

Reading and Sermon November 23, 2008

Rev Holly Baylies© 2008

READING : Grace

Grace at our dinner tables does not always come easy for Unitarian Universalists. We have been brought up in our Sunday school classes with very little to memorize but with much to think about. Our prayers are quiet and unrehearsed, often at random and most often at the least opportune of times, and when we are asked to speak a formal grace it befuddles most of us as the technique and the habit of chanting one that has been learned as children and buried in our subconscious for years is just not readily there for the recall.

On Thanksgiving Day, my mother always said grace, even with a minister in the family it was her chosen responsibility and one which she took very seriously. Her quest for the perfect grace began a good week before. She would spend hours at her desk surrounded by crumpled balls of scrap paper, searching for the right words to share. It was almost agonizing to watch her struggle, but every year her finished blessing upon us was eagerly anticipated and the highlight of our dinner together.

Several years before she died, after days of careful thought, reams of crumpled paper and much agonized pacing, she offered this unusual blessing.

First she handed each one of us a Susan B. Anthony silver dollar, this one. She sat at her place and began to speak these words:

Susan B. Anthony was a pioneer who fought for women's rights

This silver dollar minted in her name, and as we sit down at this table, the linens ironed, plates washed and table set, to enjoy this dinner prepared exclusively by the women in this family,

I would like to give thanks for the men who have supported and cared for us, by whose weekday labors we are privileged to prepare this meal and

when we have finished, as the women sit back and enjoy a snifter of brandy and chat in the livingroom, the men will clean up and put every thing away. It is for this sharing of not only joys and celebration, but for the efforts of all that we give grateful thanks.”

My brothers’ eyes grew as big as saucers as they glanced at one another. My sister and I smiled at Mom. My father looked totally confused, his routine gently shattered.

The women did adjourn to the living room with some unspoken reservations. The clatter of dishes, pots and pans and an occasional telling crunch of fine china did not move us to leap up to the rescue. We sipped Bailey’s Irish crème and never turned on the Ballgame.

In time, a resounding laughter came from the kitchen, as aprons were passed out among the men.

A new tradition was born, and has continued every year since, one for which we have the image of Susan B. Anthony and the gentle and wise words of my mother for which we do indeed give grateful thanks.

GIVE ME YOUR TIRED YOUR POOR?

Rev Holly Baylies

I have never been to the Statue of Liberty. I have heard many stories of its tremendous impact on those coming to Ellis Island to immigrate to this country; to the land of milk and honey where the streets are paved with gold, where religious belief is not an issue and many races and ethnic groups are welcome. The statue of liberty, standing firm, lifting her massive torch of freedom and promise to all who come to this golden land has brought tears to the eyes of the oppressed, and hope to the hearts of those seeking the promise of a new life.

I always thought that the Statue of Liberty was built to greet immigrants. In fact, It was a gift from France, of good will to honor our 1876 Centennial celebration. I did not know until watching a PBS documentary of The Story

of The Statue of Liberty, of the uproar among politicians and citizens that the statue caused. When the torch was shipped and unveiled at the Centennial, it became the fodder for cartoonists, who pictured an old hag with a gigantic overweight torch precariously leaning over the harbor stooped like the Hunchback of Notre Dame! Not only that, but who, in their right mind in the mid 1870's would want a mere woman as representative of America, now really! Then there was the issue of where to put it? The Politicians cried out, "What kind of joke are the French pulling on us anyway?"

Ultimately the political satirists and cartoonists had done their job well and the message was a strong "we don't want that ugly thing, take it back." When all the parts were finally shipped to us, in spite of our objections and America's distaste for the very idea of a massive French Statue dominating any US harbor, it was put into storage until the politicians decided it was a bad political move to just reject it outright or to simply throw it away. Reluctantly money was raised, much of it through dimes collected by school age children all across America, to assemble the statue and a location was selected.

The history books have left out this little detail, the fact that we didn't want it, nor did we wish to raise the money needed to assemble and secure it. The Statue of Liberty was never intended as a welcome mat for anyone.

This strange gift from France, was reluctantly accepted, their intentions speculated about, made fun of and when it was erected we still asked "why are the French doing this, what do they want from us?"

But that is not how the newest Americans saw it from the holds of freighters and the rusted decks of overcrowded ocean liners.

"The Lady with the Lamp" became their symbol of home, of new life in a new land and we let it go as that. Historically you will not find in any public schoolbook the true story of the struggle that preceded the gift of the Statue of Liberty. But, we let it stand as our national greeter and over time, we have come to know it as our foremost ambassador, a symbol of

welcome to the American way of life.

But way back then, we really didn't mean it in the way it has been perceived by immigrants, many of whom quickly found out that this too was a land of struggle in a different way and all the glorious stories of streets paved with gold and jobs for all were all too often unfortunate misconceptions as many communities today are dealing with the huge numbers of immigrants both legal and illegal crossing our borders.

Several years ago I had attempted to assist a co-worker from the Ivory Coast to become a citizen of this country. He had a green card and had applied for citizenship and never heard back from immigration.

His visas kept expiring and even calls from my lawyer did not elicit a response other than he is on the waiting list, which could take years. To my knowledge he is still not a citizen so exactly how does that open ended delay help him to become an American, a legal member of any community here in good standing? One can surely understand why so many have yet to become citizens and remain illegals.

Last year while I was in Bryant Pond, Maine I picked up the Maine Times. The lead story was about the conflicts that have arisen in the city of Lewiston, Maine over the influx of 1200 Somali Bantu's who have come to settle in that city of 36,000 in the past 20 months.

The city became known among the Somali community, as a welcoming place to work and to live and that was true until so many converged on Lewiston all at once.

Lewiston pretty much embraced and absorbed their coming until the mayor, concerned about the strain on their inadequate resources and welfare system faxed a letter to the Somali Elders asking them to and I quote, "exercise some discipline and reduce the stress on our limited finances and generosity." He added, "Lewiston is maxed-out financially, physically and emotionally." In other words no more should come.

The city hall is just around the corner from the Somali Community Office. A sit down problem solving conference with the leaders of the Somali

Community, rather than a faxed ultimatum, could have diverted much of the media feast that ensued.

Civil liberties groups are claiming discrimination, anti-racist's claiming racism, the working Somalis are insulted and the community is gathering to support through a march sponsored by the Methodist Church or to oppose Somali occupation by "the Franco-American population who are seeing their community change in ways they don't understand." The government of Lewiston has been left to decide what to do and are asking , "what do they want from us?" 795 Somali's have applied for welfare assistance and of the 412 adults, city officials figure half are working. In Holyoke, MA, one of the poorest communities in Massachusetts, of which I am very familiar, a coalition of religious charities received \$1 million dollars in funds to be distributed over a 3-year period to support 60 Somali families. The city counselors who learned of this plan asked the government to take back the money for "they do not have the resources to educate, train, house or protect these individuals." However the poverty status and empty mills that once attracted waves of Irish, German and French Canadian immigrants, and the host of entry level jobs, and more than 700 rooms available at \$350.00 a month, are the exact reasons why the money was granted. The city council insists that a million dollars is not enough and it will take away from those already in need.

The arguments pro and con have flooded both of these communities, from the strain on the already overtaxed school systems, to medical care in small hospitals and clinics, to the fact that immigrants founded both of those communities.

After seeing the issues from both sides, I still have no idea how many Somalis are registered or are illegal immigrants. How many have green cards or speak the language, or what resources they may have brought with them, or if they have ideas about a transition program?

We have put up our welcome signs but we do not seem to have a reasonable way of immigrant registration or a plan that makes integration

clear to both the leadership of communities such as Lewiston and Holyoke or to their citizens.

It amazes me to think that we have opened our doors so wide and actually been alarmed at the numbers that have come through! There still lingers a cynicism about foreigners who come here to find work and a better life.

Since the demise of the function of Ellis island, in the best and worst of its days, the lady with the lamp has become merely a tourist attraction with a convoluted history, its massive structure, looming out of the early morning harbor fog, was once, the first American symbol of promise for so many. I hope that some day it can become that symbol of hope again.

There is an irony to this story that goes back to the early 1600's, to our first immigrants, who arrived exhausted and sick, cold and hungry to reach a land that promised a new kind of freedom, that did not exist in their home land. I wonder what it would have been like for them, the Pilgrims, had the native residents rebuffed their arrival and sent them back, to suffer and die in the holds of their barely seaworthy vessels? The irony is that our ancestors were welcomed, the leadership of the native tribe actually spoke English according to historical accounts and taught them how to survive in a hostile climate and in turn, in time, we cruelly took from them, their land and their freedoms. How different the American landscape would be today had the tables turned and our relatives been cut adrift!

The part we choose to remember are those few days of abundance, and community, where two vastly different cultures sat down together and shared what they had to offer.

Immigrants, pilgrims, our forefathers and mothers, built this nation into a thriving and free country and that is something we cannot ever forget. As we prepare to sit down to our modern day Thanksgiving tables and remember that first Thanksgiving, and the community that ate together; what happened between them that fostered good will and cooperation, so that all could benefit from the knowledge and customs they shared.

As we glance around our own tables, to give thanks and to remember the pilgrims of yesterday and those of today as well, who only wish for the same things that our ancestors wished for when they set sail into the unknown and finally arrived to be welcomed in that cold and hostile place.

Emma Lazarus the American poet and essayist, wrote these words, which are inscribed on the base of the statue of Liberty:

*Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these the homeless, tempest- tossed, to me
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

So be it

Amen