

The Creative Domain and the Given

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Bethesda, Maryland

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting

To this place we come, each of us with our own sources of comfort and joy, cares and concerns, talents and shortcomings, unique histories and hopes for our personal futures.

To this place we come, joining our individual selves into a community of strength, of solace, of hope, of memory and reminder of higher and deeper purpose.

To this place we come, for joy, for renewal, for mutual learning and inspiration, for aide in the often hard task of being alive and for the chance to give to one another and the wider world.

To this place we come, whatever our present circumstance, to remember again the holy, the beautiful, the loving, the just, so that our own lives, and the lives of others, outward even to the fullness of this planet itself, may be renewed.

Spoken Meditation

From the great silence of this cosmos we have each emerged into this precious, and yet often difficult, opportunity of being alive on this planet. From all our whirl of daily concerns, we have come here, now, to this space for peace, for self-remembering, for wider view, for deeper grounding. In the movement of our breath, in the quiet beating of our

heart, we return to the great abode of our being, to rest again in the unfathomable richness, the continuous miracle, the grace of being part of a universal reality, a God or Goddess, call it what we will. To this great home, without and within, we come. Into this majestic silence, we return.

Prayer

Great Spirit, may our lives reflect the glory of our birth, the richness of the inheritance we have received from all before us, the need and loving opportunity all around us, and our own creative vision of a more loving and more just future. Amen

Reading: from *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution* by Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, pp. 81, 107.

...During one of the many nineteenth-century riots in Paris the commander of an army detachment received orders to clear a city square by firing at the canaille (rabble). He commanded his soldiers to take up firing positions, their rifles leveled at the crowd, and as a ghastly silence descended he drew his sword and shouted at the top of his lungs: ‘Mesdames, m’sieurs, I have orders to fire at the canaille. But as I see a great number of honest, respectable citizens before me, I request that they leave so that I can safely shoot the canaille.’ The square was empty in a few minutes. (p.81)

... [In] 1943 the Germans decided to apply the “final solution” to the Danish Jews, who until then had remained comparatively safe. In his talks with the king [Christian X], the special Nazi emissary for Jewish questions wanted to know how the king intended to solve the Jewish problem in Denmark. To this the king is reported to have replied with cold candor: “We do not have a Jewish problem; we don’t feel inferior.” No doubt this is a good example of reframing—how diplomatic and therefore how successful it was is a very different question. But when some time later the Germans issued an order to the effect that all Jews had to wear the yellow Star of David armband, the king successfully reframed this by announcing that there were no differences between one Dane and another, that the German decree therefore applied to all Danes, and that he would be the first to wear the Star of David. The population

overwhelmingly followed the king's example, and the Germans were forced to cancel their order. (p.107)

Sermon

In one sense what I want to talk about is as banal as the day is long. In another sense it came to me like revelation. In other words, it is nothing new, but it is rather amazing. At any rate, it took me most of my life before it struck me that we live our lives in this extraordinarily free moment of the present. All the past, all our history, all the things we call reality lead us up to this moment, but, as of right now, we are each placed with this extraordinary opportunity to bring to bear all of our creativity, all of our ideals, all of our best thought, all of our learned experience, all of our intuitive sense of wise experimentation, our full selves. And we live our whole lives this way, always poised upon this evolving moment of possibility, where we can choose to continue doing things as we've done before or try something new.

So, on the one hand, this is no new revelation, of course. But on the other, the way reality is constructed for us is, to my mind, so powerfully creative that the old E equals MC squared fades into a minor flash of energy in comparison. And I do not think that that is hyperbole. We are always standing at an extraordinary threshold, this continuous opportunity to fashion a future into a shape that manifests our ideals, our values.

And most of the time it is so in front of our noses that we sleep right through it.

Now of course a lot of the time our society has given us pretty solid guidelines about how we are to meet each moment with all these conventions we've constructed so as not to step on each other's toes too much. And these conventions often contain a rich accumulated wisdom that is to be treasured. But at other times both these conventions and the patterns into which we each slip in our lives become just repetitive ruts that keep problems alive. It is those ruts that family systems therapy attempts to address by focusing not so much on the problem per se as on the things done to attempt a solution. And simply changing the attempted solutions a bit changes everything. Instead of the same old

same old, a new response by someone, a new way of meeting the seen problem can have dramatic effect by breaking up an interlocking logjam.

Let me give you an example from Irish history, about which I've just been reading. Daniel O'Connell was called the Great Liberator largely because he tried a different approach to an old logjam—the fact that many Irish had been given the right to vote but that only Protestants could be elected. Since the ballot was also not a secret one, this led to landlords bringing their tenants down to the polls and watching as they voted for a Protestant to join the legislature. O'Connell, a Catholic, simply ran for an office he could not occupy—and won by a landslide. The landlords, who watched their tenants vote upon threat of loss of home if they voted the wrong way, were simply told that, if they followed through on their threats of eviction, they would probably be providing the match to a powder keg, which they well knew to be true. The English were so embarrassed to have the world see an overwhelming electoral victory nullified by their own laws, they relented and finally let Catholics into the legislature.

King Christian X of Denmark and that young Lieutenant in Paris did similar unexpected, new, things that opened up a whole new future, at least to the extent they were capable of influencing it. And even if restrictive laws closed in upon them in response to these momentary triumphs, still those momentary triumphs had ripple effects. As Historian Howard Zinn reminded the people at the Harlem Book Fair yesterday, it was not Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves. Rather it was countless acts of bravery, defiance, protest, all acting out of a different vision of what might be than the brutality of what was—it was acts such as these of years that roused the conscience of a nation and made the Proclamation possible. The hero was not Lincoln; it was all the people who chose to act out of a moral vision at odds with what was, who chose to step into a new future devised from their best hearts and minds and souls. They were the ones who brought this nation to confront and at least partially redress the huge flaw in its foundations. As Mahatma Gandhi put it, the difference between who we are and who we could be is sufficient to cure all the ills of the world.

The creative, visionary, moral power within us is majestic, powerful, healing, and inspiring. The fact that we are asleep or afraid or unimaginative does not change that fact.

And I believe that fact is at the heart of our whole religious enterprise. Jesus referred to that tiny mustard seed which could become a huge plant, or to the lilies clothed in radiance beyond anything Solomon in all his glory ever wore. The greatest power and beauty, the riches beyond measure are, indeed, right at our doorsteps, beneath our very noses, in the exquisite nuanced freedom, possibility, new gift, of each moment. I think we all sense this, yet lose it again and again in the flurry of life coming at us—we see the problems sure enough, but we don't spend requisite time thinking about the effect of our responses and other possible ways to respond differently from the same old same old we have grasped at in the past. In the Zen tradition they slap you on the face or smack you with a stick between the shoulder blades to wake you up to the moment. Rabbi Hillel asked us, "if not now, when?" And the Hindu writer Kalidasa put in form you have all said together: "Look to this day...For today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day."

The whole premise of religion is that within us we have the ability to intentionally align ourselves with the foundations of reality, with God or Goddess, with the structure of the universe, that we can find within ourselves the same reality as we find looking out at the stars, at the beauty of nature. And all of this congruence comes together in the very moment of now, of this majestic openness available to us all, all the time.

It was Viktor Frankl who, more than any other I know, reminded us that this creative power we possess, even if hemmed in on every side by strictest necessity, still holds the massively transforming power of establishing the attitude with which we meet what comes at us. Confined on every side by the brutal strictures of the concentration camps, he affirmed the nobility of the human soul to meet stark brutality with dignity, holding on to compassion, holding on to love. No wonderful way out for the Paris lieutenant here, no deus ex machina to make all right, but a triumph of the spirit taking this living moment to

affirm all that is held sacred and holy in the extremist of circumstances. Though often glossed over in the writings of history, this kind of noble courage, this kind of refusal to abandon compassion in the midst of dire necessity, is a moral victory of the highest order and deserves a moral recognition equal to its attainment.

So, using creative genius like Christian X or achieving simple attitudinal nobility like Viktor Frankl are both available ways to meet the extraordinary opportunity of this always-new moment. Let me give you another example from our own UU history, one which I learned about at General Assembly at the presentation done on the fortieth anniversary of the printing of the Pentagon Papers by our own Beacon Press. Daniel Ellsberg, the man who leaked the papers to the press and to the public, was there. Mike Gravel was there, the freshman Senator who was the only Senator willing to enter the Papers into the Senate record, where they would be immune from recall. And the Rev. Bob West was there, the President of the UUA at the time, who authorized Beacon Press to publish the papers. All three men took tremendous risks to their personal careers, and Ellsberg and West, not enjoying Senatorial immunity, took great risk of severe penalties—the charges against Ellsberg were for 115 years in prison, and West's would have been comparable if Ellsberg's case had not been thrown out of court because of the breaking to Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office by a group later to made famous in Watergate as the "Plumbers". I know this case is controversial, since whistle-blowing can also be considered as treason, but all three of these men were convinced that the government had been lying to the American people about the war in Vietnam and that the people have a right to know when they are being lied to. As Ellsberg put it, the oath he took was to protect the Constitution of the United States, not the Commander in Chief, and he was clear the Constitution was being violated by cover-ups made patent in the Pentagon Papers. Senator Gravel asked Vets who had lost their legs to guard his Senate office in their wheelchairs because he thought other forces would have a hard time forcing by them to retrieve the papers. To enter them into the Senate record he called a special meeting of his committee on government building construction and had one of his members ask for a building in his district. Gravel cut him off immediately, explaining that there would be no building because the government had no money, and the reason the government had no money was because of the war, and

the reason for the war was explained in these papers that he was putting into the Senate record. And Bob West decided that Beacon should take the risk to publish them because with us Unitarian Universalists democratic process is a religious principle based upon the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And democratic process was gravely in danger at that time, and if Ellsberg had taken the personal risk to leak the Papers, and Gravel to enter them into the Senate record, then someone had to step up and take the risk to publish them. Thirty-five publishing houses had declined because of legal risks. Beacon Press, the thirty-sixth, published with the go-ahead of Bob West. Bob West eventually avoided prosecution because of the over-reaching of the "Plumbers", but his older brother, a career FBI man, told him they could have no further personal contact or his job would be at risk. And so, until he retired, they had none.

Each of these men took huge risks to bring information to the people when so many others stayed in their safe career tracks knowing something was horribly wrong but not daring to address it. I encourage you to get the DVD of the General Assembly presentation and get the full story of their creativity in most unusual settings. I have never felt prouder to be a Unitarian Universalist than sitting in that audience.

But, lastly, there is a very present example of a need for great creative moral response, one that faces all of us. I know that you as a congregation have chosen this war and the environmental crisis as the two main justice issues you wish to address. On the war I'll be silent except to say that Ellsberg begged all those now sitting on today's Pentagon Papers about Iraq and Iran to honor the oath they also have taken to the Constitution of the United States and come forward with the truth. And, also, I think the best thing we can do for the people of Iraq is to address the climate crisis so that we can approach the people of Iraq without looking at them through the filter of our gluttonous use of oil. By acting environmentally responsibly we can also perhaps begin to approach the Mideast in a sane manner.

And if ever there was a time that called for every one of us to rise to the occasion with our best creative moral and practical wits about us, if ever there was a freely open time before each one of us to do what we personally can to reduce our own CO2 emissions, it is now. My own

goal is to reduce my home's carbon footprint to zero. I've halved my electrical usage with solar panels and compact fluorescents, etc., but still have a long way to go, and I'm sure I'll be buying green tags for a good while. And, hard as it is for me, I'm dropping my mph on the highways by 10. But perhaps even most importantly, I'm using this new awareness to see many of the things my family and I do and trying, as best we can, to change.

And, because of this right-in-front-of-our-noses open possibility of each moment, I know we all have a tremendous creative power at our disposal, one that does make the atomic bomb a flash in the pan in comparison. I just hope we all use it, particularly we older generations who have the chance to act generously toward the future generations by our actions. We have the chance to actually set a generous example by how we respond to this crisis, acting for the good of the future and not just for our own aging hides. A great moment is upon us now. And reality has been set up in such a way that we can in fact respond powerfully and well. May we do so.