

Order of Service
Let Your Bending Be For Gladness

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Invocation

My 15 year old son Cyrus qualified for a national indoor track meet in NYC, the only freshman on the Ithaca High School indoor track team to do so. The race was on Friday. Work obligations prevented me from going along with George and Cyrus to watch Cyrus run, so Caz and I stayed home. When I apologized to Cy that I wouldn't be there for his race because among other things I had to prepare to bring a message to Poplar Ridge today, he replied, 'Ah that's alright, you can just talk about me.' So, today I will take his advice.

Speaking of advice, I heard that we missed wonderful messages last week, from Charlie and from some of the meeting's young people, about Advices. When I was younger, I frequently found the advice dispensed by my elders to be more irritating than helpful for many reasons. Being a parent now and the elder of my preteen and teenage sons, I more often than is comfortable find myself with advice that very much wants to be given, and very much should not be. Discernment about when to advise and when to keep my own counsel and simply try to be a loving and steady presence is more and more a central part of parenting in this phase. As I work to cultivate non-judgemental unconditionally loving presence and offer it to my increasingly independent children, holding lightly and in check my often very strong opinions, I find that I feel closer to The Divine Parent, closer to the Aspect of That of God in Me which can express those qualities of non-reactive, compassionate presence. It's a practice which I certainly do not embody successfully even a small fraction of my days, as I'm sure my sons would be happy to attest, but nevertheless it is a practice that has lately deepened and affirmed my faith that there is in me that Divine Loving Presence, a Meta-Parent, perhaps, whose advice is pretty much always one word, and that is Love.

As an invocation of our human capacity for embodying that kind of Divine Parental Love, whether we are parents ourselves or not, I share with you now the following quote, the words of a young non-binary transgendered person named Forest, who was asked what they would say to parents concerned about how and whether to raise their transgendered child with full affirmation of that child's identity.

They said:

Why did you have a kid? Why did you have a child? Did you have a child so that you could model that child after you, or did you have a child so that you could bring a person into the world who is capable of and confident in making their own decisions? And are you willing to support them as they navigate that?

Readings

Kahlil Gibran - 1883-1931 was born in Bsharri, Lebanon, which at the time was part of Syria and part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1885, Gibran emigrated with his mother and siblings to the United States, where they settled in the large Syrian and Lebanese community in Boston. Our reading today is from his book The Prophet. According to Wikipedia, The Prophet was Biblically inspired, and especially popular in the 1960s. About this, the translator and Middle East historian Juan Cole said, "Many people turned away from the establishment of the Church to Gibran. He offered a dogma-free universal spiritualism as opposed to orthodox religion, and his vision of the spiritual was not moralistic. In fact, he urged people to be non-judgmental." Here is Khalil Gibran's non-judgemental spiritual advice 'On Children.'

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, Speak to us of Children. And he said:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Genesis 1:26 ²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...”

Matthew 20:16 ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Message

My son Cyrus didn't learn to walk. When he was about 9 months old, he got up and ran. It was so ~everything....~ to watch the fluidity of his movement, the sheer joy in his face and body. He would hum while he ran, like he was vibrating with the joy of it. His toddlerhood was a blur of motion. I remember the first time he outran me during a mile-long community fun run in Ithaca when he was about 6. He flew while I huffed and puffed, and tried to keep him in my sights as he pulled further and further away from me. I knew then that we'd crossed a line and I simply would not be able to keep up with him anymore. A couple years later, he participated in the Ithaca Youth Bureau's cross country running program for elementary school aged kids. Races were organized with other youth running clubs from other towns in the Southern Tier, and one such town had a very well funded, serious program. Their team had matching uniforms, and they all wore expensive sneakers. When it was their turn to host a two and a half mile invitational cross country race one Saturday morning, our conversation in the car on the way was about just putting forth an honest effort, doing the best that you could do, and having fun. George and I stationed ourselves somewhere in the first mile to cheer the runners on as they ran by, and from that vantage point we bellowed and clapped as Cyrus chugged past somewhere towards the back of the first initial pack of runners. Then we cut across the field to intersect with the runners again as they completed the second mile and headed toward the finish line. And I will never forget the soaring, giddy surprise I felt as the lead pack came up over a small rise and Cyrus was in front. I turned back to George and yelled, “It's Cyrus!” Everyone cheered as my generic-sneaker clad kid in his paint splattered shorts won the race, a half step ahead of the kid behind him in the fancy sneakers and the uniform.

Cyrus has certainly not won every race he has run since that day. He was so disappointed in his performance in NYC two days ago. There are a lot of fast kids out there and he had to absorb what for him was a pretty dramatic and even live streamed loss. He has told me that he aspires to be the one of the best at Ithaca High School, and to break school records, surely worthy goals. As a Quaker, though, constitutionally committed to equality and uncomfortable with any suggestion of human hierarchy of value, I admit that I feel a little frisson of discomfort even with the word 'best.' For that matter, about the concepts of winners and losers and competition in general, I am also ambivalent. But I remember the joy and the triumph of that cross country win, and the younger Cyrus receding further away from me as I realized I would never again keep up with him, and the still-younger toddler humming with the sheer joy of moving. I can see how competition propels my son to find inside himself his capacity for effort, a striving to work on something, to get better at something, to not only risk trying but to risk trying publicly, with people watching. I can see how that capacity to strive was there in Cyrus from the very beginning, as was reveling in the pure joy of what his body could do.

There's a lot of emphasis in our culture on hierarchy, on winning, on being the best. It's deeply embedded in our economics for one thing, in the systems that funnel wealth upward, as if supporting those very few rarified beings at the top is the whole reason for an economy. Winning has also become the terrible focus of our politics, with any election loss carrying the possibility of existential crisis. An emphasis on winning comes with a great fear of losing. All over our country we fear losing elections, losing money, losing status, losing power, losing freedom. The fear-based win-lose dualism is also pervasive in the ways we think about and conceive of God. Many people pray to God to help them win. Win the job, win the election, win the game, win the war, and the accolades and the prestige. Many people seem to think that God favors the winners, and that is why the winners win, like a positive feedback loop. Just as it's a temptation when Cyrus wins for me to add **his** win to **my** list of accomplishments, to think that he's MINE, MY son, and not the son of life's longing for itself, it's a temptation to think of God as the one who reflects back to us our preferred status in the hierarchy, as the one who proves our worth and just as crucially, the unworthiness of others. It's a temptation to

think of God as the one who picks the winners and losers. That way of thinking about what God is leads to a transactional kind of faith. And more perniciously, it leads toward a faith that may logically assume that if something less than winning happens, then it proves the removal of God's favor. Losers are losers because God wills it to be so. That kind of political theology has been useful to those who dominate in the race of life, and it has also left even those who think of themselves as being firmly in the category of Winners cold and bereft when they ~ eventually, inevitably ~ lose.

Because everyone's going to lose something at some point. Lose hope, lose a loved one, lose the future you dreamed of, lose your edge, your advantage, lose ~ ultimately ~ your life. Believing in a God of Winners means that when you lose, you also lose your faith, you lose the favor of your God.

But that's not the God I believe in. I don't think that's what God is or how God works. Of course it feels amazing to win. Of course it's so much harder to lose. It's certainly harder to feel **joy** in the **pure experience** of **losing**. To lose with joy, that is a rarified achievement. Since we're in the liturgical season of Lent, I will just say that I see the mythological, metaphorical template of the story of Jesus as the archetypal and divinely blessed journey of one who, with God accompanying him with love the whole way, lost with joy. And somehow, with that achievement, those who had always been on the losing side found in his life and death, a vindication: the last would be first and the first would be last, a powerful symbol of the reversal of the win/lose binary that winners have tried to wrestle away from the losers ever since.

Meanwhile, every track meet has kids who win, and many more kids who don't. Every track meet is filled with kids trying hard, with their parents and grandparents cheering them on. Sometimes there are 6, 7, 8 heats of a race, and the heats get slower and slower as they go on. While it's so inspiring to watch the elite athletes, to be in the presence of that kind of human excellence and achievement as they tear around the track and set records, it's also gripping and poignant to see just how hard the kids who are running the slowest are trying, just running their hearts out in last place. The kids in the slower heats do not try less hard than the kids in the faster ones. I have been moved to tears by both. The parents of the slower kids do not cheer for them

less than the parents of the 'elite' runners cheer for their kids. To me, That is how God, the Divine Parent, is.

Track meets are very long. So I pass the time by looking for the multiplicity of images and likenesses of the Plural God quoted in Genesis 1:26. ²⁶Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness..." That's where George Fox got That of God in Everyone!

And I see That of God Everywhere at track meets: in the winners and the losers, and everyone in between. In all the kids, in their stirring and purposeful effort, their awkward adolescence, their focus and hope. In all of their parents, of course, all of us loving our kids, there for hours and hours to support them for the few minutes that their events are happening. God is there in the crushing defeats, there in the dramatic photo-finishes, the come from behind wins, the terrible stumbles, the devastating injuries, the dropped batons, the collectively held breaths, the shout that goes up when someone has broken a record, the kids in fancy streamlined sneakers, the kids in worn out, cheap, clunky ones.

I'll never forget that day at the cross country race. My running boy, and his joy, his triumphant win. Me and That of God in Me will be here cheering him and That of God in him on as long as we can. Maybe he will be the best. Maybe he will break records. And maybe he won't. Maybe he will be in the middle of the pack. Maybe he will be dead last. Maybe God will help him figure out how to lose with joy. Maybe God will hum with joy as he wins. Maybe Cyrus will stand upon that pinnacle of achievement for a blip of a moment, a living arrow sent forth swift and far. Most people do not get to that pinnacle. Most people are not the best. That's not to say that setting his sights on the pinnacle isn't worth every bit of his considerable and admirable effort. The fleetingness and rarity of that accomplishment is what makes it so tantalizing, so amazing, and what makes reaching for it and trying for it so brave, moving, and worthy of recognition. At the same time, the effort of everyone other than the person who gets to the top, is just as important, and just as worthy of recognition, because they ~ we ~ the average runners, the average ones ~ we make up the bulk of the people in this race. The running race, and the human one. And God is here with all of us. God is here in all the

people doing the best we can, putting in an honest effort win or lose, and sometimes even having fun, sometimes even feeling joy.

Benediction

*The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with
His might that His arrows may go swift and far.*

*Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
Let us honor the multiplicity of all the images and likenesses
of the Plural God*

*Let us remember that God is here in all of us.
So let us do the best we can, put in an honest effort, win or lose,
and Let's have fun.*