

Order of Service
My World, My Mirror
Sunday, October 5, 2008

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

We come together to worship.

But what do we mean by worship?

We mean to gather in the name of truth and justice.

We mean to collect ourselves in beloved community.

We mean to settle into our own selves more deeply

Than the busyness of our week will allow.

We mean to sense that something,

That mystery of Life beyond our best articulations,

That is the ground upon which we are.

Meditation and Prayer

Declaring our Joys and Sorrows takes courage:

The courage to notice that we are joyful or sorrowful,

Because we often do not notice what we are feeling;

The courage to speak a shared word with our friend or our
community,

Because sometimes we don't trust in their non-judgmental
listening;

The courage to sense the joy or sorrow where it dwells in
our body,

Because we spend so much of our life caught in our minds;

The courage to dwell long enough in our joy or sorrow

To learn what Life is teaching us,
Because it's hard for us to believe that in all our days
We will grow and heal towards wisdom.

Now silently...

Amen.

Readings

Love After Love

Derek Walcott

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

Tilicho Lake,
by David Whyte

In this high place
it is as simple as this,
leave everything you know behind.

Step toward the cold surface,
say the old prayer of rough love
and open both arms.

Those who come with empty hands
will stare into the lake astonished,
there, in the cold light
refelcting pure snow

the true shape of your own face.

Sermon *My World, My Mirror* Rev. Bruce Davis (2044)

When I was little I was enthralled with mirrors. No, I was not a young Narcissus, adoring his reflection in a pool of water until he finally drowned in self love. My attraction was to the mirror's ability to reflect image and light. I remember shining sunlight with a mirror into the shadows beneath the big maple tree behind our house. And I especially remember facing one mirror into another, watching the seemingly infinite regress of mirrored reflections. But I could never perfect this. I could never get the mirrors parallel enough, and when I did, the image was always disrupted by my own face, trying to observe the phenomenon.

It was not until more recent years that I realized we're surrounded all the time by mirrors, reflecting back to us who we are.

The other morning I was just sitting on the deck behind my house when a light rain began to fall. The sun had been out earlier, and the air felt warm and moist. I noticed the way the droplets were tapping on the grape leaves, and looking out over the garden I could see the fine lines of rain as it rode on a light south wind. A chickadee was hopping in the vines, seemingly alert to the changing weather. The blue of the hydrangeas by the fence had shifted by late September to purples and browns. It was a wonderful moment, and being present to it, I felt a flickering of unaccountable joy. I sensed the beauty of the advent of autumn.

Only a few hours later I decided to go for a jog. It's not that I *felt* like going out and exercising, but I knew my body needed a workout, and my mental state is so much better when I've gone for a run. So I pushed myself to put on jogging clothes and running shoes, and I went outside. It was raining lightly again, and because it was warm the humidity felt oppressive. I walked for a couple of blocks, trying to get my momentum up, but disliking the way the rain kept dripping on my glasses. I noticed how unkempt the neighbors' gardens were now at the end of the season, with some plants dying and others overgrown. Usually well-groomed beds were choked with grass and weeds. I felt frustrated and returned home without going for a run after all.

I encountered two entirely different experiences on the same day, with the same weather conditions, and in the same place. You'd have to guess that the two experiences were had by two entirely different people.

And you wouldn't be far wrong. We are complex beings, we humans. In the course of even one day we migrate through different parts of ourselves, sometimes better sometimes worse. Sometimes we're naturally generous, sometimes stingy; sometimes calm, sometimes anxious; sometimes happy, sometimes sad; sometimes kind, sometimes mean. Yet, as different as we may be one hour to the next, we often don't notice those differences that are taking place within.

What we can do is pay attention to what's going on *around* us at any given moment to see a reflection of what's going on *inside* us. The world offers us a mirror if we choose to pick it up.

When I was sitting on the deck watching the rain come, the qualities of peace, beauty, and joy that I perceived out there were reflections of my own inner nature at

that moment. The peace, beauty, and joy were *inside of me* in that moment. Later, when I decided to jog and felt the moist air to be oppressive, the droplets of rain on my glasses irritating, and the gardens out of control, what I was actually seeing was my own nature at that moment. The oppression and the irritation were in myself, overshadowing my more essential joy and peace, and I was the one who felt out of control. Gardens are just gardens.

Like the magic mirror in the fairytale, “Snow White,” the world-mirror tells the truth. Do you remember the image from the Disney version of the queen, stepmother of Snow White, standing near her mirror. There she is in her cold beauty, but the image in the mirror reveals an old, malevolent hag.

This is not just the stuff of fairytales, though magical looking glasses are considered fairly rare nowadays. People and events around us are sharing our truth with us constantly, if we have the courage to listen. Partners often do this for each other. Recently my wife Mary turned to me. I had been sitting, relaxing, reflecting on my day, when she said, “Are you aware that you are frowning?” Now if she’d asked how I felt I would have said “relaxed and happy.” But her observation that my brow was deeply furrowed and my jaw was clenched were incontrovertible, and as she reflected this to me, I could immediately feel it. Moreover, I could feel right away that I was worrying about a situation I’m working on for my elderly parents. I didn’t know the truth of what I was experiencing in that moment until my world-mirror, in the person of my partner this time, provided me with a path to that truth.

In Buddhism the mirror is a metaphor for personal and spiritual growth toward enlightenment. You may recall that in ancient times mirrors were made from bronze and other metals that would become easily tarnished. The more tarnished the metallic surface was, the more distorted the reflection would be. Perception mediated by a tarnished mirror will always produce distorted reflections of our world. By this metaphor, ancient Buddhists called for seekers of truth to polish their perceptual mirrors and to aspire to clearer and deeper experiences of self and world.

We note here that what we are calling the mirror of our world is much more complex than the mirror on the wall. The mirror is not out there, though it involves all that we experience out there. The world-mirror is within our own selves. It is part of us. What we receive from the world-mirror is mediated by our own perception, and our perception is affected by the tarnishments and distortions that we carry inside of us.

One moment I'm sitting on my deck, receiving the beauty of the rain in my relatively peaceful soul. The next, I'm out walking, confronting my own irritation and frustration and completely missing the peace and beauty that was so obvious before. The rain hasn't changed. I have. My opportunity, according to the Buddhist metaphor, is to removing the tarnish by polishing the mirror I am, so that I can return again to the peace and beauty that are more essential to my nature.

What, then, are these qualities of person that arise in us to distort our perceptions and taint our experiences? We don't have to look far to find them because they are woven right into our experience. If I look at the falling rain and feel irritation, then it is that selfsame irritation within me that distorts my perception. It doesn't begin with the rain, it begins with the irritation. If I am sitting with a furrowed brow, falsely believing I am relaxed, when I then become aware I'm worrying about my folks, then that worry is the tarnish that distorts my perception.

The list is long of personal qualities that distort and degrade our experience: shame, guilt, worry, fear, anger, pain, pride, greed, distress, and depression just to name a few. What does it mean to polish the mirror—to reduce the power of such states of mind to overshadow our essential joy and peace? The answer here, for me, comes in the word, “Spiritual Practice.”

At one level spiritual practice means the hard work of self-improvement through reading, therapy, and small group interactions. It means working on communications, relationship building, and stress reduction. It means working on self trust, self care, and self esteem. I use the word “work” here because that's just what it is, and it takes a long time. Maybe it's work that's never really done. It's work that keeps the counselors and therapists and spiritual directors fully occupied, facilitating our release of qualities that stress and strain our lives.

At another level polishing the mirror takes place in practices that are less like work and more like Sabbath or time out. The model here is that imperfections and toxicities from our own past block our normal human functioning, inhibiting our natural experience of peace, joy, and beauty. In time, these blocks can be released, liberating the mind and purifying the perception, yielding more direct and less distorted life experience.

In the oral tradition of Vedanta we find the following Sanskrit declaration:

Apavitrah, pavitro va, sarvah vasthan gatopi va

Yasmaret pundari kaksham, sa bahyab hyantara shuchi.

Whether purity or impurity is permeating everywhere,
Whoever opens himself to unbounded awareness
Gains inner and outer purity.

What this declaration suggests is that we can release distortions to our perception and the limitations on our life, such as shame, worry and anxiety, by settling into moments of unbounded awareness through practices like meditation and yoga. In the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, written in about the time of Socrates, the author suggests that every movement toward peace and joy will be accompanied by an equal and opposite release of stress, which in turn further opens the door to even deeper peace and joy.

So, the mirror of the world is complex, involving the capacity of our own perception. The clearer our perception becomes, by working out and releasing our own unique qualities of stress, the more directly we will encounter the essential peace and joy in ourselves and in our world. And yet there is another layer of complexity to the perceptual system that opens a further dimension of the process of mirroring.

Just as the world we see, including people, places, and events of all sorts, becomes our mirror, so also do we become a mirror back to those people and that world. And the quality of mirroring we offer is determined by how much polishing we have done ourselves. It may be, for example, that my anxiety, a tarnishment on the mirror I am, leaves those who seek me out as a mirror with an anxious reflection of themselves. This is often the case in family systems in which the anxiety of the parents becomes increasingly reflected in the anxiety of the children. Over time, and with the intention of personal and spiritual growth, the reflection we return to those who would find in us their mirror can be less tarnished by our stresses and strains. Over time we can begin to reflect back to them positive qualities that may help them in their own journey.

If I am perceiving my daughter through my anxiety or irritation, then she will likely feel anxious or irritated. If I am clearer of those negative qualities, something like peace or joy may shine through in my perception of her, leaving her with a sense of peace or joy in herself. Perception in this sense is not just a passive process. How we perceive the other, how we mirror ourselves back to the other, powerfully influences what they find in themselves. Part of the gift we can offer to each other and to our world is to *perceive with affirmation*, like a mirror that *seeks out the good* in

the person being reflected. If I perceive my daughter in a way that affirms her with my love, she will experience herself as more loveable. How healing might it be if we could be a mirror that is grounded in peace and joy and that affirms love to those who seek their reflection in us.

Here's where that childhood experiment of mine comes in. We set mirror facing mirror, both who have been polishing themselves to ensure the clarity of reflection. People face each other, each reflecting the other, each affirming the other, forming a relationship of mutual affirmation. Back and forth. Peace facing into Peace. Joy facing into Joy. Love facing into love. Imagine a community formed from the building blocks of mutual loving intention. Now that would be a beloved community, indeed!

May it be so.