

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Dreams of a Common Language

The Reverend Victoria Safford

\$2.00 two dollars

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FIRST READING

from Kathy Kelley, founder of "Voices in the Wilderness," an international peace group which travels to scenes of conflict worldwide and brings out stories of civilians there

In January 2002, I visited the Baghdad School of Folk Music and Ballet in the capitol of Iraq. The children there were buoyant. Their school, one of the finest in the Middle East, taught Arab and Western classical music, dance and art. I wandered in and out of classrooms, marveling at how obviously this school "worked." In the art department, I happened upon a display of

children's drawings, one of which, done with pastel magic markers and chalk, showed a jet plane plunging into [one] tower of the World Trade Center.

"Do you think I could meet the person who drew that picture?" I asked the children. And then they were like their own little secret service; in three minutes they had the artist there, all of eleven years old, and he was so proud. I asked him, "Can you tell me what was on your mind when you drew that?" He squared his shoulders, and he said, "Allah wanted this to happen to people in America, so people in America understand what happen to other people when America hit them." By then his teacher had sidled up... and he added, "and we love the people in America, and we want to be their friends."

So I told him about being in New York City on September 11th. I told him about families who had carried banners that said "Our grief is not a cry for war," even though they themselves had lost loved ones. I told these kids about a beautiful song that had been sung at hundreds of memorial services for the people killed, an anthem that celebrated people's common hopes and lives – and they said, "Yes madam, and why you not teach us this song?"

Well, I was in trouble, because my Arabic is not that good and my voice is not much better, but the director of the school, Hisham al Sharaf, who does not understand the concept of not being able to do something, worked with our driver to transliterate the words into Arabic. [The next day, I taught it to them, and the children sang it for me. They were very proud.]

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,
a song of peace for lands afar and mine...
This is my home, the country where my heart is,
Here are my hopes, my dreams my holy shrine.
But other hearts, in other lands are beating,
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine...*

Two months later, after the invasion, the only item that survived the looting and ransacking of the Baghdad School of Folk Music and Ballet was that cassette tape of the schoolchildren singing. Hisham al Sharaf came to see me, and he had it in his hand. I listened to it with earphones, and started just to sing along. Then I stopped because he was shedding tears.

SECOND READING

from Rory Stewart, a young Scotsman who, in 2002, walked with his dog across Afghanistan, after walking through Iran, Pakistan, India, and Nepal.

One night, near Bamiyan, I slept on a small floor with thirty Hazara soldiers.... The room was not big enough for us to sleep lengthways. We slept curled so tightly around the person next to us that we couldn't turn over. In the morning, despite the press of bodies, ice had formed on our wet clothes. Some [rose] to warm themselves by the dung-fed fire, leaving the rest of us a little space to stretch out...

... As we ate, Khalife Amir, our host, played a *tamboura* lute made from a small, yellow plastic oil bottle, a table leg and two wooden awls. He fingered only the lower string.

I had not heard music for a month. My days had passed in silences with flurries of thought in a landscape that changed slowly. Note by note, the music brought a sense of time back to me. Each pause was charged with anticipation of the next note, and the slow revelation of a tune. He measured silence, dividing each minute into a succession of clear notes from the string and then weaving time together again with his tenor voice. The others, who had not been able to hear music performed in public during the years of the Taliban regime, were quiet. I did not understand the words and did not need to. The sadness was clear in the tune and the singer's tone and in the expression of the listeners, as was the beauty shared between us.

DREAMS OF A COMMON LANGUAGE

Here is a true story, told by an Italian writer, Piero Ferrucci:

A woman lives in an apartment with thin walls.
Every evening, she hears her neighbors' baby crying in the apartment next door. The parents put the child to bed alone in the dark. The baby cries for a long time while the parents watch television.

*[The woman next door cannot escape the baby's desperate cries], which seem to express all her own anguish, her own loneliness. She is uncertain what to do. Speaking to the parents might make things worse. [Banging on the wall won't make things better.] She realizes that just as she can hear the baby, the baby can hear her, so she decides to sing. Every evening when they put the baby to bed, she sings sweet lullabies, talks through the thin walls, consoles and comforts that baby, for just a little while, and soon the baby falls asleep. [in Ferucci's *The Power of Kindness*]*

Every so often we are reminded what an honor it is and what a challenge it is to penetrate the thin or thick walls of our solitudes to speak to and hear one another. Every so often we're reminded what a risk it is, what an ordeal, what a moral obligation, what an art it is, what a gift that it is even possible, that it is in fact required for survival, that we talk to one another. Pablo Neruda, the poet, says in these words I've read aloud before,

All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence, in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our [clumsy] song - but in this dance and in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience [and our consciousness], in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny...

How can we convey to each other what we are? How, across whatever barriers, do we learn to listen and speak and then dare to listen and speak? as strangers, as friends, as partners in a marriage, as parents and children, grown-up children and aging parents, neighbors, nations...? How do we, how can we, convey to each other what we are?

Out west, in Nevada, citizens have been wrestling for more than a decade with a fascinating dilemma involving the ordinary miracle of communication. Yucca Mountain is the designated site of a large underground storage facility for radioactive nuclear waste. The contents of the sealed chambers there will be lethally dangerous for at least the next 10,000 years, and one of many challenges at this facility is to design markers, signage, barriers, around the site and within it, that will be effective warnings to people 25 generations from now. If human beings even exist in what is now Nevada 10,000 years from now, it's unlikely that they will speak English as we know it, nor any other living language. Languages don't last that long, and symbols change, as do human understandings, cultural agreements, about such values as what's "scary" and what isn't, what's ugly or repulsive, or official, and what isn't. A sign with a skull and cross-bones that says to us, *KEEP OUT* could very well say to our far-off descendants, *COME CLOSER*. Anthropologists, archeologists, linguists, philosophers, psychologists, environmental designers, artists and others, speaking the six official languages of the United Nations and also Navajo, are at work on this problem, and the state of Nevada has sponsored an international competition for artists to design a compelling, enduring, universal warning using any media. (The submissions to that art show are now traveling around the world.)

Of course, whether this will work, whether we will be able to speak to the future in ways that the future can hear us, we will never know. It's a mystery, and it is a further mystery that *we want to speak to them at all*, want to warn them, keep them safe; the fact of compassion in humans is a

mystery. It seems to me that the best we can do in this case, and in this life generally, is to try to express *to one another*, here and now, the plain fact of our compassion. To share it with our children, just one generation forward, feels like a major work, and to live in such a way that they will want to pass it on, that they will want to update and teach *their* children to update the sign that says, “Be careful friends, there’s danger here,” and on and on. Perhaps that kind of teaching starts when they are babies and we decide that we will sing to them, no matter whose babies they are, no matter what side of the wall. The language of love is passed on, and not always only in words.

Philosophers of language, linguists and theologians, argue a lot about the limits of what we actually can say to one another, what we actually can hear from one another. Until not too long ago, people pretty much assumed that personal experience comes first: something happens to you, or you feel something, or you have an intuition, say, of the presence of God, and then you find the words to describe that experience, as nearly as you can. You speak it, and others then can understand you. But a post-modern view suggests that words come first, before experience. If you come from a culture in which God is said to be a large, judgmental, male person, then you are more likely to experience, and talk about, that kind of God. It will not be impossible, but it will be difficult, to imagine a world with different kinds of gods, or a goddess, or with no deities at all. If you come from a tradition that has a word for “forgiveness,” then you are more likely to practice it, or long for it. If you only have a word for “vengeance,” you will more likely practice that. “What can be said,” says one theologian, “lays down the boundaries of what can be thought... We belong to our language far more than it belongs to us. This means that there are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use [or decide to invent] the appropriate symbols, [or words].” [David Tracy, in Paul Razor’s *Faith Without Certainty*] So, for example, if new phrases like “round earth” or “women’s rights” or “peaceful coexistence” have not been placed in active circulation, so that lively images of these things can develop, then the concepts have nothing to hang onto and people won’t believe in them, at least not without resistance. If words like “radioactive nuclear waste” are no longer in the current lexicon, people won’t imagine the phenomenon. These arguments about language and ideas, language and reality, go round and round, but the poet’s question stays intact: how shall we, how can we, convey to one another who we are? How can we pass through *solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence, in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our [clumsy]song* – and touch each other, begin to understand each other, across whatever walls (or space or time) may separate us? How do we choose the words we need, or invent the words that we need?

It’s a question about intimate relationships, how we relate very personally, and it’s also about politics. I think of one particularly tired phrase we’ve been hearing more and more in recent years, recent months, recent days, most often from the State Department or the White House, to justify everything from the invasion of Iraq to the torture of prisoners and detention without warrant, to threats of new invasions now in other places: “This is the only language these people understand.” We hear that from a Senator, or a President, a Secretary of Defense, and then echoed by our neighbors or our co-workers, and we could almost begin to believe it, to let fear (and loathing) close our minds and hearts that much. But then - we listen to Rory Stewart, the young man who walked across Afghanistan, tell what it was like when a farmer in a dirt-floor hut played an ancient melody on a lute made from an oil jug and a table leg:

He measured silence, dividing each minute into a succession of clear notes from the string and then weaving time together again with his tenor voice. The [men around me, all soldiers], who had not been able to hear music performed in public during the years of the Taliban regime—these men grew quiet. I did not understand the words and did not need to. The sadness was clear in the tune and the singer’s tone and in the expression of the listeners. [It was as clear] as the beauty shared between us... Clearly these are people fluent in the language of the soul. “Shock and awe” are not the only words they understand. They are deeply human beings.

We hear that phrase and then begin to wonder when Kathy Kelly speaks of her Iraqi friend, the teacher who laughs, then cries, as the children in his school sing that hymn tune of Sibelius, with the words we know by heart translated from Finnish to English into Arabic:

*My country’s sky is bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on clover-leaf and pine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is:
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine...
But other hearts, in other lands are beating,
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine...*

These children are emotionally multi-lingual. There’s very little that they do not yet understand, although destruction on the scale they’ve known and the killing that they’ve seen, must be hard for them to fathom. We hear from the President, or from anyone, about “the only language they can understand,” and begin to realize that this may be the only language that the speaker himself can comprehend, can take the risk of comprehending. Such risk requires an evolved, deliberate courage.

We see these pictures from Tehran, full of people as fluent as we are in the languages of playfulness and joyfulness, people who clearly speak our common native tongue, who are proficient in all the subtle, lovely dialects of laughter, music, romance, architecture, art, and we begin to see how the language of this war on terror, this reign of terror, constricts not just what can be said, but what can be imagined. If we only see pictures of Iran’s president, and only hear his often hateful rhetoric, if they only see and hear our president, then they can’t see us, and it’s hard for us in turn to even begin to imagine those beautiful young women on their cell phones, or the children in their face paint, or the snowboarders, the couple on the park bench in the spring. *What can be said lays down the boundaries of what can be thought.* What can be said or be seen on the evening news lays down the boundaries of what can be thought or dreamed or demanded or negotiated. To penetrate the walls that separate people, nations, ideologies, you need a wild, deliberate, vigorous vocabulary (much of it very ancient, even primal) and you need a wild, deliberate desire.

I think of the classes here for 7th and 8th grade. Their curriculum this spring takes them out of our building to visit other congregations. One week they went to St. Andrew’s, then to the Cathedral in St. Paul; this Friday they’ll be at Temple of Aaron synagogue and in some years

they visit a mosque and a Buddhist community. In the intervening weeks they come back and talk about what they've seen and heard, and our hope, always, is that their observations will be respectful, and that they will be complicated, not simplistic. We want them to be prepared to discuss the standard questions, "How are they like us?" and "How are they different?" -- but we want them to go even further, to let go of obvious comparisons and give in to absolute wide-open curiosity, to sit in those houses of worship (like foreign countries for some of our kids), and hear the people singing, see the people praying, and then deeply, honestly, openly wonder, *Who are they?* without projections or expectations, or judgment: a generous wondering. *Who are they?* can yield to a harder question, *Who are we?* - and in time, it may open a way for some of them privately to wonder, *Who am I? (What songs am I singing? How do I pray?)* which is hard when you're 12 or 13, (or 40 or 50 or 80) but important, so your sense of self is in proportion to other selves, and you become, and continue to become, a person in relation, in communication, evolving.

With what words do we tell each other who we are? In what language do we listen? There is a book for children that retells a true story, the story of the "wild boy" of Aveyron, a feral child found by hunters in 1800 in the forest of southern France. He was thought to be somewhere between 8 and 12 years old when they found him and brought him to Paris, and made him into a kind of public scientific specimen. He was rescued from the freak show circuit by a young doctor who took him home to live with him, and who wanted desperately to unlock him, not so much to civilize him, but to release the humanness inside that wild animal creature. Jean-Marc Itard, the doctor, called him Victor, and in time Victor learned to wear clothing, to eat at the table, to chop wood, tend fires and sweep floors, and even to express emotions, to cry when he was lonely or frustrated, to laugh at something funny. But he never learned to talk. The story for children, written by Mordecai Gerstein, is taken from the doctor's journals,

... [Victor] did remain silent, and could never tell of his wild life. And something of the wild was always in him...

The sound of a rising wind, or the sight of whirling snowflakes, or the sun bursting from behind a cloud, still made him tremble with excitement and a wild joy.

And every evening, when the doctor sat on Victor's bed, Victor took the doctor's hand and covered his own eyes and forehead with it, and held it there, without moving for a long while. They sat like that for an hour sometimes, and then the doctor would kiss him and say good night.

And if the doctor looked back in on him when the moon was full, Victor was always gazing up into it, perfectly still, bathed in silver light.

I wonder what he sees, thought the doctor.

I wonder what he feels.

I wonder...

[*The Wild Boy*, Mordecai Gerstein]

It seems at first to be the story of the expanding humanity of this child, but it is also the story of the expanding humanity of the young doctor who is not trying to change Victor or make him adapt, but trying to know him, to connect with him somehow, to ask *Who are you?* Along the

way the doctor is connected to something wild and quiet in himself, something archetypal that he shares, and every human shares, with Victor. But he also begins to ask the generous questions of deep compassion: *I wonder what he sees. I wonder what he feels.* He never says, “There’s only one language this kid can understand, and I know what it is,” because he knows that can’t be true; he’s dealing with an other, who (because he is a person) is like himself, utterly, profoundly, and who (because he is a human person) is also unlike him, profoundly, with a story and a language different from his own.

In what languages have you chosen to be fluent?

The dream of a common language is only that, at best – a wispy ideal that cannot hold or celebrate complexity. We know this in our life together here, where everyone’s story and everyone’s belief, everyone’s words are different. It is not the case, as people sometimes glibly say (often when they want to change the subject), that “we all worship the same God, just in different ways.” We don’t. The things we’ve seen and known, the gods we’ve seen and known, the paths we’ve walked, the prayers we need, the kind of hope or fear we hold, the things we’ve suffered, burdens we carry, blessings we’ve known - and the words we choose to talk about all this are not the same, at all. We may long sometimes for the simplistic ease of homogenous belief, but I think most of us have chosen this complicated, pluralistic house because the life we share here more nearly resembles real life in the real world out beyond these walls. There can be no common language really, but only this old desire, the deliberate, brave desire held by all of us in common, to reach beyond the borders of our separate selves and try to understand. We want to know each other, truly, and be known.

We’re like that baby, each of us living on our own side of the wall, a little in the dark, a little lonely, and when we hear the voice of someone singing to us on the other side, speaking to us from the other side, it is a risk and an honor to take it in, and at some point to choose to trust and to love, to cherish and respect, not only what’s familiar, but also what is not.

This service included slides of Lucas Gray’s images from Tehran, Iran (assisted by Curt Proud), and music in Arabic and English from Carol Caouette, Nanc MacLeslie, Dick Rogers and Russell Packard.