

# **The Largest Community on Earth**

**May 25, 2014**

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"No country has suffered so much from the ruins of war while being at peace as the American."

*Edward Dahlberg 1964*

"Adults could not persuade these small survivors (children who survived the Second World War) that it is always necessary to make the world safe for democracy, but never safe for children."

*Martha Gellhorn 1949*

## **Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:**

*We are here*

**on the Memorial Day Weekend,**

*to celebrate the common life*

**which embraces our individual lives;**

*to go deeper and soar higher*

**than our ordinary days,**

*that we may be nourished for the week to come.*

**Ingathering:** *A Naming Ceremony and Dedication*

## **Opening Words:**

We are here to Name and Bless this babe in the presence of this family and in the presence of the Spirit of Love.

## **Queries to the Parents:**

Erin and Corey, you are the parents of this child. Since she was born, you have come to know well the responsibilities of parenthood, not as you imagined them, but as they actually are. You already know thoroughly the dedication, time and heart it requires of you. Therefore, I ask you:

Will you be diligent in *self-care*, questioning both self and each other, so that your parenting is strong, mindful and self-reflective. If so, say "We will."

## **Queries to the Family:**

Do you, the grandparents of this new child, speaking for yourselves and on behalf of family who cannot be here, herewith pledge your support to this little girl, and her parents? Will you teach and encourage this new family member, offering her your honesty, your spiritual counsel and earnest questions? Will you set aside special time just for her, and be generous of spirit to her?

**Words to the Congregation:**

You who gather here this morning represent both yourselves and all future members of this congregation. I pray that you shall always seek to guide, but never contain, this young spirit, holding her close to your trust and generosity, telling her your stories and sharing your wisdom, but always remembering to bless her for being exactly who she is, and no one else. Along with the parents and family, you are fortunate indeed, and you will know this girl more and more as the years go by. If you will welcome her into our congregational life, please say "We will."

And do you the children here before me promise to be there for this young child as she grows older and joins you in your classes? Will you care for her, watch out for her? If so, say, "We will."

Let us therefore bless this child with the elements that make the world:

**Blessing with the Elements**

*With earth, which is as strong as your given and developing frame, my child, we bless you. Take care of yourself as a body, grow strong and enduring - for you are a good gift indeed to this world.*

*With air, which moves and changes even as you're given and developing passions, my child, we bless you. You will know contentment and discontent, joy and grief, anger and deep love in your life. Feel your feelings, my child, for they are good gifts.*

*With fire, which illumines everything as does your given and developing mind, my child, we bless you. Think things through, reason and question with care and patience, for the light that shines in your mind is a good gift.*

*With water, which flows as clear as your given and developing spirit, my child, we bless you. Enlarge in conscience, grow deeper in confidence, compassion and vision, for the spirit, too, is a good gift.*

**Blessing of the Names**

And now we bless this child with her names:

Your Name is Elora, the name of a child in the movie *Willow*. It is a new name as far as names go, although it sounds very much like older names from Greek and Hebrew meaning Light. Still, it is new. Like you. So you, Elora, make of yourself a light. Brighten your name, for your name is Elora.

Your Name is Fae, which is also a relatively new name in history. It dates from wonder stories retold in the 19th century, about the legendary King Arthur; but more personally, it's also a family name, being the name of your father's mother, and your own mother's middle name. In your life, my child, join the wonder of legend to the reality of your family life, and you yourself live a story worth retelling. Your name is Fae.

Your Name is Reilly-Sanders, which signs the gift of your heritage. From the green hills of Ireland, to the stone circles in England, to the dark forests of Germany, to the beautiful cities in the land of the Czechs, your northern European cultural heritage is rich, textured and offers you blessings on your life. Your name is Reilly-Sanders.

Your name is Elora Fae Reilly-Sanders

### **Closing Prayer**

Elora Fae Reilly Sanders, we, the people of this community, gathered in this one small place on the earth forever turning, now dedicate you to the living out of a life of love, truthfulness, and vision, in concert with all who support you, and care for you. Be who you are, and never try to be anyone else, and may you be *blest* in all that you are, for yours is the Spirit of Love.

And let us say: Amen.

### **Greeting**

**Affirming      #583 The Young Dead Soldiers**

**Singing                      #159 This is My Song**

### **Communing**

How I'd like to rise up to the sky and look over the world from that vantage.

Up there with the clouds, white and gray,

flashing with sunlight, pulsing, moving.

Through the rifts in the clouds, there it is,

the green earth, my home.

Blue with water, gold with sand,

grey with cities etching the whole face of it.

I'd like to see exactly what I've always imagined,

that from this height, we all look pretty much alike.

Oval heads covered with hair or hats, tens of thousands of oval heads moving this way and that, wearing something, some form of identity, but I can't see that from up here.

All I see are the ovals, all of us round the earth  
from this sacred vantage. More alike than not.

The whole community of us perfectly perpendicular to the surface of the earth, except when we are sleeping. I can't see clothing styles or uniforms or tears and patches. I can't see badges or golden crosses or chalices around necks. I can't see missing limbs, or wounds or rashes. I can't see what separates, only what matches.

Here in the sky, above the fret and fray of the world,

I can catch a glimpse of what all the great

prophets and bards also saw: a common world with a common population made up of individuals whose lives are just as important to them as my life is to me. Made up of individuals who strive to communicate enough to make communities.

Here in the sky, however, far above the fray,

the noise of every community is silenced, and the quiet embraces everyone.

### *The Great Silence*

Here on the earth, below the sky, we live our day to day lives of joy and sorrow, love and grief, song and silence. Opening our hearts to our own stories, we are invited to bring forward, at this time, the names and faces which make us who we are...by their loving, by their challenge, by their absence, by their eternal memory at the core of our being. These we are free here to release softly in the common silence, or privately within.

### *The Naming*

Here on earth, we look to the sky; its sun and clouds inviting our spirits to fly above the gravity of our lives for a time by the wings of song and lyric....

**The First Reading** *is a bit of poetry over 1000 years old. It's from Akka Mahadevi, a beloved Indian saint.*

If you build your home on an open hilltop,  
how can you afford to be afraid of the wild animals?

If you build your home on the seashore,  
how can you afford to be afraid of the typhoons?

If you build your home in the middle of the market place,  
how can you afford to shrink from all that noise?

Having been born in this world, one best not lose it  
when either praise or blame comes your way.  
Best to maintain poise, and an even keel.

**The Second Reading** *comes from a remarkable essay I discovered, written by the psychologist Francis Weller, on his website "Wisdombridge." He is a true wisdom teacher on the subject of grief.*

I would like to amplify the importance of this often-neglected emotion (of grief) and situate it squarely in our capabilities to respond to the challenges of our time.

Denise Levertov has a brief, but illuminating poem about grief. She says: "To speak of sorrow works upon it, moves it from its crouched place, barring the way to and from the soul's hall."

It is our unexpressed sorrows, the congested stories of loss, when left unattended, that block our access to the soul. We must clear the way. This requires meaningful ways to speak about sorrow.

No one escapes suffering in this life. None of us are exempt from loss, pain, illness and death. Yet how is it that we have so little understanding of these essential experiences? How is it we

have attempted to keep grief separated from our lives, and only begrudgingly acknowledge its presence only in the most obvious of times?

Without some measure of intimacy with grief, our capacity to be with any other emotion or experience in our life is greatly compromised.

Besides grieving for losses of persons and times and things, besides grieving for portions of our lives we have exiled and hidden in shame, there is another aspect of grief. Communal, not personal grief. It is not possible to walk down the street and not feel the collective sorrows of homelessness, or the harrowing sorrows of economic insanity. It takes everything we have to deny the sorrows of the world. The daily portrayals of death and loss are overwhelming.

But grief is a powerful form of deep activism. Grief becomes the core element in our peace-making practice. The gift of grief is an affirmation of life, and of our intimacy with the world. Grief stirs the heart, and is indeed the song of a soul alive.

## **Preaching**

I met a guy recently who, right in the middle of our conversation, dropped mention that he had served in Iraq. His name was Zachary.

He was tall, bright-eyed, and fit, so I counted him as someone who came back from war unscathed, at least visibly. I asked about his time over there, and he told me several stories. And just in passing (as if it wasn't worth mentioning), he told me he had been shot.

"Really?" I asked, kind of dopey, as if I thought a bullet should still be visible some place.

"Yeah, right here..." he lifted up his t-shirt and showed me a small pinkish circle, smaller than a penny actually, on his right side, just where the rib cage connects to the sternum.

"Did they have to do surgery to take the bullet out?" I asked, surprised at how small the scar was.

"Oh no, it went right through me," he said. "It collapsed my lung. I only have the use of one lung. For the rest of my life, they tell me. I was treated at the hospital there, and was out for many days, but I feel pretty good now."

"What does a collapsed lung do to your life, practically speaking?" I asked. "You look healthy enough."

"Oh, I get tired easily. Fatigued. Still, I work out at the gym, and I'm a welder by trade, which isn't always light work; but I literally don't have as much wind in my sails."

Zachary came back from the war with a rather invisible but permanent and serious wound. Many come back missing a limb, or missing equilibrium in their minds for good. Many do not come back at all.

And these are the soldiers we send over there, across the seas. Many more civilians in these other lands also are shot, lose lungs, limbs, or life. All of them, soldier and civilian, both countries, need care. As Steve Abbott put it in a recent letter to the editor of the Dispatch, more civilian lives were ruined by the use of the chemical weapon Agent Orange than even our own soldiers over in Vietnam, and yet our own veterans here have had to *push, agitate, demand* medical research and treatment for the physiological results of this weapon, which has shortened their lives drastically. Think about the millions of Vietnamese on whom the weapon was actually used. What are their lives like...if they are still living? Who is pushing for them?

“War is hell,” General William Tecumseh Sherman famously said, first to the graduating class of a Michigan Military Academy, in 1879, a version of which was given here in Columbus just a year later.

Here are his exact words, and tell you that he never actually said, "War is hell." That was just a summary of his speech. But it is a good summary, I think. He said to those graduates: "I've been where you are now, and I know just how you feel. It's entirely natural that there should beat in the breast of every one of you a hope and desire that some day you can use the skill you have acquired here. *Suppress it!* You don't know the horrible aspects of war. I've been through two wars and I know. I've seen cities and homes in ashes. I've seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, it's Hell!"

On this Memorial Day Weekend, it's important to mention all of this. It's a three day weekend for most, in this nation. Picnics and parties, festivals and feasts. Monday, in particular, is set aside to commemorate the losses of war, in a nation that has tasted war on its own shores very infrequently. We have experienced battles over seas many times...but on our own land, very little. A few remember Pearl Harbor, and many more remember the 9/11 attacks, but in many nations, the "War is Hell" speech of General Sherman is an every day slogan, not a rarified speech. When I was in England, preaching to the Unitarians there in September, several folks expressed to me how they were bewildered by the wild interpretations and over-the-top reactions to that horrible event of 9/11. "We've had military invasions every century since the Romans, the Vikings and the Battle of Hastings in 1066. A number of our Unitarian churches were destroyed by missiles during the missile bombs mid-last century." (I preached on one of those sites when I gave the sermon in Manchester UK last September.) The anti-Muslim furor, the nutty Quran-burning pastors, the exaggerated political rhetoric really surprised and bothered most of the English I talked with. They are not without their own foibles, certainly, but about this, they were clear.

Now of course, don't get me wrong. If you live in the world at all, and we all do, I think you'll have to agree...you will encounter life-threatening catastrophes just as deadly as war. Floods. Disease. Windstorms. The Hindu saint Atta Mahadevi recognizes this...if you build your house on a barren hilltop, you will be vulnerable to wild beasts. Build by the sea, give up worrying about hurricanes, because they'll be coming no matter how much you worry. Praise and blame will come your way if you build your house in the world, she whimsically and profoundly adds. Praise and blame...you know: "They did it. They started it. No, *you* did it. You're a citizen of the best country in the world. No, you're not." Best to walk the middle road, the saint says, and not get caught up in the deadly either/or game of blame and praise. If you live at all, she is saying, no

matter where you live, what choices you make...suffering and loss will come your way...because that is part and parcel of all life...it always has been, it always will be. There are no exceptions. Live with that reality, not against it.

In the book I am writing on grief, I call this realization "Compulsory Buddhism" since it was Siddhartha, the Buddha, who made this so plain 2400 years ago...Everything changes, nothing is eternal, everything ends. Live your life best by not denying it, but by working within that reality.

In other words, even if all war around the world stopped tomorrow, peace was declared, and neither soldier nor civilian lived with bullets flying back and forth, there would still be change and loss, and a need to live our lives honestly within that truth.

Francis Weller, the author of the second reading, restates this truth, and then asks an intriguing question. He writes plainly, as plain as Buddha: *None of us are exempt from loss, pain, illness and death. Yet how is it that we have so little understanding of these essential experiences? How is it we have attempted to keep grief separated from our lives, and begrudgingly acknowledge its presence only in the most obvious of times?*

Yes, obvious times. Like when my best friend died. Obvious like a brick dropping on your head. Obvious like a thunderclap in your ear.

But most grief, in my life at least, is a lot less dramatic. More subtle. Not so obvious. Mac was my auto mechanic in Oakland for years. Resurrected my VW Bug many times. I have no idea what happened to him when I moved. Jose Garcia was a friend from California. He and I spent time in Rome, Italy once when he lived there for six months. We had a great time. We've lost touch now. I'm not even sure how.

I've lost touch with many friends from the university. But I grieve for more than just people. My favorite Hong Kong restaurant in Berkeley where I ate a hundred meals with friends and colleagues is now defunct. The school that granted me my doctorate sold its building and does most things on line now, and the rooms where eight of us crafted this hymnbook have been sold for good. Less dramatic griefs, but grief nonetheless.

I've been writing about these kinds of grief in my book. Telling stories to illustrate many aspects, both subtle and obvious.

But I have come to realize, while writing this book, that grief is not something that happens now and then. It is not discreet, as in "*here* is the rest of life, and *there* is grief." Grief is not something where you cry and curse and then, afterward, it dries up and is replaced by... what? ordinariness? Or Joy?

No, even joy can be an expression of grief. When I drove up to Michigan to do my mother's eulogy, I was joyful and grateful the whole four hour drive. I listened to inspiring music. I felt giddy with rapture. And that was a form of grief on that sunny Thanksgiving day afternoon. Gratefulness for my mother. Thanksgiving for every story she told, every blessing she offered me. I was filled with joy.

How is it that grief is only supposed to look like tears? Or depression? Bargaining? Is grief something that only looks a certain way, happens at certain times?

Sometimes no one has died, the weather is great, my life feels in order, and I listen to a piece of music, like an old song by Lara Fabian, or a piece by Messiaen...and as I do, I suddenly feel a sense of grief. Why?

Because grief is not some isolated thing, only attached to dramatic losses that are intimate with my own personal life. As Weller puts it: Besides grieving for losses of persons and times and things, besides grieving for portions of our lives we have exiled and hidden in shame, there is another aspect of grief. Communal, not personal grief. *It is not possible, he says, to walk down the street and not feel the collective sorrows of homelessness, or the harrowing sorrows of economic insanity. It takes everything we have to deny the sorrows of the world. The daily portrayals of death and loss are overwhelming.*

Right. Perhaps this is why the community of grievers is often called by psychologists *the largest community in the world*. Not just because loss is part of our personal lives, but because it is part of our *communal* lives.

The loss of species, for example. The loss of the weather patterns we had become used to. The loss of familiarity in institutions. Some people wept when the new hymnbook came out because they were used to the old one.

And then there is the loss of whole cultures. I once told you how angry I was when I discovered that, in all my education, which was excellent, I had never heard about the Native American city of Cahokia in southern Illinois. A walled city with almost 30,000 inhabitants, twice the number of inhabitants as Paris and London in the year 1200 Common Era. I said aloud at that time: "I don't know if I could survive if I was a Native American citizen of this country, knowing that a dazzling part of my culture and history was simply swept under the rug, leaving us with little more than Tonto." But recently I began to ask myself, "Why doesn't that bother *me* just as much? Do I have to have Lakota blood to be outraged? Do I have to be veteran to be upset that veterans have to push for medical research? Do I have to sit homeless on the street in order to be moved to tears by the economic realities of people who DO sit in doorways?

I am part of local communities...friendship circles, the congregation, clergy groups, Italian American circles...even now, at my age, the community of people applying for Medicare cards. But I am also part of the larger circle of the world, where there are losses which I am less aware of, but which are just as real to the people who experience them. And thus, grieving for others, as if their lives were just as important as my own, seems only sensible.

But is this too much grieving, you ask? Well, if you insist on defining grief as tears or intensity all the time, probably yes. Who knows. Who is going to be arrogant enough to make a chart for that? But remember, I told you clearly I am preaching from a place where grief is wide, not narrow, a daily part of my life, not contrasted with it. And I think Mr. Weller is right when he says: *It is our unexpressed sorrows, the congested stories of loss, when left unattended, that*



*block our access to the soul. We must clear the way. This requires meaningful ways to speak about sorrow.*

Speaking about sorrow. About grief. We need a vocabulary for that. Great idea. So here is my meaningful way to talk about sorrow, to talk about grief. Naming the reality of loss *is* naming sorrow, naming grief. Not turning away from the loss, once it has been named, is grief. Engaging with people, as they are, is grief. Noting that the homeless are homeless is grief. Noting that bullets hit *both* young Western men like Zachary, and also civilian women and children with names like Fatima and A'isha, is grief.

Furthermore, grief, I conclude with Dr. Weller, *is a powerful form of deep activism. Grief becomes the core element in our peacemaking practice. The gift of grief is an affirmation of life, and of our intimacy with the world. Grief stirs the heart, and is indeed the song of a soul alive.*

## **Offering**

### **Devotional Song of Peace**

I grieve for the losses in war,  
on battlefields and in villages and cities  
and I still turn toward peace  
on this *earth forever turning*.  
I grieve for the loss of species and habitats,  
for the loss of weather patterns undistorted,  
and I still want to be at peace with  
the whole *earth forever turning*.  
I grieve for the parts of my life  
when I have not admitted that I am worthy  
to love and be loved, and still  
I want peace in the form of love  
for all who live upon the *earth, forever turning*.  
I grieve because there is no place I can go  
which is grief free, and that I say, O Love,  
is both a good and grace.  
*For the peoples of all nations  
for their dreams and spirits free  
for their gifts of hope and healing  
sing we our song of peace to Thee.*

**#163 v. 3-4**