

Readings

10/21/07

Call to Worship

What am I? I mean, what am I *now*? Now, while I am up, speaking to you. A worship associate for this service? A member of this church? A Unitarian Universalist?

Oh, I didn't mean what am I to you. I meant, what am I to *myself*. What do I gain when I identify myself as...well, whatever I want to call myself? When I do, I give myself some clarity—I have a better grasp of what I must do at this moment, continue speaking to all of you. And I claim for myself affiliation—the worship associate rally will take place immediately following this service—and, perhaps, a legacy, too. But, as I self-identify, I also self-deny. I lose parts of myself for at least a moment. Neither my current interest in Set Theory nor my devotion to the Green Bay Packers, for example, is currently on display. And, while this may be an appropriate social compromise to make, I am nevertheless temporarily diminished. And sometimes, in some situations, when I make similar compromises about who it is that I am right now, you might be diminished, too.

Come, let us worship together.

From *Krishnamurti to Himself*, by J. Krishnamurti (pp. 107-110)

A whole group of us sitting at table towards the end of the meal began a serious conversation as has happened several times before. It was about the meaning of words, the weight of the word, the content of the word, not merely the superficial meaning of the word but the depth of it. The word is never the actual thing. The word, the phrase, the explanation are not the actuality. The actual *never* conditions the brain, but the description, the abstraction, *does* condition it. Take a word like ‘suffering’. The word has a different meaning for the Hindu and the Christian. Suffering, however described by words, is shared by all of us. Suffering is the fact, the actual. But when we try to escape from it through some theory, or through some idealized person, or through a symbol, those forms of escape mould the brain. Suffering as a fact doesn’t and this is important to realize.

It is quite extraordinary to watch this whole phenomenon of communication with words, each race giving a different significance and meaning to the word and thereby creating a division, a limitation, to a feeling which is common to all humankind. Suffering is shared by all human beings. The Russian may express it one way, the Hindu, the Christian in another, but the fact of suffering, the actual feeling of pain, grief, loneliness, *that* feeling never shapes or conditions the brain when we use these words. So one becomes very inattentive to the subtleties of the word, the weight of it. The universal, the global feeling of all human beings and their inter-relationship, can only come into being when the words ‘nation’, ‘tribe’, ‘religion’, have all disappeared. For most of us words have lost their weight. Thus, the moment there is identification through a word, there is division.

“Diving Into the Wreck”

Adrienne Rich

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers

the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
abroad the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.
There is a ladder
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it's a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs

and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or week

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
and I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he
whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
Obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to the scene
carrying a knife, a camera

a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

“Shrink Wrap and Other Telling Terms”

Rob Eller-Isaacs
October 21, 2007

Who are you? No, I mean it. Who are you? A man, God be merciful. A woman, God be merciful. A parent, God be merciful. Who are you? (congregation responds) God be merciful. Each of the words we use to describe ourselves, or others shapes the way we feel, about ourselves, and about others, the judgments we make and the relationships we enter into or avoid. “The words are purposes,” writes Adrienne Rich, “the words are maps.”

In the early 1930’s when my parents were courting my mother worked as a buyer of Asian antiquities for Marshall Field and Co. in Chicago. As an engagement gift, in appreciation of her love of the Chinese aesthetic, my father purchase two 18th century maps of China. Each map is framed by portraits depicting the diverse ethnicities of the Chinese empire. Each portrait is boxed as if to emphasize the distinct identity of each ethnic group. Those two lovely maps hung side-by-side in the living room of my childhood home a marker of my parent’s long and fruitful partnership.

Maps, like words, can be easily mistaken for the truth. But any map, no matter how well drawn or detailed literally implies a world-view. And any word, no matter how well chosen can only point toward the existential reality the speaker is attempting to describe. Picture in you mind a map of the world. What is at its center? Most American’s imagine a world map with the United States at the center. Others likewise place their nation or themselves at the center of the map. This notion may seem rarified or too abstract but the maps we carry with us in our minds shape our consciousness for good or ill just as the words we use help make our lives more manageable by narrowing the options we allow ourselves to see.

We human beings are born into an inescapable tension between the one and the many, between the sense of spiritual unity and the challenges of individual identity. That tension, when magnified by poverty and fear becomes the basic cause of prejudice and yes, of violence. Was it Kierkegaard who recognizing this basic human ambivalence cried out that “life itself is something that never should have been.” This is more than an adolescent outburst of anger and resentment. It points to an essential aspect of the human condition. Consciousness may seem like a great gift but it can also be a dreadful burden.

Human beings simply can't cope with the multiplicity of persons and possibilities by which we are surrounded. That's why we learn to think categorically. Categorical thinking allows us to ignore most of the people and most of the problems most of the time. Only those who have achieved enlightenment, or cosmic consciousness are able to take it all in and they, I assure you lose track of the details. The problem is not the fact that we need to limit our awareness. The problem is that we don't pay good enough attention. We screen people out not on the basis of our stated values but in reaction, out of fear and often out of prejudice. We need to learn to choose the words and maps we use to shape our inner lives. We need to develop a personal values template to help us determine our priorities and obligations.

In his 2006 book Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny nobel prize winning economist, Amartya Sen makes a compelling case for cultivating the a world-view that celebrates “diverse identities.” He asks us to refuse to be involved in “the miniaturization of human beings.” He argues that we miniaturize or diminish other people (and for that matter, ourselves) when we make assumptions based upon the notion that behavior results from a determinant, singular identity.

Sen writes: Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when the manifold divisions in the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification-in terms of religion, or community, or culture, or nation, or civilization. The uniquely portioned world is much more divisive than the universe of plural

and diverse categories that shape the world in which we live. It goes, not only against the old-fashioned belief that “we human beings are all much the same: (which tends to be ridiculed these days-not entirely without reason-as much too soft-headed), but also against the less discussed but much more plausible understanding that we are *diversely different*. The hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division...We have to see that we have many distinct affiliations and can interact with each other in a great many different ways. There is room for us to decide on our priorities.”

He is calling for, a strength of mind and a depth of character we humans rarely achieve. The question of identity is absolutely crucial to the possibility of peace. It matters who we say we are. It matters how we identify others. I find my own ability to blot out and ignore people and their problems deeply distressing. I also know that my own energies are limited. That’s why I invest my life in the church. We are able to do and to be so much more together than we could ever do or be alone. The church collectively is able to sustain that strength of mind and depth of character our wounded world demands. While you or I might fail, while you or I might weaken and fall back into the ease and comfort of our segregated lives, the church, when it’s doing its job, carries on.

The church asks more of us than we would like to give. The church projects an image of a future different from today. I love this church. I love it just the way it is. And you and I are large enough to love it well enough to let it change and grow and flourish. “The moral owners of Unity Church-Unitarian are those who yearn for the Beloved Community and see Unity Church as an instrument for its realization. The Beloved Community is engaged in the work of the spirit. It is community at the highest level of reality and possibility, where love and justice prevail.” These brave words were written by your church trustees. There is a map embedded in these words, a direction, an imperative, a quality of what evangelicals call, “sending.”

Much as we may love our lives we have no right to linger here. We've chosen a faith, you and I, which does not rely on supernatural intervention. Instead, we place our faith in the enduring, creative process of human interaction and in the clear evidence that loving engagement with others in service to the common good is the only true path to salvation.

For as long as I can remember we've been talking about church growth. We figure that in order for our free faith to prevail we need to fill our pews with people eager to hear our positive gospel of freedom and conscience. I don't say it isn't true. Do bring your friends and neighbors here. But I beg of you remember much as we love it the church is a means not an end in itself. Though our ministry may well begin here, though this place can be a font of nourishment and inspiration, ultimately our ministry is in and of the world.

That's what our evangelical friends mean when they talk about "sending." We send you forth from this place to bring its good gospel to bear in your homes, in your neighborhoods, in the places where you work and play. Our ministry is so much larger than we can possibly imagine. Remember the words of Isaiah: The spirit of God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn, to give them garlands instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations, the devastations of many generations. You shall be named ministers of our God."

Just as we would struggle against our all-too-human tendency to diminish or miniaturize others so we need to root out that in us, which causes us to shrink or diminish ourselves. This faith and we who are its instruments are far too precious to waste.

"We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to the scene
carrying a knife, a camera

a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.”

Who are we? (congregation responds) God be merciful.

May it be so and amen.