it doesn't mean they don't need help.

But back to codependence, which is saying Yes to others as a way of saying "No" to yourself... and ultimately to them. This is something I have encountered throughout my life, in story after

story, conversation after conversation. I've begun to wonder if addictions to alcohol, drugs, and gambling are just the *famous* addictions. Words like "workaholism" or "shopaholism" seem cute (or even cruel when you have buried people who have actually died of disease that supplies the root word, *alcoholism*), but I've always noted that folks make as convincing excuses for people who work too long as they make excuses for people who drink themselves numb. And people who brag about shopping all the time to make themselves feel better usually just get an appreciative and usually supportive laugh.

I've recently been reading a series of essays based on the insights of neurobiology...brain science...on concepts like altruism, or empathy. Difficult reading for sure. Separating out co-dependence from true compassion isn't easy all the time, but neurobiology grants us terrific insights. Interestingly, in this very polarized modern United States culture, some researchers say that the exact same area of the brain lights up when people are totally certain about things as lights up when standard addictive behaviors like alcoholism come into play. I've been thinking about that particular insight ever since. The article had the mind-blowing title "Pathological Certainty." Kind of supports my intuition that addictive behavior attaches itself to far more than beer bottles or a loose fist shaking dice.

Addictive behaviors distort things certainly, but even when I am as far from my addictive self as I can be, still I find it hard to love others as I love myself. There is only one of me to love, but millions of others. Men and women...strangers, neighbors...may come into the church to ask for help, but that doesn't happen more than once a week. The requests for help that come my way – not as a parson, but as a person – are endless. I'd love to show up at the statehouse every day to lobby...and I could do that, since this week alone I've been invited to do that five times. I've received 30 requests for money since this month began, not from men with alcohol on their breath, but from reputable organizations whose values I share, or friends who are supporting a particular health issue which I would indeed like to support. I thought the BREAD meeting at the State Fair Grounds this last Monday went very well, personally, and that the progress made on certain issues was exhilarating. 3400 people banding together to make their support known is powerful indeed. But if I just heard the list of all those urban issues *without* the supportive structure of our interfaith organization's well-structured meeting, complete with children's choir, I think I might be overwhelmed to the point of rolling on the floor with my eyes popping out.

To love myself, I need to have compassion for myself as a mortal being with edges and limits. To love others, I need to have compassion for them as mortals with edges and limits...and I need to feel that compassion even more than I feel empathy for their plight. What people call compassion-fatigue is actually much better named empathy fatigue...I can be co-dependent, that is, I can identify too much with others, and lose myself in the process, which doesn't do anyone any good...either my self or other selves.

Which is why I love the two readings I offered you today. The first, by the amazing Barbara Brown Taylor, urges us to love ourselves enough to resist "***the culture's killing rhythms of drivenness and depletion, compulsion and collapse.***" Powerful words...let me say them again...

She offers the Jewish *sabbath* as a model, one I have come to appreciate since my best friend is an Orthodox Jew...but she is not telling us to follow that practice, but any practice that allows us

to resist losing ourselves to empathy fatigue...whether it's meditation, or just sitting there without doing anything for a while. She peppers us with powerful questions...about ourselves...

How is your own deep fire doing, by the way? Are you pretty confident that you have enough heat and warmth and light within yourself to get you through the night? Once you have turned off the computer and hung up the car keys, once you have decided to take one whole day off from earning your own salvation, are you ready to wrestle with the brawny angels who show up?

I wish I could write that well. I may very well use that set of words as my evening meditation, my evening prayer tonight and every night for a while, as soon as I turn off the computer and hang up the car keys. I need to ask myself those questions frequently. You may need to ask yourself different questions...maybe it's not the computer that the best image of a demanding life, but working two jobs, or working and taking care of your children, or trying to juggle work, self and relationships in the eternal triangle where only two out of the three get any sufficient attention at all.

I also like her line about taking one day off from "earning your salvation."

Poet Dan Gerber says much the same thing with a different set of words: he is taken with the *incomparable* blue beauty of the sky, the *incomparable* colors of wild flowers---lupine and poppies---but is not very sure, in Taylor's words, that he has enough *heat, warmth and life to get him through the night*. He is filled with empathy for the suffering, and then offers a pretty straightforward list of just the suffering he experiences in his own local life. He laments that there is so much he cannot do to help the people he most wants to help...not strangers, but family members. But he finds some rest, some sabbath, some inner warmth and life and light when he sets himself free to let the "fleeting, incomparable beauty of the world" bring him back home to himself. Like the Buddha, he understands that all beauty is "fleeting" and that nothing is permanent. Like Koala Lou, he learns that the salvation of love is not something you *earn* from others, but that you offer to yourself first, and then to others, even if sometimes the Yes of your love has to be a No...no to codependence, no to a culture of "drivenness and depletion, compulsion (that is addiction) and collapse." No to the practice of desperately giving ourselves away before feeling compassion for ourselves as much as we feel compassion for others. Sometimes people say to me, after a sermon, that I seemed to be speaking just to them. I want to be clear this morning that I am talking aloud to myself, for these are the issues I have been wrestling with a lot lately. Maybe you can hitch a ride on these ideas, maybe not. I have no way of knowing.

But all of a sudden I realize what my mother used to say to me can still be said, "Just do it for me." I did, ma, I did. And I still love you with all my heart.

Offering

Returning: A Sutta

Thus I have heard: One day, Siddhata Gotama was teaching in the Deer Park at Isipitana. Many hundreds of men and women had gathered round. As he was teaching, the sun was setting, and as its light filtered through the branches of the banyan trees, he looked up and stopped his teaching

in mid-sentence. There, in the sun-lit branches of the trees, arranged just so against the orange sky, was the image of his mother Maya, who had died only a week after he was born. He loved the aunt who raised him, but he always wondered about his mother, and her life, and the wonder that life, and love and loss are just as they are. So he stopped speaking, and sat down under the banyan tree and kept quiet, meditating on these things. The people sat down too, and gave up listening as their teacher gave up teaching for a while. And as the moon and stars rose over them all, they were lifted up and restored to who they always were.