

THANKSGIVING TO THOSE WHO AWAITED YOUR BIRTH HOPEFULLY
On the Influence of Prenatal Companions

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READINGS (printed after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	adapted from a Navajo prayer
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>The Pilgrims' Covenant</i> , adapted from Rev Alice B. Wesley
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>Take a Lump of Clay</i> , by Kuan Tao-Sheng
<u>Reading</u>	<i>On Parents</i> , adapted from Kahlil Gibran's <i>On Children</i> (in <u><i>The Prophet</i></u>)
<u>Readings</u>	<i>To Ourselves and Our Posterity</i>

SERMON

In ancient days East and West, fortunetellers forecast the fate of children who were about to come into the world. Some today are less deterministic. They see people as having relative free will, relative to their powers of imagination about alternative options.

Yes, we have potentials. But some of these we are unaware of and don't prepare to develop. So we may fall short of our full potential. Probably everybody does. We are not omniscient or omnipotent or pre-determining – and many of us believe there is nothing that is. And yet, does that not allow that our fate is in our creativity, our imagination? And therefore, our fate is not sealed.

One kind of influence on us as we are coming into the world is the kind of hopes the world has for us and what kind of preparations the world makes for these hopes. And the question then becomes, what will be your response to the influence of these hopes and preparations.

My wife, Alisun, loves bowls. So we have a lot of bowls in our cupboard. When selecting a bowl for the stone soup auction, I checked with her. She gave me an accounting of where each bowl came from – that friend, that potter, that Goodwill, that state, that city, that holiday, that relative, her mother, her grandmother. Besides all the unique pottered bowls, we have somehow ended up with 21 brightly colored FiestaWare bowls. (After today, 20, I hope.) Why the colorful diversity? Alisun's maternal grandmother, Angelina, was an Italian immigrant to America, married at 14 years old to Michael, also an Italian immigrant. Raising a family in New Jersey, she grew a small orchard of ten trees (peach, plum, apple, pear, cherry), two grapevines (one red, one white), and a garden of vegetables. She canned, preserved, made wine, made pasta. She had eight children.

To Angelina, food was important for the family. Beauty was important for the family. And colorful dinnerware was a way to serve food and beauty. These were her hopes for her

children and grandchildren - evidenced by how she prepared herself to relate to them and how she influenced them through the environment she created.

When Alisun was a child, her family lived with Angelina and spouse for about ten years. After school, as a reward for studying, Angelina served tea to Alisun in a nice tea cup – actually, one third tea, one third milk, one third sugar – Angelina Tea, the family called it. Health, home, studiousness, beauty, happiness– these were hopes for which Angelina created influences to nurture the potentials in her children and grandchildren.

Have these influences been passed along? Alisun made Angelina Tea for her children when they were home from school sick. Alisun's daughter Erin makes Angelina Tea for her kids when they need comfort (probably with less sugar). And you should see our cupboard. Many are grateful to Angelina and her foods and beauties.

I have seen other families which value health, home, studiousness, beauty, and happiness. I have seen them raise their children as best they could to these ends. But it didn't work and they and their children did not fulfill their potential. I think the main reason is that they were not supported by family, community or society.

That suggests that on the path of spiritual growth, there is a political dimension. Long ago, at the start of the Reformation, John Calvin called political work and public service the highest spiritual calling. It is the spiritual work of community. Politics is personal, but also, I think, it is communal.

Almost nothing good happens, or at least is sustained, without community. Even great wealth doesn't work without community – witness the waste of millions of dollars donated to Tampa Bay by Bill Gates for educating the poor. Because the full community was not involved in the political decisions, none of that money reached its targets, much less its goals.

This points to a spiritual corollary of democracy – you may have a vote, but you're not a real citizen if you don't have an active equal voice in the debate. And in that, you have to monitor where the influence of wealth and power are pressing.

Every story and life begins with expectations and hopes, great expectations and small, positive and negative, personal and environmental, each with an influence on the development of one's potentials, and each needing a response. The story of Jesus, for example, is structured such that we can find examples of the influences on the coming child's potentials. At his birth - set in the story in this season where new light is also soon to be born upon the earth - the authors describe a world of hopes and preparations to influence Jesus' potentials.

What were the world's preparations then? The Jewish shepherds of Bethlehem – sons of David as were Joseph and Jesus - hoped a messiah would come liberate them - and based on their revelation, they soon were spreading the word. The Magi, leaders of the Persian society that was foe to the Roman Empire, hoped for a politically revolutionary new king amenable to their dreams of lost glory and they were soon offering what we might now consider bribes of gold,

frankincense, and myrrh. The Judean puppet king, Herod, installed by the Romans, hoped to quash any revolutionary movement that would disturb order and rile the Roman army, so he ordered the massacre of Bethlehem's children. Those are influences on the child's potential working even before his birth. For some, thanks; for others, alarm.

In America, the polity – our political culture – and the emergent secular religion in our founding days would have said our role is to establish and maintain democratic rule to form ever-more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide not conquest but common defense, promote general welfare for all our people, and secure these same Blessings of liberty for the people and its posterity. In faith terms, I believe it is telling us, You are the authority, you are the real hope, and you are the active force – not as a messiah working alone, but as a citizen among many citizens working together.

As I reflect, I see this to be the same societal expectation of those shaping our environments when we were about to be born, whether they thought of it in those terms or not, whether they knew individually or collectively how to prepare themselves and the world and us, or not.

How do you use that influence or, if it seems necessary, disabuse that? When I was growing up, my parents and our community regularly voted to pay high taxes to educate the children, and in my observation the children and their subsequent communities have thereafter prospered in large part. Now as an adult, I still vote the same way, though with less engagement than is needed – but my community local and national votes to avoid taxes and fails to educate all our children – and many children's potential for fulfilling self and community dries to dust like raisins in the sun.

Oh, for families with lots of food and beauty and hope and drive. Oh, for communities that provide equal opportunity for hope and drive enough to bear and share good fruit.

The fine novelist Amy Tan, author of The Joy Luck Club based, as I recall, on her grandmother's experiences as a Chinese girl and an American immigrant, has written an autobiography – or better, perhaps, a portrait of the writer – in which she says, (A relative) “complained to my mother that she should not be telling me all those useless stories. ‘She can't change the past,’ he said. My mother told him, ‘It can be changed. I tell her so she can tell everyone, tell the whole world, so they know what my mother suffered. That's how it can be changed.’ My mother” (continues Tan) “wanted the secrets exposed so that the power of shame could be replaced with outrage.”

I think that part of Tan's mother's point is at the heart of our spiritual work: If we examine the influence of the world on our forebears and the consequent conduct of our forebears as they struggle to bring us into life, that in itself changes the alignment of the forces of life from repressive power to salvational power.

Kahlil Gibran's beautiful book *The Prophet* advises parents that they cannot and should not direct their children's lives. That is okay to a degree, particularly as a hedge against surprise, if you prefer. But children, especially children in the womb, do not know their options. The best

options must be demonstrated then – kindness, patience, wisdom, mother courage, excitement, expectation – and made part of the living narrative as the child grows.

Kuan’s poem about clay statues suggests to us that our lives as parents and children – through genes, temperament, experience, and culture - are inextricably not only interwoven, but interfused. Our task is not to deny or retreat from influence, but to discern what to do next about the realities of influences received or given.

As we grow, as we mature, as we realize the power of our imaginations for reshaping the world past and present, and investigate our potentials and influences and their possible futures in every stage or dimension of life, we encounter many streams of power operating upon us. And we also encounter a stream of power operating in us. And this inner potency gives us the potential to imagine, to generate choices, to make our own freedom and our own way and our own destiny - not fated, but perhaps to be feted (F-E-T-E-D as in celebrated) by our own spirits, our posterity, and even our peers.

Are we not Life, longing for itself? In metaphor there is no difference between the Archer, the Bow, and the Arrow, anymore than between seed, sprout, blossom, and fruit.

We can say, I think, that spiritual practice is about discerning and adopting those influences, internal and external, which help fulfill potential and it is about detaching from those which are not truly in accord with what we are. Spiritual practices then become guides to keep us on the track we want to be on.

Meditation, journaling, spiritual friendship – examination of the stream of life power in yourself and the world – these help keep you in your most uncluttered, unconfused state of being and in your most unencumbered, nurturant state of doing.

By knowing the stories and changing their power from constraining to sustaining, then to be able to walk in the influence of the many beauties of life around and within us, even in the womb: could that not be part of our search and our way and our life? And our thanksgiving.

READINGS

Thoughts for Gathering adapted from a Navajo prayer

Beauty before us, beauty behind us, beauty above us, beauty below.
Us coming from it, it coming from us, in birth, in youth, in age.
In wonder, in quiet, on the beautiful trail, at the beginning, at the end.

Invocation *The Pilgrims' Covenant*, adapted from Rev Alice B. Wesley

This morning in our celebration of life may we be strengthened,
that we may walk together in the ways of wisdom and kindness
as best we understand them now or may learn them in days to come --
and that we and our children might be fulfilled,
and might speak to the world
in words and actions of peace and good will.

Meditation *Take a Lump of Clay*, by Kuan Tao-Sheng

Take a lump of clay,
Wet it, pat it,
Make a statue of you
And a statue of me.
Then shatter and scatter them;
Add some water
And fold them and mold them
Into a statue of you
And a statue of me.
Then in mine there are bits of you
And in yours there are bits of me,
And nothing ever shall keep us apart.

Reading *On Parents*, adapted from Kahlil Gibran's *On Children* (in *The Prophet*)

You are not your parents' child.
You are the son or daughter of Life's longing for itself.

You come through your parents but not from them,
And though you are with them, yet you do not belong to them.
They may give you their love,
But they cannot give you their thoughts,
For you will have your own thoughts. Your parents may house your body, but not your soul,
For your soul dwells in the house of your tomorrow,
Which they cannot visit, not even in their dreams.

They may even strive to be like you;
But seek not to make yourself just like them,
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
They are the bows from which you were sent forth as a living arrow.
But it is the Archer who sees your mark upon the infinite
and bends your glad parents with Its glad might
that you may fly swift and far.

Readings *To Ourselves and Our Posterity*

And holy men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, "Where shall we seek the child who is to be born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." And in the hills of Bethlehem, the City of David, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel stood before them and glory shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said, "Be not afraid, for see, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: To you will be born this day in the City of David a savior who is the messiah." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host.

We the People, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.