

***“Everything is Holy Now”***  
***Easter 2006***

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***Invocation***

*I thank You God for most this  
amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits  
of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and  
for everything  
which is natural which is infinite  
which is yes*

*(I who have died am alive again  
today,  
and this is the sun’s birthday; this  
is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings:  
and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)*

*how should tasting touching  
hearing seeing  
breathing any –lifted from the no  
of all nothing –human merely  
being  
doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake  
and  
now the eyes of my eyes are  
opened)*

*e.e. cummings*

## ***SERMON***

I have been re-reading Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" lately. Do you remember that book? Or perhaps the movie? The book came out way back in the 1950's. I had forgotten that it isn't just about book burning which had been my primary memory of it.

In the book the main character, Montag, suddenly "wakes up" to realize what kind of world he really lives in. Before that he'd been "happy". Or so he was told. In fact the world he lives in is constantly at war, men of all ages are increasingly being called into service in wars which don't seem to end, children are increasingly violent toward each other, and depression and suicide are rampant.

But people are "happy" because with a flip of a switch, television shows in the form of virtual reality take over the walls of the house, and there are these ear gels that you can put in to hear music all the time, even when you're walking down the street. And most of all, there are no books to create disappointment in you.

Books have been banished not just because they can be subversive to the government, or because they make people think, but because they set people up for emotional distress and disappointment. This was the point in the story I had missed when I first read this book as an adolescent. This futuristic society has banished books, especially poetry, because like the springtime it feeds a deep human yearning which is dangerous and painful.

Books, especially poetry, raise a person's expectations for joy, romance, deep love, beauty, truth, of something great always about to bud or blossom or bloom. They feed a yearning for something more. They feed hope in a belief that change is possible.

But then...life doesn't live up to the promises in books. And then the books themselves, the beauty in them, even springtime itself can become a rebuke in a way. A reminder of the failings of the human heart and the human will.

Montag, in one scene, in a kind of ferocious rage and moment of near unraveling, pulls out a contraband book and reads a poem to a group of his wife's friends who have gathered to watch a soap opera together. After he reads it, one of the women begins to sob uncontrollably and another says:

*"I knew it would happen! I've always said, poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness' all that mush! Now I've had it proved to me. You're nasty, Mr. Montag, you're nasty!"*

He's nasty because he's made her feel things she thought she'd banished, made her realize she's not happy at all. That inside her still lives a deep need and a longing and to feel it, trying to get through all the barriers in the way, is painful.

Firemen, in this futuristic society Bradbury creates don't put out fires they start them. If it is reported that a house holds books the firemen burn it down. But their work is pretty minimal. Most people don't even want to read books anymore. There are just a few holdouts.

Montag, all because he has met a strange and unusual young woman, on the street in his neighborhood becomes one of these non violent revolutionary hold outs. He ends up in the woods with a small group who have each memorized a portion of a book, or a whole book. They believe that this "dark age" is one they will have to just ride out until its end and that when it ends, as it will, they always do, they will be there, ready to fill it again with the wisdom of the ages.

So I'm sitting there reading this book the other day at a table in a mall, outside of a Starbucks, which is just like a million other Starbucks. And young people are going by with ear gels playing constant music and I have in a gel in my ear for my cell phone and if I wander down the mall I can watch scenes from a war that never seems to end. Right now it happens to be in Iraq. But I don't want to watch it.

And on that same day I had been talking to a friend who has dealt with three suicides this year in his congregation. And the other day an acquaintance told me of a child he knows who was killed by a drunk driver. And I can't tell you how many people I know who suffer from depression. But then, you know all this.

And it wasn't yet Good Friday but it sure felt like it. Too much suffering in the world.

What to do about suffering? What to do with all the *feelings* that come up as a result of all this suffering. Suffering in the world, in other people, in my family, in myself? Present suffering? Past suffering? Future suffering?

But this year's Easter revelation for me, as a result of reading both *Fahrenheit 451* and the Biblical story of Jesus resurrection, is that I suffer much more when I don't let myself feel the pain of the world. That trying to hold all that pain at bay is tremendous work, and this work of repression that leads to depression, is work that our society colludes in, and spends much much money and materials and energy on.

This acceptance has been a long time getting to. I'm not sure I understand it at all yet. Some of you may have gotten it a long time ago.

I have always struggled with the meaning of Christ suffering on the cross and his martyrdom. Christianity has struggled with its meanings, and disagreed as to what the cross means in terms of how Christians should live.

It is much easier get the part about Jesus as a great teacher and prophet. He was for the poor and oppressed, let's live as he lived. But this suffering part, martyrdom? What's that about?

I was raised a Christian, in a liberal progressive tradition. And I was raised to think about how Jesus lived, not how he died. My father, a Congregational minister, told me that in Protestantism we put an empty cross up on the wall because we emphasized the risen Christ, the resurrection, more than the crucifixion. That Catholics showed Christ, bloody and hanging on the cross, because they emphasized suffering.

All the stories my Catholic friends told me about nuns and catholic school seemed to back up the image of Catholicism as suffering.

But what we hear of doctrine is not what we necessarily learn. We learn from those around us. My Protestant father suffered, from depression and chronic worry and, I would say, most of all, the huge expectations he placed on himself. And our house was lined with books. Thousands of books including much poetry.

This year through the Lenten season, I slowly read through one of the four gospels (with a thick book of commentary by my side) until finally, the other day I reached the end, the resurrection. And all along this road to Jerusalem the problem I kept

butting up against was this idea of Christ dying on the cross, suffering on the cross in order to take on the sufferings and sins of the world. You know, that Catholic part. I think it's just all too codependent for me.

I've spent years trying to create good emotional boundaries and not take on other people's pain and suffering, as I did with my father's suffering as a child, soaked it up like a sponge. In fact in my years of hospice chaplaincy, it was absolutely necessary, to not take on other people's pain. I journeyed with thousands of people through all kinds of feelings until they reached their death. To take it all on would be like suicide.

I wrote a sermon about this once, about compassion fatigue. The word means *to suffer with*. From doing the hospice work I realized that *to suffer with* can't mean to *take on* someone else's suffering. That we can't walk in someone else's shoes. Unless maybe we're Jesus or Buddha or Mother Theresa. What would it take to be a Jesus or Buddha or Mother Theresa I asked the congregation? I think one would have to be open to some larger kind of love, some breath of spirit flowing through you at all times. I am not a Mother Theresa I told them. I'm just not that compassionate. I get compassion fatigue in fact.

That's brave of you to admit that as a minister, someone said to me afterwards, sounding more like they thought it was foolish.

Compassion, to suffer with, I told them, might mean to walk alongside someone as they suffer, to simply, *be* with them. Like Jesus wanted his disciples to do in the garden of Gethsemane. Just stay awake with me, please. But they didn't. Not even for an hour.

Maybe compassion, suffering with the world, with others, is about simply staying awake, in the Buddhist sense, staying conscious and aware. Being there with people in their hour of need. Like the women around Jesus. This week I visited a Christian internet site and the sermons were all about the fact that it was the women who stayed at the tomb of Jesus, and were then rewarded with seeing him first, after the resurrection. Like the mothers of “the disappeared” in South American one sermon noted, women, mothers, stay with the suffering, they don’t run away like the disciples did.

So maybe the crucifixion story, the Good Friday part of Easter, is not about role modeling martyrdom, but is telling us that Jesus took on the world’s suffering and sins and we don’t have to. Like I was told growing up, live like he did, be there with the poor, and the oppressed, and the hungry, and with anyone in your life who needs you, show up for them, but you don’t have to take on their suffering and pain.

And then, again on the road to Jerusalem this year, I had my Easter moment. My Good Friday passed as it always does. There was no reason for this to happen, I have no idea why it did, when it did. I guess I was ready, as they say.

It was simple. One day recently a person called me up to tell me a secret, something very painful to them. And she wept, and her crying was like a kind of living poetry. “*Poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness’ and all that*” And a stone rolled off my heart and I saw this huge cavern of universal pain opening up in front of me, and for a moment I looked in, uncertainly.

*Will I go in*, I guess I was asking myself, assuming an old familiar weight would descend. *That’s a dark and scary place. The story, the secret she’s telling me, well, I’ve*

*been there too.* It was like I was hearing my own story. I didn't really want to go there again. I've done that work. I didn't want to feel those feelings again. And then the tomb opened wider and I simply fell in.

And I cried on the other side of the phone in a way I never have before, tears just running down without any sounds or sobs. I had a philosophy teacher in high school who cried like that whenever he read us a very beautiful idea from a book, his voice didn't change at all or get choked up but tears just flowed down. I always wondered how he did that.

Crossing that threshold into the pain with her, was I'm thinking maybe a little bit like death. A moment of fear and pain, and then just wideness. And then freedom. A deep breath around all of the feelings, so much spaciousness that nothing hurts and everything is felt.

It was like one of those moments in a group that are so rare, when someone tells a difficult truth in a surprising way, not a practiced way, and every one's face is changed instantly. All masks are down and compassion is not even a question, it's a natural state.

You know, it wasn't like I haven't gone in there with people before. I have. But it's that life as an onion kind of thing. The layers of experience peel off one at a time and we go deeper and deeper and there is always something new about each spiraled layer, and closer to the core.

This felt different. There was a new awareness. And I am still learning what that awareness is. But I do know a couple of things. That I was wrong. The sermon on compassion fatigue that I gave only two years ago is out of date in my personal spiritual journey. On that life long road that spirals its way time after time, from Good Friday to

Easter, from death to resurrection, this year I learned that compassion *is* to take on someone else's suffering.

Christ *is* a role model on the cross, not a martyr. In the garden of Gethsemane, when not one of his friends will stay awake with him he is filled with doubt and fear, and disappointment and God knows what else and he says: I really don't want this to happen. If there's anyway you can take this cup away from me Lord please do it. But if I have to go through with it, then so be it. Thy will be done.

I like it that the editors of the story allow all this confusion and doubt to remain there. The human condition. Jesus didn't get it either. Why the cross? Why does he have to suffer?

This is a good example of being human, I think. We shouldn't *want* to suffer. That would be martyrdom and masochism, and codependency. I *still* don't get it. Why do we have to suffer? Why is there so much pain? There's a saying running around, we've heard it for years. Pain is not optional, suffering is. In other words, I guess, things will happen that are painful, but we don't have to *suffer* about them. I guess that means it's all about perspective or something, that with the right perspective, when we accept reality, we won't suffer so much. Suffering comes about because we want things to be other than they are. We want our will to be done.

That's an eastern point of view that I subscribe to, acceptance does lower suffering. But this point of view doesn't completely fill out the roundness of life for me. I suspect I need both East and west to be a full 360 degree person. When I meditate I do it in an eastern fashion, hoping for detachment from my learned suffering. This Easter

season I am appreciating what I learned from Christianity, to accept fresh suffering, not that of the past, or anticipating the future. Just what is here, in the now.

I am wondering if maybe suffering is not optional for those who would be compassionate. To suffer through something is to experience it, is to let myself feel the pain of the world.

In liberation theology, which is a grass roots revolutionary movement within Christianity, they say: God is with the poor and the oppressed. That is where God is. I happen to think God is everywhere, but my own Good Friday to Easter gestalt this year helped me understand the centrality of suffering in liberation theology. And I widened that idea. God is not just with the poor and the oppressed, God is wherever there is suffering whether rich or poor, male or female.

In the book “The Kite Runner”, the main character, Amir, nominally a Muslim, risks dying at the hands of the Taliban when he returns to Afghanistan from America to Kabul to rescue his best friends’ child. He is someone who has never really been able to “be there” for someone else, especially for his best friend. Most definitely he could not take on his friend’s suffering when he had the opportunity to do so in childhood. His friend was being abused by racist bullies and he did nothing about it. He has been wracked with guilt all his life as a result. He finally overcomes this distance from people and redeems himself by saving his friend’s child only to almost lose him again, to suicide.

In the hospital as he paces the corridors he is surrounded by the sounds and sights of suffering. And in his staying awake for someone else, for this child, he has his own

awakening. He says, and because I have just read Fahrenheit 451 I hear echoes from that wandering group of book memorizers in the forest: *“I know what I have to do... I have long forgotten the words but it doesn't matter, I will utter those few words I still remember: La illaha il Allah, Muhammad u rasul ullah. I see now that Baba was wrong, there is a God, there always had been. I see **Him here, in the eyes of the people in this corridor of desperation. This is the real house of God, this is where those who have lost God will find Him, not the white masjid with its bright diamond lights and towering minarets.**”*

And he drops down on his knees in the corridor and prays that the child will live. And the child does.

To *not* feel, to *not* suffer with the suffering world, is actually a lot of work I am realizing. It is like building and maintaining an invisible Berlin wall, slowly over time. We can't feel with each other all the time. We just can't. It's true few of us, are Mother Therasas. But sometimes the stone teeters over the heart, and we are invited to make a choice to let it roll off the tomb.

Maybe these opportunities become inevitable after we've done a lot of work on feeling our own feelings, and learn that they won't kill us. Maybe then other people's feelings don't have to feel like a six car pile up either. And when that happens we get a glimpse of what it means to have a Christ-like, a Buddha-like, a Mother Theresa-like compassion. No not just a glimpse, we *feel* the spirit moving through us like a wind, a great humanly divine spirit that is as common to all of us as our breathing in and out.

When it is outside the door it feels like the wolf that will blow blow blow the house down. But when the doors and windows to the soul are opened it is not heavy at all. It is poetry, it is the wind moving through us. It is the spirit of resurrection. It is Life Itself. It is the Holy Now.