

THE MAYFLY AND THE BIRD

A sermon preached by Pamela Patton
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
May 29, 2016

Reading:

Please Call Me By My True Names (excerpt)

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time
to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Sermon:

In an essay titled “Looking Out the Window,” *New York Times Magazine* writer Sam Anderson describes what happened one morning when a crashing sound awakened him from a nap. Anderson’s office window looks out on a tired apartment building of pale green aluminum siding and a parking lot surrounded by a chain link fence, occupied by one car and a couple of dumpsters. Upon being disturbed by the crash, the writer sees that a car has run into the parking lot fence, and the fence is badly dented as is the car’s bumper. The driver, a middle aged man, gets out of the car and begins tugging at the fence to try to repair it with his bare hands. He gets nowhere; the fence is too crumpled.

Anderson comes to a rapid conclusion about the man and his lazy attitude about the broken fence. Anderson then watches the man return to the front passenger seat of the car and remove a small child. A toddler in the front seat! At this point, Anderson is thoroughly disgusted.

The story continues. Anderson describes how the man persists in trying to fix the fence. At one point the man grabs a vertical support pole, which was wickedly bent, and pulls against it with his full weight. The pole breaks, and the man falls backwards. The entire fence falls on top of him, and one of his sandals flies off and lands 10 feet away on the sidewalk. He climbs out from under the collapsed fence and limps back to the apartment building above the lot, rubbing his elbow.

Anderson writes, “That, I thought, would be the end of it. The man—that villainous man—was going to leave all the chaos behind for someone else to clean up. It was only the middle of the morning, but I imagined him sprawled out on his sofa with a case of beer, eating horrible snacks, while his child played with fire and broken glass and battery acid near a malfunctioning electrical socket.”

At that point, Anderson could have resumed his nap or padded into the kitchen to brew some tea followed by a round of Oprah to replenish his spirits. But fortunately for him and for me, he stayed in his office for a few more minutes at which point the man reappeared with a toolbox. He attended to the fence with persistence and care, he even borrowed extraneous parts from the end of the fence in order to fully restore the damage he had caused.

Anderson had been sure that he knew this stranger. But he didn’t know him at all. In fact, Anderson comes to realize that the ugliness he projected onto the man was about his own shortcomings and fears. Anderson concludes the essay, “I would never have fixed that fence; I would have panicked and run away.”

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who joined a monastery at age 16 and is now in his late 80s. He coined the term “engaged Buddhism” which

is a call for monks to apply Buddhism outside their monasteries by doing social justice work in their wider communities. During the Vietnam War he founded several organizations that worked to aid victims of the war on both sides. In their efforts to care for people in decimated villages, many of the members of his organizations were attacked and killed. Nhat Hanh writes “The Communists killed us because they suspected we were working with the Americans, and the anti-Communists killed us because they thought that we were with the Communists. But we did not want to give up and take one side.”

Nhat Hanh wrote the poem “Please Call Me By My True Names” after he heard a news story about boat people who were attacked by sea pirates. One of the refugees, a 12 year old girl, flung herself into the ocean after she was raped by one of the pirates. The poet writes, “I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.” Nhat Hanh urges us to see the parts of ourselves that are the victim (the mayfly, the frog, the starving child in Uganda) and the parts of ourselves that are the perpetrator of suffering (the bird, the grass-snake, the arms merchant).

The poem asks us to receive the news story about the girl and the pirate with compassion for all the parties. Nhat Hanh said of himself that if he had grown up under the same circumstances as the pirate’s, he imagines that he too would have been a pirate. He insists that taking sides leads to further suffering because it denies the humanity of one side. He believes that seeing any other being as completely separate from ourselves is an act of violence.

How is it that we come to see ourselves as separate from others while we tell ourselves that we understand them so well? We come to vilify strangers who embody traits that we detest whether it’s their politics, their negligent parenting, or their dogmatic religious opinions. We justify our hatred by pinning these people as oppressors, as though these traits are all there is to them. As we tell ourselves a story about their ugly thoughts and decrepit hearts, we wish them hardship or at least invisibility.

We just as easily come to vilify people we know well who have disappointed us or rejected us. Family members, dear friends, and lovers with whom we once felt we could be our most genuine and joyful selves morph into inimical caricatures—we are sure we understand their every motive and we can spend hours or even years ruminating over their cold hearts.

In *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, the Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes

“...encountering another human being is as close to God as I may ever get—in the eye-to-eye thing, the person-to-person thing—which is where God’s Beloved has promised to show up. Paradoxically the point is not to see [God]. The point is to see the person standing right in front of me, who has no substitute, who can never be replaced, whose heart holds things for which there is no language, whose life is an unsolved mystery. The moment I turn that person into a character in my own story, the encounter is over. I have stopped being a human being and have become a fiction writer instead.”

Turning back to Anderson’s story about the fence fixer: At what point did the writer vilify the stranger in the parking lot? Did that happen as soon as he saw the man’s jalopy of a car? Did the writer resent the view from his office window of the overflowing dumpsters in the parking lot and therefore conclude that the residents of the building next door were irresponsible? Or was it the moment that the toddler crawled out of the front seat that Anderson decided that the man was a good-for-nothing?

As we make our judgments consciously and unconsciously, we become fiction writers, we turn others into characters in our own stories and deny them their humanity; we are committing an act of violence when we see another person as completely separate from ourselves.

As many of you know, I am an aspiring hospital chaplain. In order to qualify for board certified chaplaincy, I have to complete thousands of clinical hours. During one of my clinical units I worked on a floor where patients were undergoing stem cell transplants for diseases like leukemia and lymphoma. After a transplant, patients are secluded for about 30 days. Every few days I would start my visit to the unit by checking in at the nurse’s desk to inquire about new patients.

One day I arrived and the nurse mentioned a patient, Aaron, who was a man in his 20s who had been in and out of the unit a few times. She recommended that I didn’t prioritize visiting him because he didn’t talk much and he spent most of the day on his computer playing games. Moreover he wasn’t feeling weak or sick, he was just bored. I envisioned an unreceptive, disgruntled young man glued to the imagery of a violent video game.

I knocked on Aaron’s door and prepared myself to be dismissed. Our first conversation was stilted, but I learned that he was an artist and that he was ambivalent about his relationship with God as he confronted his cancer in the midst of the prayers of his Catholic mother and the booming demands of his Baptist minister father. Aaron had no health insurance, and had been transferred from a

public hospital thanks to a Legal Aid attorney who had assisted him with getting the treatment he needed for his unusual cancer.

Over the course of my next couple of visits with Aaron, I learned that he was grappling with whether his cancer was a punishment for his sins. Aaron's father believed that Aaron's inter-racial marriage and his sexually charged art were offensive to God. Aaron's art expressed a social justice agenda; he depicted homo-erotic scenes that were intended to confront homophobia.

After several weeks, Aaron's condition worsened and he became severely ill. I spent many hours with him trying to untangle the notion that his cancer was a manifestation of his sin. His father imposed on him the idea that illness is a punishment for sin. In so doing, Aaron's father exponentially increased Aaron's emotional and spiritual distress at a time when he needed to rally his strength.

In this story Aaron's father was clearly a perpetrator causing suffering. But he was also a man whose hardened expressions were a reaction to the possibility of his son's death and the possibility of his son's damnation.

Aaron's father is on the same team as all parents whose hearts are bound to their children. Aaron's suffering was unbearable to his father, and he had to do everything he could to save his son. To see Aaron's father as purely a cause of suffering is an act of violence.

When we define the motives and thoughts of others, strangers or even those we love, we deny them their inherent worth and dignity. And we deny ourselves insight into our own suffering. A contemptuous thought is the perfect opportunity to shed light on ourselves. Instead of separating ourselves from those whom we find villainous, our judgments can awaken us to our own suffering and pain.

Nhat Hanh asks us to see ourselves from all the perspectives that his poem proclaims. He writes, "I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river, and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly." As we beckon summer, a time for observing the mayfly and the bird, may we live in harmony with the many creatures we embody so that the doors of our hearts can be left open.