

Reflections, January–February 2010

Thursday, January 7, 2010

Our cat, Sam, is quite old, and has been abnormally restless and vocal lately. I took him to the vet to see if he's in pain or distress. After examining him Dr. Logan said he's in pretty good physical shape, but has—dementia. Dementia.

Cat dementia, like the human kind, entails forgetfulness and confusion (happily, he can still find the litter box). Dr. Logan said we should worry only if he becomes indifferent to food or to us, his human can-openers, er, caretakers.

It may seem like a ridiculous association, but Dr. Logan's advice made me think of my dear friend and mentor Rev. Rex Bateman, who died 23 years ago this morning. At a certain point in the development of his illness, he lost interest in things. With unsettling suddenness, he became indifferent to the affairs of the church to which he'd dedicated his life, and to me in my ministry there. I understood what was going on, but I felt forsaken.

We should give thanks for the things that keep us engaged: love and hope, hunger and desire, and also, within limits, anxiety and even fear. The times of which the Book of Ecclesiastes speaks, in its lyrical and haunting 12th chapter, await us all: "... when the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, and we say (of our days and our years) 'I have no pleasure in them.'" These times prepare us for the next life, the rest so different from this world's restlessness. But we certainly don't want to hasten their arrival.

He gets on my last nerve, but I feel reassured every morning when Sam pesters me till I feed him.

Wednesday, January 13, 2010

The prophets Amos and Zechariah speak of an earthquake which occurred during the reign of King Uzziah of Judah. Zechariah says the people fled from it in terror. Isaiah received his call to be a prophet at the end of Uzziah's reign. He says the foundations of the temple, where he was praying, shook when God spoke to him. This may have been an aftershock of the same quake.

All three of these prophets would likely have said that God visited this earthquake on his people to punish them for their iniquity. We wouldn't say—we wouldn't dare say—such a thing about the terrible earthquake in Haiti yesterday. Surely, though, we can look for prophets to come forth from this tragedy. I doubt that any of them will be in positions of authority. More likely, we'll hear the prophetic word from a mother who lost her children, a shopowner whose business was destroyed, someone who dug through hospital rubble to reach a person whose screams he could hear.

Each of these voices will call our attention to the sort of iniquity Israel's prophets decried: corruption and complacency, within and beyond Haiti. Will we respond to these prophets' call? I don't know. But we should know this: though God may not have visited this tragedy on Haiti, yet the word of God will come to us through those whose lives it devastated.

Thursday, January 21, 2010

Leaders of the Episcopal and other mainline churches sometimes lament the proclivity of their followers for getting bogged down in debates about personal morality when larger issues of hunger, homelessness and poverty demand our attention.

In some measure, they're right. People of many religious persuasions, or none, are working together to bring relief to the stricken nation of Haiti, setting aside differences on hot-button moral issues like gay marriage. This is as it should be.

But personal morality matters a lot to people who are suffering. From the writers of the Biblical psalms to the Haitians offering prayers and hymns in parks and public squares, people see catastrophes as moral tests. They plead with God to help them maintain their personal integrity, even purity, when the anguish of the moment tempts them to forsake it. Were we to counsel them to set aside this focus on personal uprightness in order to address hunger, homelessness and poverty, they'd wonder what in heaven's name we were talking about. Worse, if they heeded our counsel, we would have robbed them of one of the few sources of meaning that can sustain us in the face of otherwise incomprehensible tragedy.

Thursday, January 28, 2010

The poet W.H. Auden wrote, in "For the Time Being," "Unless you say—'There must be some mistake'—you must be mistaken."

How often we say, to ourselves if to no one else, "There must be some mistake," or at least more to be learned about something or someone, more to be seen, something yet to be figured out.

God made us this way, with a drive to probe, question, inquire. This drive, as Auden seems to say, leads us toward truth. But the road to truth, as Auden also knew, takes unexpected turns. Sometimes our inquiry hits a brick wall, or runs out of steam. What looked like a mistake is just the way things are; what cried out for explanation falls silent.

The world resists being probed. We all have a few secret places, shielded even from our own gaze, let alone that of others. This is as it should be. In the end the mystery of things, which is their deepest truth, comes into view precisely when our restless probing finds its limits.

Thursday, February 4, 2010

Bill Proctor was a classic Chicago cop: big, burly, garrulous, profane, politically incorrect. He read voraciously, and could talk just about anybody under the table. He loved to hunt; the parish looked forward to venison sausage suppers whenever he and his brother-in-law brought back a deer from southern Illinois.

And he was sick, from before I became his pastor in 1984 until he died, just before Christmas last year. He had a bad heart (three heart attacks, necessitating a triple bypass), two kinds of cancer, and assorted other ailments. But he always had things he wanted to do: more hunting, more reading, more talking, more baiting of grandchildren. Partly by sheer cussedness, the force of his own will, he got more time to do all these things than he had any right or reason to expect.

Then, he was done. On certain occasions, we pray, "From dying suddenly and unprepared, good Lord, deliver us." Was Bill prepared? In his own way, by his own lights, yes. God gave him some room to set the terms of his own surrender. Is there a reckoning underway now, on God's terms and in God's

way? Absolutely. Each of us gets ready for the end in his or her own way, or ways. Then God, ever merciful, finishes the work that we began. We don't necessarily begin it well, but God makes it good enough.

Thursday, February 11, 2010

Sometimes I talk on the phone and read, or even answer, e-mail at the same time. I get mad at myself when this happens, because I believe we should do just one thing at a time. Driving, of course, but walking too, and even buying groceries, all require our full attention. So does talking on the phone. For each activity, its own time and place.

Honestly, though, a big part of me resists this "Zen" approach to things. This part of me has a short attention span. It thrives on jumping from one thing to the other, and even doing more than one thing at a time. It thinks giving my full attention to a transaction at CVS is silly, just as the Zen me scorns the multi-tasker.

... Okay, I'm back; just skipped over to the inbox to see if I had any new e-mails, and checked my voicemail. In fact, I'm listening to a message right now. I feel a little defiled ...

"Snowpocalypse" has shrunk the world for many of us. A mixed blessing, right? Time with family is lovely, but it's the fourth day and we're itching to get back to work. We enjoy catching up on reading, but get fidgety after 45 minutes or so. Centuries ago, long before Zen came to the West or anyone imagined modernity's frenzied pace, Augustine wrote of our characteristic oscillation between rest and restlessness. It seems like God has woven this rhythm into the fabric of the universe, and that of each of its creatures..

Thursday, February 18, 2010

Our left hand usually knows what our right hand is doing.

Jesus, in the gospel reading for Ash Wednesday, says it's not supposed to. That's because sin begins with self-awareness—the left hand taking note of the right hand's activity. Seeing our own actions and hearing our own words, we're compelled to defend them, rationalize them, and compare them to what other people do and say. From these fruits of awareness come defensiveness, self-deception, insecurity and arrogance.

But we can't cease to be self-aware, right? If we did, we would cease to be human. The left hand has to know what the right hand is doing. If it doesn't, it won't rest till it finds out.

On the horns of this dilemma we begin to understand, even feel, the difficulty of the questions Lent lays before us. How do we separate self-awareness from its poisonous fruits? How do we defend ourselves without getting defensive, set forth reasons for what we do without falling into deceptive rationalizations, compare ourselves to others without succumbing to insecurity or smugness or both? I'll explore some of these questions in reflections during this season of self-examination and repentance.

Thursday, February 25, 2010

Note: This is the second in a Lenten series on self-awareness, inspired by Jesus' words in the Ash Wednesday gospel: "Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing."

Sakena and I have been taking ballroom dancing classes off and on for several years. My favorite instructor is Justin. He doles out pithy aphorisms to guide clumsy, self-conscious students like me: "take small steps," "keep everything underneath you," "shift your weight with each step," "dancing is really just walking."

In a way, Justin is trying to move us from awkward self-consciousness to a healthy self-awareness marked by humility: know your limits; respect the dance's structure and discipline; remember that it's more about the dance than it is about you.

The best dancers, like many great artists and great athletes, seem to move beyond self-awareness altogether, into a place some call "the Zone." A larger force takes hold, and things happen almost independently of human awareness or intention. Shots find the basket, the bat finds the ball, dancers glide across the floor, the music flows out of the instrument. The left hand (maybe the left foot) doesn't know, or care, what the right one is doing.

Every once in a while we witness this sort of thing. When we do, it feels like one of us has transcended self-awareness and taken his or her place, if only for a fleeting instant, in an Awareness larger than ours.