“Bless the World”

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Meditation

“St. Francis and the Sow” - Galway Kinnell

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don’t flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
...
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow,
and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them: the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Sermon: “Bless the World”

Upon our arrival in Canada fifteen years ago,
Bob and I received a copy of the book
by humourists Will and Ian Ferguson, titled How to Be a Canadian.

I took to heart the instructions,
even though many of them are quite tongue-in-cheek
and the stuff of our worst stereotypes.

You know—the myth that we all love Timbits
and that everyone has figured out how to have sex in a canoe.

What stayed with me was the chapter on the multiple meanings
of the seemingly simple word “sorry.”

I learned that it can, of course, serve as a genuine apology.

And that, paradoxically, it can also be a terse deflection of blame or responsibility;
simply a way of clearing the air and allowing everyone
to move on from a moment of tension.

I also learned, very importantly, that it can be used to basically—
and I’m choosing me language here carefully—
to tell someone to get lost.

Basically, the word can be used to cover a full spectrum of occasions,
conveyed by a certain tone of voice and the surrounding context.

While the many meanings of the word “sorry” were foreign to me as an immigrant,
the concept of a word or phrase having different meanings
in different situations was not.

Which brings me to a staple phrase of my childhood
spent in the southern part of the United States.

A phrase in wide use there means, at face value, exactly what it says:
“Bless your heart.”

_Bless you._
_May you be comforted in this moment._
_May you find strength in whatever it is you’re going through._

This meaning is not unlike the words of our centering music:
“May you be well. May you be at peace.”

But there are, as you may know or might imagine,
other ways in which the phrase “Bless your heart” can be used.

Typically, it’s said of someone behind their back.

“Bless their heart.”
Which suggests the person being discussed just doesn’t have their act together.

It may sound like sympathy, but it actually reeks of judgment.

“Bless their heart, but I could do this better.”
“Bless her heart; she doesn’t know how much she’s embarrassing herself.”
“Bless his heart; he’s making a fool of himself, and the poor thing doesn’t even know it.”

The saccharine insincerity is in no way sweet. In no way kind, or understanding, or sympathetic.

Occasionally, the phrase is spoken directly to a person, but in a way that is dismissive and diminishing.

“Well, bless your heart.”

This may well be the most offensive use of all, as it discounts a person to their face, with a false and mocking expression of understanding.

The poet Richard Newman gets at some of these delicious nuances of meaning in his poem, “Bless Their Hearts.”

At Steak ‘n Shake I learned that if you add “Bless their hearts” after their names, you can say whatever you want about them and it’s OK.

*My son, bless his heart…. He rents storage space for his kids’ toys—they’re only one and three years old! I said, my father, bless his heart, has turned into a sentimental old fool. He gets weepy when he hears my daughter’s greeting on our voice mail.*

Before our Steakburgers came someone else blessed her office mate’s heart, then, as an afterthought, the jealous hearts of the entire anthropology department. We bestowed blessings on many a heart that day. I even blessed my ex-wife’s heart. Our waiter, bless his heart, would not be getting much tip, for which, no doubt, he’d bless our hearts.

In a week it would be Thanksgiving,
and we would each sit with our respective families, counting our blessings and blessing the hearts of family members as only family does best. Oh, bless us all, yes, bless us, please bless us and bless our crummy little hearts.

I bring all this up because blessing can take many forms.

And the things we may consider to be a blessing may have an opposite effect.

True blessing takes care.
It requires sincerity.

It takes observation of the reality of another’s circumstances, a suspension of judgement, a real openness and curiosity, and then a genuine turning of the heart towards the other in compassion, in care, in kindness—with a clearly-felt effort to show support and understanding in a way that matters in the moment to the other person.

Now, it has to be said that, in this process, it’s no simple thing to suspend judgement.

It’s part of how we navigate the world, of course.

I mean, sometimes it’s an absolutely necessary judgement call to decide whether the eggnog that’s been the fridge for three weeks is off or not.

But judgement will always get in the way of blessing.

Blessing the heart of another, then, requires an opening of our own heart.

That opening of the heart is a central and enduring focus of this time of year.

It informs our seasonal stories, from Rudolph to the Grinch to Ebenezer Scrooge.

The guiding mystery of the holidays is whether something, this year, with spark our hearts to expand—if they will transform from being three sizes too small
to growing big enough and bold enough
to hold others with care and compassion.

Rather than waiting for that spark, though,
hoping it might hit at just the right moment,
resolve, instead, to be that spark.

In this festive season, may you seek out ways to bless the world,
beginning with those around you and radiating outwards,
as far as the reach of your life takes you.

Again, blessing can take many forms.

Sometimes it’s more about something we do than something we say.

Sometimes it’s about holding silence with someone as they grieve.

Sometimes it’s about holding space for someone to tell their story,
to work out in conversation what they see as their next step.

Sometimes it’s about simply showing up,
expressing care by our presence.

And sometimes, to be sure,
it is indeed about something that we say—
words that need to be said.

Words that need to be heard.

Words of blessing.

I see you.
I applaud you.
I’m proud of you.
I love you.
I’m with you.

Take a moment to consider where in your life
there may be an opening for a blessing right now.

Who in your life needs to know you care?

Who needs to hear certain words from you?
Who needs you to be present to them
in a way you’ve not previously or recently been?

How might you bless your corner of the world with your being?

_Silence_

In 1982, the great playwright Tennessee Williams,
the author of _A Streetcar Named Desire_ and _Cat on a Hot Tin Roof_,
found himself unexpectedly blessed.

That year, he was among eleven people
“awarded honorary doctoral degrees at Harvard [University]’s Commencement.”

Another was Mother Teresa of Calcutta,
winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Robert Kiely… was Tennessee Williams’s escort
during the academic proceedings.

In his memoir, Kiely reveals this beautiful story:

At the honorary degree dinner the night before Commencement,
Williams (a short, shy man) was nervous
and a bit overwhelmed by Harvard formality,
but after dessert and a little wine,
when a student group came in to sing,
he smiled, relaxed, and taking my hand
and that of the elderly lady next to him, said (like one of his characters):
‘I just want to be surrounded by beautiful people.’

The next morning when I met him at Johnston Gate for the procession,
he seemed anxious again because he was in a sport jacket,
had no academic gown, and felt out of place at Harvard.

I tried to reassure him, but he became more tense
when we were told… the honourands were to sign a guestbook.

Inside the reception room there was a whirl of red gowns
and ‘important’ people standing and chatting
as if at a Cambridge cocktail party.

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I thought Williams was about to back out when he and I saw two very small nuns (ignored by everyone) sitting on a couch across the room saying the rosary.

‘My God!’ Williams whispered, grabbing my arm, ‘That’s Mother Teresa!’

I had been on the hono ury degree committee and knew she would be there though she had not come to the dinner.

Tennessee (he had become ‘Tennessee’ by then) said, ‘Will you introduce me to her?’

I told him that I didn’t know her, but ‘Yes, of course’ that’s what [I was] supposed to do: introduce everybody to everybody else.

So over we went through the milling crowd of crimson and I—in the strangest introduction I have ever made—said respectfully to the tiny, wrinkled nun, ‘Mother Teresa, this is Tennessee Williams.’

She looked up kindly, obviously having no idea who Tennessee Williams was.

And then something extraordinary happened that I am almost positive no one else in the room saw.

Tennessee fell to his knees and put his head on her lap.

And she patted his head and blessed him.

After that and for the rest of the day, he beamed.

During the procession, he said to me, ‘Now I know why I came to Harvard.’

Bless his heart.

Bless her heart.

Bless our hearts whenever a connection is made that transcends the everyday—that gives us access to the sacred bonds that bind each to all.
That affirms in the deepest possible way all that is good in the world, in one another, and in ourselves.

Be it Mother Theresa blessing a gay writer from Mississippi.

Or St. Francis blessing a beautiful sow, feeding her drift of piglets.

Or you, reaching out with your heart and your hands to bless someone in your corner of the world.

…everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;

though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on its brow …

and retell it in words and in touch it is lovely until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing…

One need not be a saint to do the work of blessing. Arguably, most saints became such because they had a habit of blessing long before they died and were beatified.

One only needs to be attentive and courageous enough to be led by the heart in the moments that matter most to offer words or actions that do the work of blessing.

Unitarian Universalist minister Rebecca Parker has provided us with a powerful meditation on what it means to bless.

I leave you with her words.

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power, the strength of the hands, the reaches of the heart, the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

2 From “St. Francis and the Sow” by Galway Kinnell.
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry, 
bind up wounds, 
welcome the stranger, 
praise what is sacred, 
do the work of justice 
or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door, 
hoard bread, 
abandon the poor, 
obscure what is holy, 
comply with injustice 
or withhold love.

You must answer this question: 
What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will, 
a moving forward into the world 
with the intention to do good.

It is an act of recognition, 
a confession of surprise, 
a grateful acknowledgment 
that in the midst of a broken world 
unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness 
that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil 
there moves a holy disturbance, 
a benevolent rage, 
a revolutionary love, 
protesting, urging, insisting 
that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life 
as a gesture of thanks 
for this beauty 
and this rage.
The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
to search for the sources
of power and grace;
native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,
the endeavour shared,
the heritage passed on,
the companionship of struggle,
the importance of keeping faith,
the life of ritual and praise,
the comfort of human friendship,
the company of earth
the chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

May we, then, be moved to bless the world around us,
that we might count our own hearts blessed, too.

So may it be.

Amen.