

Jeff, my best friend in my New York City days, and I were heading downtown on a blustery night as another cold winter had just started to lose ground, releasing slowly melting snow and ice into slush. We swung down from the street to the stairs of the 79th St. Station and waited on the platform for the number one downtown IRT to appear.

Subways were never ideal places in which to encounter people. It was often difficult to live in New York in the seventies and early eighties, and the tensions that fell across the city those many years ago now were often vented in the confines of the subways. Safety was something to take into account. One young friend, a small, slight woman; told me that she carried a large licorice root in her bag onto the subway. She said that she liked the taste of licorice, but believed that the sight of her chewing on what appeared to be a gnarled stick kept people from bothering her. She showed me the expression she had practiced to use while gnawing on the root, and I could see how she traveled safely. It was not in the culture of the city at that time to either speak to, or make eye contact with strangers on the subway.

On this particular night, when the hiss of brakes gave way to the muffled sound of an announcer with marbles in his mouth saying something unintelligible; the doors opened and we got on near the end of a car illuminated by lines of fluorescent tubes and we stood holding one of the poles. The scene was depressingly familiar. People sat or stood with dead stares in damp down coats, sadly punctuated by soggy gloves and woolen hats balancing beads of water. Small ponds of dirty slush from wet shoes and boots formed on the linoleum floor. The usual advertisements for business schools, apartment finders, dentists and lawyers ran in a line near the top of the car, and some of the silent travelers gazed at them in endless, dull fascination, while others looked down at the reading material in their laps.

Jeff saw an attractive young professional woman reading the *New Yorker*. Since he and I had just laughed together about something funny in that issue, he turned to her and broke an unspoken rule of the subway by starting a conversation: "Did you read the Roz Chast cartoon? It is hilarious!"

Instead of ignoring him, she looked up at us, full of joy, and asked, "No! Where is it?"

Jeff took her *New Yorker* and thumbed through to the right page. People watched. She studied it for a moment and then squealed out loud. This got the interest of someone seated near us, so the young woman showed it to him. He laughed out loud, and showed it to his companion who did likewise. A larger conversation started. Somewhere near the middle of the car, another passenger decided to speak up and declare how funny the cartoon was, and then produced the issue of the *New Yorker* from his bag and opened it to share with anyone who wanted to see. I think someone else had it as well.

An unspoken decision was made that everyone on the subway car who wanted to see the funny cartoon would have it passed around to them, and people seemed delighted, whether or not they understood what was happening, but in the meantime, Jeff pushed the envelope a little further. He turned to the young woman, and in his theatrical manner that invited, or perhaps even demanded any and all to listen in, he asked, "Did you read the story in here about the woman who, when anyone tries to explain anything to her, says, 'I know ALL about that'?"

From somewhere in the car, a woman who had clearly read the story, declared, "I know ALL about that!" People laughed. Soon, Jeff was reading an excerpt of it out loud. The subway

stopped at the 72nd St. Station. We could have changed from the local to the number two express, but we liked the party where we were, and more guests were arriving. These 72nd St. latecomers were caught off guard by the slightly more uptown mood. The doors closed and we were off to Lincoln Center, by which time the newcomers were clued into the fact that they had stepped into something to be enjoyed, even if they were not yet in on the joke, until grinning fellow riders handed it to them to bring them along.

Not everyone on the car read the *New Yorker*. Some did not speak English. There were no doubt a couple, as it sadly was in those days and continues to be so now, who were there merely to stay warm. Some were tourists. It didn't matter. The inhibited spirits in that car were now aroused by life and joy. Somehow, what had come to be the accepted norm of being in this particular shared kind of community had been changed. Fleeting perhaps, but nonetheless here was a glimpse of how it might be if people were more open, more trusting and certainly kinder. Here also was an example of how one person can make a difference in changing the status quo, and how others might just be waiting for such positive change.

66th St., Lincoln Center. Some got off...some got on. 59th St., Columbus Circle... I wish I wrote down the punch line from the Roz Chast cartoon in my journal, but whatever it was; it was used as a parting salutation to the dwindling laughter of those remaining passengers from three stations before.

50th St.... and then the man with marbles in his mouth somewhere in a little booth with a microphone announced, "42nd St., Grand Central Station. Change here...." And we did. The young woman thanked us, and we her; in the way you do when you have a transcendent moment with a stranger. Jeff and I emerged from underground to the midtown streets above.

Within ten stations or so, I suspect, everyone who shared that experience with us would be scattered, and the train would resume its underground journey by reverting to the atmosphere in which young women choose to bring licorice roots with them in order to appear crazy enough to be left alone, while others bring their own recipe for practiced guardedness that keeps them in seclusion from the humanity hurtling below on a journey of isolation and separation.

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A benediction is a short blessing that concludes a worship service. The word comes from the Latin, and it means, "to speak well of." The Apostle Paul ends the Second Letter to the Corinthians with a blessing on his church, and as he does, he asks them to put things in order, to agree with each other and live in peace—even to greet one another with a holy kiss, which is a sign of communal love. This short passage is called, "The Grace," as it speaks to this love that flows into common participation in God and with each other.

Benediction—to bless...to speak well of.

What is your benediction? What do you give that causes others to be blessed, to be thought well of and in turn, speaks well of you as members of the human family, as well as the family you were born into and the community where you choose to live out your own expression of faith and humanity? Because...you do make a difference. When you are in a negative place or a positive space, you are making an impact.

In religions that recognize a divine spark within each of us, all personal interactions may be viewed as encounters with the holy. In Christianity, the concept of the Trinity, phrased as "Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit," envisions the sacred as being relational. In the moral code of Confucianism, the health of the society derives from the maintenance of proper relationships with family, friends and community.

No matter what...despite frustrations, misunderstandings, even periods of separation, we are called back into the intentional desire to make things not only right, but to do so in a way that causes a more healthy and whole community, hurtling as it is on a journey towards communion with the source of Creation, with us as passengers, active or passive, transformative or just “along for the ride.”

What is the good word you bring to the wholeness of your relational understanding of the sacred? The Talmud states that, “God wants the heart.” We are wooed and won by grace. And our response is to be aroused by life. Henri Nouwen said that part of our experience here is to move out of the house of fear and into the house of love. Those who want to help move that experience of assisting humanity in evolving by moving our mental and spiritual belongings from a house of fear into the house of love, are invited to come along and help lead us by continually demonstrating that the only response to life is to live it fully.

Fathers Day is often a day when we reflect forward and backward about our own fathers and the experience of being a father that is shared by so many in this room—the mark you are able to make on your own children, as well as the gifts that were given you by a caring parent. We support members of our community around us today who are actively trying to move us forward in the examples they are setting to provide good, healthy models of fatherhood.

Tom and Pam, you are bringing your own benediction, a good word to us, by seeing a beauty and a worth in joining with this community today. We welcome you.

Eddie, you wrote me a letter saying that you often wanted to join this church when you visited here with us. Can you imagine how special it is that you are doing this with your family and now extended family today, before you move to hospice care this week? The gift that is being given is from you to us. Let us find ways to return that gift in supporting you, Delores and your family. Thank you for your continuing zeal for life that made today important.

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, in their book, “Spiritual Literacy,” talk about that zeal: “To be aroused by life is to cherish every moment and to not miss a thing. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler Ross states: ‘It’s only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth—and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up—that we will begin to live each day to the fullest as if it was the only one we had.’

“To be aroused by life is to feel kinship with other peoples. ‘The spiritual thirst that is latent in everybody can never come to a place of fulfillment unless people begin to think of each other as potential brothers and sisters,’ writes Malidoma Some, an African medicine man.

“To be aroused by life is to honor the ties that bind us. Theology Professor Lewis Smedes states: ‘Human fellowship and sturdy joy come to us as we create and keep on re-creating our fragile human relationships making them last through the power of caring love. To dare to make and care to keep commitments, this is love.’”¹

In the Apostle Paul’s benediction to his church, he says, “Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” Forgive what needs to be forgiven and move forward...embrace your zeal for what is now in front of you, and be the agent of change the world is waiting for you to be.

“We are communities in time and in a place,” writes Dorothy Day, “but we are communities in faith as well—and sometimes time can stop shadowing us. Our lives are touched by those who lived centuries ago, and we hope that our lives will mean something to people who won’t be alive until centuries from now. It’s a great ‘chain of being,’ someone once told me, and I think our job is to do the best we can to hold up our small segment of the chain. That’s one kind of politics—doing your utmost to keep that chain connected, unbroken.”

What is your “good word,” your “blessing,” your realization that you are not just on the train for the ride, but have the very real capacity to make a difference? Then speak it—live it—make it transform us and yourself as well, in your own zeal for life and in the way you understand yourself to be a follower of Jesus, as we hurtle down the tracks together towards communion with all that is; waiting...hungry... thirsty for the good word you have the power to bring. Be a part of that great chain of being, the Benediction that lives on after the service is long gone. Amen.

Sermon Resources

1. Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, (Scribner: New York) 1996 pp. 530-531

Scripture for Sunday, June 19, 2011

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

11 Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. 13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.