

SERMON for October 7, 2018

IS CULTURE YOUR ENEMY?

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READINGS (texts printed below, after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>Creativity</i> , from Albert Einstein
<u>Invocation</u>	Adapted from the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>Cedar Waxwings</i> , by Robert Francis
<u>Reading</u>	<i>The News</i> , by Paul Burnore
<u>Benediction</u>	<i>Taoist Prayer</i>

SERMON

A couple of weeks ago, my family and I went and heard the The Florida Orchestra perform what proved to be the most rapturous concert experience I've ever had. We sat high in the balcony, the theater spread below us like an anthropological diorama - musicians, conductor, full house audience in long rows and box seats, ushers here and there - rapt attention everywhere - audience unexpectedly asked to stand - National Anthem gorgeously played, everyone with whole and hopeful hearts spontaneously joining to sing. Then Respighi and Rachmaninoff poured forth no less intoxicating in spirit than Beethoven's Fifth. Standing ovations throughout.

This was culture. This was a grand harmonious culture - sparkling in vibrations of individual excellence and orchestrated community – radiated from the fulfilling potentials of performers and patrons alike. The orchestra hall and the performance were a model for a culture, as is perhaps all artistic creation and performance or any bonding play – at once sanctuary and garden and adventure for the soul.

Let us define culture as “the customized system within which persons and peoples live.” The whole system can be analyzed in terms of subsystems: economic, political, social, religious, aesthetic, communication – power systems whose dynamics influence the growth of all human potentials, for better or for worse. Perhaps we could just say a culture is “a human system” in which all people are born and journey with their potentials to survive and to thrive.

I think of anthropologists as students and scholars of culture, of whole human systems. I'd like to see their analysis of that concert so I'd have a more scientific grasp of the magic in the conductor's wand over rows of enchanted people, motionless in their seats, but dancing inside to every pull of the strings, every swell of the horns, every pulse of the drums, then bursting to their feet in applause as the last note keeps sanctuary in their souls.

And the next day perhaps it will be in the news – some facts, some opinions, some biases – as if the journalists were the best friends or worst enemies of the people – filling our minds then filing the news in the archeological tell of culture, to be excavated someday by anthropologists searching for trends and explanations and meaning by which a past might be defined and a future might be divined. Culture – the anthropologist's record book of life – and for most of us, a guiding invisible hand.

But some persons and peoples, for example a long tradition of Taoists and Zen practitioners and Emerson-influenced Transcendentalists, warn that culture can spread detrimental ways. It

can be a tool for dominance, limitation, injury, sterility. Only simplicity of heart and simplicity of mind and simplicity of soul – simplicity, simplicity, simplicity - can clearly see the light.

I doubt that today you'd have any trouble coming up with examples of these warnings about injurious culture and customs – pardon my language, but patriarchal rape culture, papal abuse and denial culture, paternalistic oppression culture. Know thyself, say Taoist and Delphi – and by “thyself” is meant yourself and your society and the divine self within all.

But perhaps we should understand the knowing of thyself as not requiring the dismissal of all customs and prescribed manners, but rather requirement discernment of ways that would serve well as custom. Hasn't it proved true that some custom is beneficial, while some is injurious? Isn't that, in fact, the reason that our Declaration of Independence, in order to establish equality and freedom of rights for all, held government accountable to be “most likely to effect (our) safety and happiness” or else be changed by us? Is this not still the standard for which we are obliged as citizens to offer our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor? In times like these and in any times, there is something you can do – and now is always the only time to do it.

Cultural systems and their influences:

When I was in the Peace Corps in the Pacific islands of Micronesia, in 1967 I met an anthropologist named Thomas Gladwin. Around 1947-1948, Dr. Gladwin had written a book entitled Truk: Man in Paradise, based on his study of the isolated island group's 2000 year old Trukese culture. (*Truk* or *Chuk*, by the way, means “mountain” in the indigenous island language, referring to the cluster of 13 islands that were the remnants of a huge ancient volcano.)

Around 1948-49, when the U.N. made the Pacific Islands of Micronesia a U.S. Trust Territory, Dr. Gladwin was appointed staff anthropologist for the Trust Territory's Truk District. In that role as part of the U.N. mandate to advance the trust territory's political, economic, social, and educational independence, he traveled island to island, training the 30,000 Trukese people and their leaders in the democratic processes of campaigns, elections, voting, and representation.

When Dr. Gladwin returned in 1967, then as a Harvard University professor of anthropology, his project was to describe and analyze the amazing navigational accomplishments of the islanders about which he had earlier become familiar. The islanders would sail a thousand miles in outrigger canoes for trade or just for acquaintance sake, navigating not by instruments, but instead by an intricate system of ocean currents, winds, and star positions, memorized for each season. Yet on any standardized Western intelligence test, these sailing people ranked poorly.

Dr. Gladwin's research indicated strongly that this was because of differences in cultural experience and expectation. In the publication of his work, entitled East Is a Big Bird after the eastern constellation of the Trukese astronomical system, he showed how this low ranking of brilliant people corresponded to conventionally deprecatory IQ assessments of people living in poverty in America. In other words, American IQ testing methodologies unjustifiably excused a great waste and oppression of human potential.

In 1981, I was returning to the Micronesian islands to do some research for a possible great

American novel and I stopped on my way to consult with Dr. Gladwin. To my surprise, when we began to talk about Micronesia, a sadness came up in him.

“When I went back that time in 1967,” he said, “I found the culture of Truk Lagoon dramatically changed even from those post-war years. All those gasoline-powered motor boats – they had been imported and had replaced all the beautiful locally crafted outrigger canoes and sailboats. All the garbage dumps of tin and plastic from imported food – before, everything had been local, organic, recycled, pristine. All the teachers and public administrators we still train and pay were becoming an elite dominating class in the cash economy the U.S. set up to keep the islanders dependent under our political and military domain. And the democratic voting and election procedures I as a trusted anthropologist had helped implement has replaced the consensus system that had been customary for perhaps two thousand years and had ensured everyone got along and got what they needed for a good life.

“We have created in Micronesia,” he said, “a system of winners and losers, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. What was one of the most placid and paradisaical places on earth, with such low levels of anxiety that they would have been the envy of any industrialized people, now has the highest suicide rate in the world among young males because they can no longer find a productive respected place in their society.

“I,” said Dr. Gladwin, “am an anthropologist who, by professional overreach, helped destroy a joyful, egalitarian, cooperative, life-serving culture. By training alone, I should have known better. What can I say?”

Dr. Gladwin’s book on the intellectual stature of indigenous seafaring people had been influential in the research on the relationship between poverty, potential, and achievement in America. In 1980, the year before I visited him, he applied similar analysis to Africa in an influential book entitled, Slaves of the White Myth: The Psychology of Neocolonialism. He remained active for making the world better. But he knew with deep regret from his own short-sightedness and from U.S. government interventions that cultural imperialism is at best blind. For the well-being of people, culture matters, understanding cultural influence matters, and knowing how to influence culture matters.

So for ourselves and our world, must we not ask:

Your culture’s economic system: Is it responsive and productive for all?

Your culture’s political system: Is it inclusive and empowering for all?

Your culture’s social system: Is it just and nurturing for all?

Your culture’s religious system: Is it realistic and integrating for all?

Your culture’s intergenerational system: Is it purposeful & wise for all?

Your culture’s human systems in relationship with the ecosystem: Are they sustaining and sustainable for all?

And for that we must also ask ourselves:

Am I aware of American cultural influences on my potentials?

Am I aware of my potential to influence American culture?

And, am I aware of my calling to be aware?

I have come to believe that, in these times and in any time, it is more than simply fruitful to think and feel our way through these questions to an active caring response.

What do you believe?

READINGS

Gathering Thoughts *Creativity is intelligence having fun.* - Albert Einstein

Responsive Invocation Adapted from the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

On this Indigenous Peoples Day, may we grow in understanding

that all peoples are equal though they may be different and prefer to be different.

May we grow in understanding that all peoples contribute

**to the diversity and richness of civilizations and cultures,
to the common heritage of humankind.**

May we grow in understanding

**that assertions of superiority of peoples or individuals
on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences
are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust.**

May we grow in understanding that there is urgent need to respect and promote
the inherent rights of indigenous peoples

**as derived from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures,
spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands,
territories and resources.**

May we grow in understanding that indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices

**contribute to sustainable and equitable development
and proper management of our environment.**

Today may our spirits grow in caring for our sisters and brothers of Earth

and for all the children of Earthkind and for all their ways.

Meditation *Cedar Waxwings*, by Robert Francis

Now if you would, undertake that paradoxical act of deep relaxation

by focusing your mind on your mind

and, in our reading, sense place, feel relationship, think meaning –

and above all, into each word, breathe your spirit.

The poem is called “Cedar Waxwings”:

Four Tao philosophers as cedar waxwings

chat on a February berry bush

in sun, and I am one.

Such merriment and such sobriety--

the small wild fruit on the tall stalk--

was this not always my true style?

Above an elegance of snow, beneath

a silk-blue sky a brotherhood communion of four

birds. Can you mistake us?

To sun, to feast, and to converse

and all together--for this I have abandoned

all my other lives.

Reading *The News*, by Paul Burnore

I delight, I entertain, I inform.

I am useful in more ways than you might imagine.

I provide something for every taste.

So you who criticize me all the time,

I ask, do you do as much as I do?

Not only unlikely, my dear, but quite impossible.

I am still handled by my edges, delicately, religiously

By those who love my touch, my feel, my importance.

And I win arguments between friends when I'm quoted.

My pages are often folded backwards, sometimes cruelly crumpled

Once they've fondled my smooth surfaces and had their pleasure of me.

Articles and ads and cartons are torn out of me, and worse.

Used to soak up everything from spilt paint and cat pee

To vomit and filth from overflowing sinks and toilets.

And blood. In that way I'm indispensable. I'm pretty good.

Used everywhere to start fires, and there I'm good too,

Sometimes in camps and grills, sometimes in homes.

I'm innocent of how and why I'm used. Why should I care?

I'm used to wrap wanted and unwanted flesh,

Like the fish from the market or the possum the dog killed,

Because I'm versatile, I absorb and cushion and hide the truth.

I'm packing material for little Charlie's shiny red toy truck,

And Aunt Ethel's unspeakably ugly vase,

And even forensic evidence for the district attorney's office.

I pile up upon myself, day after day, for weeks, months, even years

In some old person's home, lining the dining room, the bedroom,

Falling over in the kitchen corner, getting soggy on the porch.

I've also taken on a new electronic appearance, all bits and pixels

And glossy photos, wizarded up from anywhere in the world,

Displayed and devoured quickly, without digestion, then toileted.

My television puppets are all mascara and scripts.

I give them something simple to do, just smile and read,

I make them look like they know something, but they don't.

I'm the patron saint of freedom. Sometimes I tell the truth.

Countries without me are in tyranny or war or starvation.

People without me live in squalid ignorance without hope.

I'm the angel of demagoguery. I allow unfettered lies

To influence people who wait to be persuaded. Ah the ignorant!

I allow the trivial and sensational. I ignore poor writing.

The dog is reluctant to fetch me in his mouth,

But he does.

Benediction *Taoist Prayer*

In differences, see agreement.

In freedom from culture, find blessing.

In choosing, choose blessing.

In the way of life's power, be blessing.

In action, have no ambition but blessing.

In relationship, be at ease enough to bless yourself.