

Second Reading

“Work in the Invisible”

Mawlana Jalladdin Rumi

Mathnawi Rumi Vol. III, 3077-3109

(Version by Coleman Barks in *Rumi: One-Handed Basket Weaving*, Maypop, 1991)

The Prophets have wondered to themselves,
“How long should we keep pounding this cold iron?
How long do we have to whisper into an empty cage?”
Every motion of created beings comes from the Creator.
The first soul pushes, and your second soul responds.
So don't be timid. / Load the ship and set out.
No one knows for certain / whether the vessel will sink
or reach the harbor. / Just don't be one of those merchants
who won't risk the ocean! / This is much more important
than losing or making money! / This is your connection to God.
Think of the fear and the hope / that you have about your livelihood.
They make you go to work diligently every day.
Now consider what the prophets have done.
Abraham wore fire for an anklet.
Moses spoke to the sea. / David moulded iron.
Solomon rode the wind. / Work in the invisible world
at least as hard as you do in the visible.
Be companions with the prophets / even though no one here
will know that you are, /not even the helpers of the *Qutb*, the *abdals*.
You can't imagine what profit will come!
When one of those generous ones/ invites you into the fire, go quickly!
Don't say, “But will it burn me? Will it hurt?”

Offertory

As Torrents in Summer
text by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Edward Elgar

As torrents in summer,
Half dried in their channels,
Suddenly rise, though the
Sky is still cloudless,
For rain has been falling
Far off at their fountains;

So hearts that are fainting
Grow full to o'erflowing.
And they that behold it
Marvel, and know not
That God at their fountains
Far off has been raining!

WORK IN THE INVISIBLE

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 8, 2009
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Have you ever felt that you were really in trouble? I certainly have; just recently, in fact. Then a revelation came to me. I was listening to those NPR giants of spiritual wisdom, Tom and Ray Magliozzi, otherwise known as “Click and Clack,” the *Car Talk* brothers. They got a call from a woman in Central Vermont. Last summer she found a wonderful new windshield washer liquid that really got the bugs off. It worked so well that when cold weather came she forgot to replace it or put antifreeze in. Now it’s frozen solid. She’s tried pouring boiling water on the reservoir, but it’s 12 below. What should she do? “You need to bake brownies,” said Tom. “And you need to learn my mantra,” said Ray. “What! A mantra? Brownies? For frozen windshield fluid?”

“Right!” they said. “Obviously, you don’t have a garage, do you?” “No.” “But someone near you must have one.” “Well, yeah; the guy down the road; but I just hate to ask him. He plows our road for free. His garage is full of snow equipment.” “That’s why you need *warm* brownies,” said Tom. “And my mantra,” said Ray. “Now please repeat after me: ‘I’m in trouble, and I need YOUR help!’” “I’m in trouble and I need help,” she says. “No, YOUR help!” Tom and Ray replied. “Right: I need YOUR help!”

It works! I’m here to testify to that. A few days later, talking to Lucas, I discovered that I was in trouble. You see, next week, I’m keeping a long-standing commitment to preach at the church where I was ordained 35 years ago. I thought that Lucas would preach here. Forgetting that he’d clearly told me that, like this week, he’d be off interviewing with a search committee, as he seeks his first pastorate. Short notice to find a guest preacher! Gwen suggested someone. So I called her up. First, I told her the whole Car Talk story. Then I said the mantra: “I’m in trouble; and I need YOUR help! I need a preacher for February 15.” Preaching here next week will be Kay Montgomery, who has been Executive Vice President of the UUA since 1985. She told me to forget the brownies.

So don't miss hearing Kay! She's funny, down-to-earth, savvy, practical, and profound. Like Barbara Brown Taylor, she knows that there is no way to the sacred apart from real life in the real world; that faith is a way of life more than a way of thinking; that the world is just waiting for us to notice the holiness in it; and that we are all priests, practicing daily at the altar of our own lives; and if we can't stand see the sacred because we are standing on it, if we lack the willingness to imagine that we have all the sacred elements that we need to bless the world; if what is missing is our consent to be where we are, still, we have everything we need, at least to begin.

Almost everything valuable in life, I think, seems hidden at times. But it is hidden in plain sight. It is here in the ordinary, visible world, but we haven't the sense to see it there. Rather it remains invisible until someone jars us out of our passivity and complaint with, well, something like a mantra.

Here's what I believe about the sacred: it hides in the "between" dimensions of life -- between I and Thou; between friends and neighbors; between birth and death; even between the seemingly solid, visible things of this world. A piece of Hasidic Jewish wisdom says, "Just as the held, held before the eye, can hide the tallest mountain, so life's everyday routine can prevent us from seeing how radiance and wonder fill the world." Not to mention kindness, and compassion, if we will only seek it in a little humility. Certainly I don't want to deny that life also has its cruelties and tragedies, but only the frozen of heart and the cynical lose sight permanently of the more tender emotions that can flow between human beings, if we will let them.

My friend Patrick Thomas Aquinas O'Neill, now minister of the Unitarian congregation in Brooklyn, tells a story from his childhood in an urban school that comes to mind. When he was only in about the first grade, on his way home from school some older boys decided to get mean and pushed him face first into a snow bank. Stung with the indignity, Patrick staggered to the stoop of his house and sat with tears flowing in outrage and frustration, afraid that if he went inside, his brother or father might tell him to be a man and go back after the perpetrators.

From a nextdoor window a neighbor, Mrs. Boutellon, had seen everything. She came down, brushed the snow off his clothes, wiped his tears, brought him into her kitchen, made hot cocoa for him, and fussed over him in her French accent, saying, “You are very angry at those boys for what they did to you, Patrick, and it is natural for you to feel so. But now you must let it go, let it go. This day has other things to give you.”

Patrick never forgot that phrase. Years later, after both Mrs. Boutellon and her husband had died, Patrick mentioned to his mother the whole episode. “That sounds just like her,” his mother said. “You know, don’t you, that the Boutellons were both survivors of the Nazi death camps in Europe?”

“Let it go. Life has other things to give you.” Another mantra.

Too often, in the cynicism and materialism of our age, we can think that the prayer has to be something like Janice Joplin wailing out, “Lord, won’t buy me a Mercedes Benz?” When times are rough, as they were in the Great Depression, there will be preachers like the Father Divine preying on the credulous for donations by promising to teach them how pray themselves rich. Purveyors of a so-called “prosperity gospel” are among the most popular clergy in times and places of economic anxiety.

But what if authentic prayer is really more about seeking the things that can’t be seen? The things that appear only within and between; things like serenity to accept those things that can’t be changed, courage to change those that should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference? Still another mantra -- but a great one.

I know, for many people in our time, given all the abuses of religion, and all the oppressive, patriarchal, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, tyrannical imagery associated with “God,” one’s spiritual heart can be frozen about as solid as that Vermont woman’s washer fluid, so that one can’t even see through the windshield -- see the light shining on winter snow, much less see the enduring beauty and compassion at the heart of existence.

It can be hard, when the Universe or people in it have hurt you, or disappointed you; when you are anxious about the future; to do anything like try to rebuild a relationship with the Sacred. But as Annie Lamott puts it, there are ultimately only two prayers: “Help! Help! Help!” and “Thanks! Thanks! Thanks!”

All I can say is that it can be worth the risk to try. As the spiritual master Rumi insists, “This is much more important than losing or making money. This is your connection to [the Sacred.] Think of the fear and the hope / that you have about your livelihood./ They make you go to work diligently every day./ Work in the invisible world/ at least as hard as you do in the visible.”

I suggest that you *not* compare yourself with the great prophets. Just set out from port. You needn’t leave home to lift anchor. Be a companion, spiritually, to all the great souls: but on your *own* life journey; the one that only *you* can take. You will encounter losses. But you can’t imagine what profit may come.

Maybe you have some old, hurtful childish image of God. Let it go. Leave it behind. As Meister Eckhardt once said, the highest spiritual parting is one of leaving “God” for God. Let the old God die. As my friend, theologian Rita Nakashima Brock, says in her book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, which is honest and personal about hurt and pain done in the name of a false image and idea of God: “This is how I can speak of God [now]: [as] a presence gradually unfolded by life in its richness and tragedies, its devastating losses and its abundance; a power calling us into a fullness of living, a passion for life, for good and ill: an unquenchable fire at the core of life, glimpsed in light and shadows.”

It’s enough to melt the heart, let the tears flow, and cleanse the lenses of our perception. Working in the invisible world may be simply what one spiritual discipline, the one we will again teach and introduce here again on Wednesday night, calls “living by heart.” What it offers is no panacea, and surely no escape, but a going deeper into human living. Including a commitment to the sort of compassion that feeds active passion for justice. Spirituality not as *opposed* to activism in the visible world, but as what keeps it burning.

Lately I have been taking note of how this is what helps some of the people I most admire keep going. Last week Kim Lorimier, who along with her wife Sue and daughter Abby, are enduring about as much frustration and anxiety over their daughter Gwen as any human beings should every have to take, passed on some lines by Wendell Berry that were given to her by one of Gwen's physicians. They say, "It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work. And then when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey."

When I looked up those great lines, I discovered that they are followed by these two: "The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is one that sings."

Two final mantras. May such wisdom forever jar us into risking the renewal of our work in the invisible dimension of life – the renewal of our connection to the sacred, to love. So may it be. Amen.

"The impeded stream is the one that sings." So let's end our worship by singing together Hymn 299, "Make Channels for the Streams of Love."

Benediction

We can stop our ears, each with one finger,
and not hear the world's music.
Our sins are many,
but our greatest is simply that of omission:
the beauty we could turn to at every moment,
but too often do not. Let those who have ears to hear, hear;
and those who have eyes to see, see --
the invisible within the visible,
the intended harmony beyond every note of discord.
Go in peace then, to taste and see, to hear and pray. Amen.

