

# Personal Accountability

October 6, 2013

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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,

*8*after a week of humid, warm days,  
and sad and difficult news from Washington,  
*to worship, to link our lives to ideals*  
to which we are accountable:

*truthfulness, compassion and courage*  
so that we might live lives that matter,  
*and ground our days in wisdom.*

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

# 1002 Comfort Me vs 1-2

**Ingathering** *based on Marc Brown's Arthur's  
Computer Disaster*

"Mom, can I use your computer to play Deep Dark Sea?"

"What's Deep Dark Sea?" his mom asked.

"Mom, it's the greatest video game in the whole world, so can I play it on your computer? Puh-leez."

"What is the game about?"

"A haunted ship that sank to the bottom of the sea. It's got sharks in it, and swimming skeletons and everything! Please, please, please, please, PLEASE?"

"Oh, alright," she said. "But finish your dinner first OK?" Arnold finished his dinner amazingly fast!

Once Arthur started to play Deep, Dark Sea  
he couldn't stop.

"Time for bed, Arthur," said his dad.

"But Dad, I almost found *the thing*!"

"You can find the thing, whatever that is, tomorrow, young man. It's bedtime. Right now."

So Arthur went to bed. Went to bed with a frown on his face. He really LOVED this new game.

Next morning, Arnold's friend Buster came over to play Deep Dark Sea with Arnold. But Arnold's mom

said, "Sorry boys. I have to use the computer all day for my job." But just then, the phone rang. It was for Mom. "Oh dear, I have to run to the office for a while anyway. But that does not mean you can use my computer. Don't touch it, OK?"

Arthur and Buster both frowned, but shook their heads Yes. After Mom left, Arthur and Buster stared at the computer. "I was so close last night to finding *the thing*," he said. Buster said, "I bet you could find it before your Mom gets home." So they got onto the computer and started playing the game.

"Look out for that squid!" said Buster. "I'm running out of oxygen," said Arthur. Then he saw it. Look, the treasure chest. That is where *the thing* is!"

"I saw it first!" said Buster. They both tried to be first to get it, but they went so fast, they knocked the whole keyboard onto the floor. "Oh oh. Now you're in BIG trouble," said Buster. "I don't know. Maybe I can fix it before Mom gets home." Arthur got the book that talked about the game, and looked through it. They couldn't find anything. Arthur called up his friend who had the nickname "The Brain" because he was so smart, and knew so much. He came over, but The Brain couldn't do anything either. They even went to a computer store. When he found out how much it would cost to have someone come out to fix the problem, Arnold said, "Oh no! That's more money that I will get for my next ten birthdays! I'm am doomed. Doomed. Mom will lose her job because she can't use her computer, and then we won't be able to keep our house, and then we'll all have to live on the street, and it's all my fault. It's the end of the world."

Arthur and Buster went home from the store, but as soon as they got there, they could see Mom had come home, and she was already walking to the computer desk. Arthur felt sick. Buster left for home in a hurry. He didn't want to see what was going to happen. Arthur went into the room where his mother was, and just as she was about to turn the computer on, he said, "Stop! I was playing Deep Dark Sea, and the screen went blank. I wrecked it. It's all my fault."

"That happens to me all the time. Did you jiggle this switch here?" Mom jiggled the switch and the computer...and the game...came on. "Why didn't you call me?" Mom asked. "I thought you would be very mad." "I am not mad, I am disappointed. You should always call me with your problems, no matter what."

"Am I going to get punished?" asked Arthur.

"Of course," said Mom. "No computer games for a week. Now get ready for bed. I'll be up to say good night in a few minutes." Arthur got his PJs on and went to bed. Mom took her time coming

up to say good night. He called out to her "Are you coming up Mom?" "Give me a minute, Arthur. I need to blast these sharks and skeletons away from the treasure chest."

"Good night, Mom," said Arthur with a smile.

## Greeting

## Affirming

**We are a profoundly interconnected species, as the global economic and ecological crises reveal in vivid and frightening detail. We must embrace the simple fact that we are dependent on and accountable to, one another.** *Parker Palmer, 2012*

## Singing

## Communing

Oh Love far deeper than my own,  
I've discovered this week  
that I am not a fan of being held hostage  
by people in a chamber far from here.

Oh Love, I don't know what else to call it.  
I'm not so clever with words that can  
accurately describe what's going on in my heart.  
And I know that others are affected by this event  
so much more than me. After all, I still work.  
Get paid. And have no plans to visit Yosemite any time soon or attend a Head Start school.

I do think the feisty civil rights worker Fannie Lou Hamer, born 96 years ago today, expresses my heart today much better than I can: *With the people, for the people, by the people. I crack up when I hear it; I say, with the handful, for the handful, by the handful, 'cause that's what really happens.*

But for now, oh Love greater than my own, I am going to have to keep on going forward, step by step right here. In Columbus. Hospital visits, crafting weekend weddings, writing sequences like this one, doing laundry, noticing the leaves slowly get dusty, then take on colors that defy my imagination, folding ravioli for a Thursday dinner with Geoff and Karie, having morning coffee with Christian at that place on High St, talking with Bernie in NY, until I drain my cell-phone battery. Step by step. Moment by moment. And while moving forward a bit at a time, I suddenly recall it was Mohandas Gandhi's birthday this week, Gandhi who faced far more difficulty in his time than we do in ours. So, much is possible. *So much* is possible. So much *is* possible. And so now, remembering that the whole universe rose out of a deep silence 13.8 billion years ago, may we immerse ourselves in the emblem of that silence now.

*silence*

Oh Love, my heart experiences more than frustration with stand-offs in Washington. It reaches out in care and gratitude all over the world. The love I feel for others, the forgiveness I both work to offer, and desire for myself; the heart stretching to those who live far away, or whom I struggle to love, the grief I feel for all whom I have lost...these too have been part of my week. And so I remember those who find shelter in my heart by naming them, either silently or aloud.

## Reading

*The First Reading comes from John G. Miller's book Outstanding! written in 2010*

Certainly there are situations in life where we pull out the swords of Facts and Logic and wield them mightily in our defense. But when we are tempted to do so in front of anyone we call “customer,” we might want to remember the country song that says, “Here's a quarter, call someone who cares.” Never forget: The customer does not care to hear our reasons and excuses. Just ask Alan Farnsworth, head of customer service worldwide for Bausch & Lomb. He's been on the receiving end of the better approach, and shares it in this story:

Connecting through the Paris airport, I was on a bus full of travelers heading out for a remote boarding on a distant tarmac. When we reached our plane, we weren't allowed to get out. Instead, an Air France person came onto the bus to let us know the airplane cabin wasn't ready. I wasn't concerned about the delay since I was not in a hurry, but I could see other passengers getting increasingly annoyed as the minutes passed.

Once we were finally on the plane and settled in, forty minutes behind schedule, the captain came over the speaker. Honestly, I expected the standard, canned, insincere airline spin such as, “Sorry for the delay, but it's due to the late arrival of the incoming aircraft,” or some other routine excuse. Instead, here's what the captain said: “I'd like to personally apologize for this delay. It was due to our failure to get the cabin ready on time, and as captain, I am responsible for that. I didn't get the job done. This is inexcusable. Our practices will change to ensure this never happens again, at least not with any team for which I am responsible. This is not typical of Air France, and I hope you won't hold this against us, because we can do better – and you deserve better. Now, please sit back and enjoy the flight. We may be late, but we'll make it as pleasant as possible for you.”

I have never heard such honesty like this in circumstances like these. You should have seen the passengers' response. It was fascinating to observe. Nodding heads, smiles, and faces that clearly said, *OK, that's pretty nice. I feel better now.* People's agitation and irritation seemed to be replaced by acceptance and relaxation. While observing all of this, it occurred to me that candor and accountability like this are exactly how every organization ought to deal with their customers. After experiencing it – after feeling it myself – I know it works!

*The Second Reading comes from Elizabeth Cady Stanton Speech to Senate 1892. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a force of nature, and the speech she gave before the Senate in support of women's right to vote was different from all other such speeches in support of suffrage. Stanton's best friend was Susan B. Anthony, the Unitarian firebrand from Rochester NY.*

Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility. Nothing adds such dignity to character as the recognition of one's self-sovereignty; the right to an equal place, everywhere conceded – a place earned by personal merit, not an artificial attainment by inheritance, wealth, family and position.

## **Preaching**

Some of you may remember that I sometimes point out that I never offer these sermons to any particular person or group. I offer these sermons to myself, and pray you get some benefit from overhearing me. Well, this morning, I am really feeling the heat of what I have prepared, since I am challenging myself even more this morning than usual.

Back in Hayward, where I served my former congregation for 18 years, I had the pleasure of working with Phyllis Perry in the office. She was a remarkable person in skill, character and spirit...

cheerful but direct in her speech. I loved her, and everyone in the congregation loved her. She was what the Germans call a "mensch..." that is, she was a person of integrity and honor. Sadly, she died the year after I left Hayward, and I mourned deeply.

Phyllis kept a neat desk, and structured her papers well. She had a bulletin board above her desk where she put small cartoons she had cut out of *The New Yorker* and other places which offered a humorous take on her own work. But above them all was a very large and clear sign: "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part."

And she meant it too. When a member of the board came in and asked Phyllis to make so many copies of an article on policy for distribution and at that evening's board meeting...only two hours away...Phyllis had no hesitation invoking the sign above her head. The person may have offered a great excuse: "I was so busy this week at school, because of accreditation papers I had to fill out, and I put this on hold until now." Phyllis was never impressed by excuses...from board members, or from me, for that matter. She had plenty of commitments already she intended to fulfill, and she was not willing to drop everything because of circumstances. She would point to the copier and say, "There's the machine. I have other things I promised to do first."

Sometimes folks got upset with Phyllis because she drew this clear boundary. Because she didn't think excuses excused anything. Because she was so direct and clear. Sometimes folks would quietly bristle, basically blaming *her*, because she didn't drop everything to serve *their* needs.

I use to applaud her, however, and often told her that I thought she should be a role model for me. Of course, when I didn't plan ahead, she gave me the same treatment...there were no double

standards. I was alarmed how fast I would have to wrestle myself away from wanting to blame her...after all, it was I who calculated my time wrong. If I had a sudden inspiration about something that would be good to do, or changed my mind about what picture might make the best impact on the printed order of celebration, she would help me right away. She understood that ideas themselves don't always arrive at convenient times. But she had no patience for folks who looked upon her as some sort of convenient slave whose life goal was to support their mismanagement of time.

I often mismanage my time. Which is why this sermon is so hard for me. I got into the bad habit years ago of never allowing enough time between events or commitments to actually travel there. It can take anywhere from 12 minutes to 25 to get from my place to this place, depending on the signal lights alone. Not to count the frequent traffic snarl-ups that have blossomed during all the freeway interchange work down near my loft. It once took me 12 minutes to get here...the lights were all green, the traffic freely flowing. So I often leave 12 minutes before a meeting. Wishful thinking, you could call it. A single traffic slowup can make me late, because I failed to plan for the frequent contingencies which have made the 12 minute trip between home and here an infrequent achievement.

There are many other times in my life when I don't plan well, and it affects my schedule. By now, you would think that I would know that certain things on my calendar schedule are simple things which have to do with time, *chronos*. Tick tock. Tick tock. The time we tell by a clock. I promise to attend a BREAD meeting at 1:30, or a committee meeting at 7. I promise to get a marriage ceremony crafted by a certain afternoon. I promise to cook a meal for our church Auction on a certain date at a certain time. I have a form to fill out for my continuing education session. These are all concrete things.

But I do other things too. Less concrete. Things without clear beginnings or endings sometimes. I listen to people's stories. I hear them speak of their struggles or sorrow or even share their joys. These are most beautiful aspects of my work...but they are not at all like filling out a form. They move through my heart, they engage my sympathy, or tutor my compassion, they raise emotional questions about boundaries or forgiveness. The Greeks referred to the time in which such events for the heart take place as *kairos*, not the tic-toc clock time of *chronos*. The kind of time where two minutes might feel more like two hours, so deep are the concerns and compassion which rush from the vulnerable places of my being. And of course, anyone can, and does what I do... you hardly need ordination or counseling classes to be there for others...ministry is ministry. Period. Most of you, I wager, have felt this way when you help a friend sort through a crisis, or lend an ear to a tough story, or hold a grieving hand in your own hand. You don't want to be anywhere else. You want to be right there. But that "there"...as it should...does stay with you for a while, doesn't it? Matters of the heart simply weigh more than matters of the head.

So I am still learning how to plan my time more spaciouly so that I don't show up late...not in time...but in spirit. I want to be fully present. I don't want to be living within the circle on the last conversation.

But I also don't want to go around blaming myself for being a bad planner, any more than I want to blame traffic jams or lights for making me late. I want to learn more how to be accountable to

myself, and not engage in blaming anyone or anything else for my mistakes. I want to claim my own native power as a human being, and not wallow in any quicksand of excuses which, I have to admit, usually ends up leaving me feeling powerless. I am not powerless.

Are there circumstances in my life which have affected me? Sure. My father's jack-in-the-box anger. The bullying I experienced as a child from neighborhood kids. And, all this *last* week I was simply broiling on the inside because of this government shutdown event. I was in a sour mood all week, imagining myself flying to Washington and slamming open the doors as I burst into chambers to shout "Are you kidding me? Are you out of your minds?"

But I cannot do such a thing. The fantasy may make me feel righteous for a while, but the point is not to feel righteous about anything, but to move through the world as it is with my principles and values steadying my gait along the path. Blaming others for *my* feelings, exalting myself as blameless over others, is a kind of spiritual delusion, and not either honorable or useful for the living of a life. It simply is not honest. It does not tell you who I most honestly am and am coming to be.

What I like is what the pilot on the Air France flight says about who he is. I almost fell over when I read this story you heard earlier in the reading. He actually held *himself* accountable for the delay. *"I'd like to personally apologize for this delay. It was due to our failure to get the cabin ready on time, and, as captain, I am responsible for that. I didn't get the job done. This is inexcusable. Our practices will change to ensure this never happens again, at least not with any team for which I am responsible. This is not typical of Air France, and I hope you won't hold this against us, because we can do better – and you deserve better. Now, please sit back and enjoy the flight. We may be late, but we'll make it as pleasant as possible for you."*

I have been fortunate enough to fly many times in my life, and I have never heard that. I do hear excuses however. On my way to England last month, for example, I flew out from Columbus an hour late because of a storm. That is not an excuse, that is a hard *reality* airlines have to deal with, and I can understand that completely. When I got to Dulles, however, there was another delay, not based on a storm. I got onto the plane to Manchester UK. They shut the doors, and then I sat on the tarmac for *one full hour*. No explanation, no nothing. After 45 minutes, the pilot got on the intercom and proclaimed this brief statement, "We are still filling out papers." Not an apology. Not an explanation. A worthless excuse. It takes an hour to fill out some forms? The passengers were none too happy, I'll tell you that. One man close to me said aloud, "Is he filling out his income tax forms now?" after which there was rueful laughter nearby.

I found myself wincing. Have I ever done something like that? Do I know how to accept responsibility and apologize?

Personal accountability has what I would call a "spiritual" dimension to it. Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke about it when she spoke on behalf of women getting the vote to an all-male Senate panel considering the issue.

*Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility. Nothing adds such dignity to character as the recognition of one's self-sovereignty; the right to*

*an equal place, everywhere conceded – a place earned by personal merit, not an artificial attainment by inheritance, wealth, family and position.*

Powerful words. Being accountable for what we do and say, she says, *quickens the conscience, and strengthens our judgment*. She uses the expression "self-sovereignty," that is, taking responsibility for our own actions. These were the spiritual reasons supporting women voting as human persons along side men. That everyone should have an equal place "everywhere conceded," she says, is just basic. But that is not the final reason that women should have the right and privilege to vote. Equity has the power to deepen character and judgment and conscience. To deprive women of that opportunity, she is suggesting, is without any merit whatsoever.

My office manager, Phyllis Perry, got it right. She kept her promises, was sovereign over her own life, and claimed her dignity, even though others wanted her to sacrifice it for their own lack of planning, and wanted to blame her for their flustering and their mistakes. Phyllis never accepted any of that blame. She was accountable to herself first.

Oh, we all make mistakes, and use bad judgment, as our story this morning about Arthur's computer disaster pointed out plainly. And there are consequences...in Arthur's case, no video games for a week. But Arthur's mother did not beat him down, call him worthless for disobeying her, or humiliate him with blame and finger-pointing. She was gracious, and even light hearted about it. So was Phyllis. She never yelled at anyone. She smiled kindly as she sent people to the copier, asking them to be accountable for their own lives.

I miss you, Phyllis. Did I ever tell you that you were one of the best teachers I ever met?

## **Offering**

To give of our livelihoods during the morning offering is to form a circle with the world that gave us our lives, and this religious community which nurtures our spirit and our vision, and calls us to our mission. Along with all of us who have long loved this place and who give electronically and in other ways, we therefore now complete that circle and give and receive the morning offering.

## **Returning Accountable Prayer**

Love, let me blame neither others nor myself, but simply be honest about what I do and say. Where I do not know, let me say, I do not know. When I have not followed through, let me say that, and not shield myself in the armor of excuses. Let me apologize, and learn from my mistakes, and then do better.

Oh Love, the ancient scripture puts it so beautifully: *As you love yourself, so love your neighbor*. Thus, I want to make sure that it's my real self that I love, not a make-believe self I create to please others. In this way I can love my neighbor more freely. Oh Love, let sun and moon and stars bear witness now that I have spoken these words, that I may



be held accountable, and be lifted up to be who I really am, without shame or blame, and find some measure of peace.

**Singing #1057**

**Blessing**