

The Presence of the Way

I want to share a bit of poetry with you first..

Is it Atlas?
Casually balancing the world
Easily carrying the weight
Of his 4 billion brothers...
Is it Atlas?
A superhuman giant of a man
Is it Atlas?
Or is it you and I?
The common, more ordinary
Everyday men and women of the world
Who smell the everyday smell
Of urine in the hallways
Who step in the everyday
Contamination of the feces in the streets
Who touch and greet the smiles
And the distended bellies filled with parasites...
Is it Atlas...
Or is it you and I...
Those everyday people...
Who live with the everyday...
Sloppy...raggy...women dragging their youngsters...
Women in curlers eating candy
And watching soap operas and game shows...
Women in veils who never are allowed to leave their homes...
Is it a casual strongman Atlas...
Holding up the world...
Or is it just a you and an I...
Who live with those who can't read the newspaper...
Or bible...
Or can't read a book on how to raise chickens...
Is it just you and I who care...
Who hold up the world...
You and I who drive out on Sunday morning
To see our neighbor lying drunk along the roadside...
It's just you and I...
Common and everyday...
Who never seem to know the answer
Who ourselves are helpless against despair
Who can only point to the mystery
And ask and ask and ask
What makes it possible
To say yes...to love life
To decide...to grab a hold
What mysterious love of life...
Gives you and I and John and Maria
The will to live a yes to our vitality...

you have heard it, it will grow on you until such a time that it comes clearer and then extremely discernable. You cannot run away from the clarity.

During the consult in Maliwada, the first time we raised the question of a symbol for the community, the people talked about the fort. It was very strange, but slowly, over the next three months, that symbol became more and more important. I remember one community meeting when one of the old men stood up and said, "The fort has been talking to me these last three months." History had claimed him and that community in such a way that they could never turn back. That which was beyond the fort had altered their minds and hearts and would not allow them to forget the claim on their lives. You walk through Maliwada and at times you can be very close to the fort, and it looks very small. You can go far away and it looks huge; there is that kind of pervasive presence of the fort in the minds of the people.

This last year on three occasions, I had the opportunity to go to Fifth City. The first time was when the theologian, John Dunne was here, and on a Saturday afternoon we took him around the community. You can hear people hear the whistle. I heard it when John Dunne walked up to Floyd Stanley who is in charge of the laundromat in Fifth City. Floyd Stanley had been with us in one of the groups when we studied John Dunne's book. I said, "John Dunne, this is Floyd Stanley, Floyd Stanley, this is the gentleman whose book we were reading the other day." Floyd looked up and said, "You know something, I got something out of it." His eyes were big and shining and John Dunne knew that he had been captured by a reality that neither he nor Floyd Stanley could ever forget. We went through the community center and found Ruth Carter giving her life dancing with the children. You could hear the whistle in the presence of her vitality. People hear the whistle. They know that their lives are changed and from then on, they cannot forget it.

I have been overcome with my one visit to Pisinemo, Arizona. Before we drove to Pisinemo, our colleagues had said, "Pisinemo is the best project of all the projects in the United States." We met with the people when we arrived and that visit stayed with me for a long time. When we received the picture of the newly built laundromat, I kept taking the photograph to everybody and saying, "Hey, what a fine laundromat!" People would look at me and say, "Why are you doing this?" Then I went to Minto, Alaska, and I saw Kee Lee there. Kee Lee is an eighteen year old from the community of Pisinemo. Minto is a community where the space has been neglected. Kee Lee's room was the most intentional space that I encountered in Minto. The intentionality of her space was caring for Minto. There is a story about Leonardo Ortega, also from Pisinemo, who did an Economic Issues Forum in a small community in Arizona. He gave the context that proceeds one of the workshops and everyone clapped because it went very well. He was pleased with himself. One of our staff who has been around for many years, turned to Ortega on the way home and said, "Now Leonardo, do you think that you would like to coordinate a Forum one of these days?" Ortega turned to him and said, "If you can do it, then I can do it." Pisinemo has been building up inside of me, and I have wondered why. They have a myth, though they do not talk about it too much in Pisinemo. You can see it in the patterns on their baskets. It is the story of the man in the maze. This man walked to the center of life, overcame all the complexities, and walked back from the center, so that he could tell everybody the secret of life. When he came back, his body was torn into pieces, and out of the pieces, came the new people of Pisinemo.

that congress grass is called milkweed here. It grows all over the place, and when it dries up, it is very ugly. People do not like to touch it because they are likely to get an allergy that swells up their face. So every day we would work from morning until night, clearing the grass. After many days, some people walked by and called us all kinds of names, and kept saying, "These people have nothing better to do," and things like that. One day, one of the teachers came up to Lala Divekar and said, "What is your name," and so he said, "My name is Lala Diveka." "Where is your home?" "My home is near Maliwada." "How far have you studied?" "I have just finished high school." "What are you doing here? Why are you doing this?" "We think that this is important." "Don't you have a family to take care of, don't you have sisters to take care of?" "Yes." "Do you know that if you worked in a hotel, you could get twenty-five rupees every month and they would give you better food than you get here." And he said, "Yes, that is true, but I would not want to do anything else." He offered no excuse, no defense, no explanation, no justification. Three months later, when you walked into that community, there was no congress grass to be seen anywhere. That is not mystical nonsense.

The Presence of the Way has to do with the joy of life. I am told that Francis of Assisi was hoeing his garden one day and one of his colleagues walked up to him and said, "Now, if this were the last day of your life, if you were to die tonight, what would you be doing?" He said, "I would finish hoeing my garden." The joy of the Presence of the Way is that life has got you in its hold and you are a part of it. Everything that you do is significant. This year's assignment has been a very peculiar one for me. The Panchayat gets to know all the news (the bad news first), and then you feel paralyzed because you cannot just go out and do anything about it. It has been a very good year. Everyday, it is like sitting on a volcano, your blood just boils with what life is about. Listen to the details from one day in our life--eighteen hours of work all held in this one sheet of paper. First, we set up the system for Panchayat selection including getting somebody to count the ballots, then we walked through the financial situation of the Institute, the debts, the salaries, the program money,--that took about five hours of intensive work. All of the past came crashing in, all of the future came crashing in. A call from Jamaica reported that the InterAmerican Development Bank's visit to Woburn Lawn went very well, a complete victory, and everybody was very happy about it. Then a call from Brussels involved us in a talk about registering the Institute in Europe as an international organization. Then someone walked in and talked about an assembly that he had attended. Then, we heard a report on the plans for the July 25 anniversary celebration. Then we did some individual work, and reported together. Then someone walked in and said that a newspaper reporter had called and wanted some information. Then a call from Maharashtra at 9:00 p.m. reported that the 232 villages were done, and the celebration will be on the 16th of June. In one day, you have been through panic, you have been through rage, you have been through passion, you have been through hilarity--there is no end to that and your blood boils at every moment and there is nothing you can do about it. It has to do with mundanity, everyday nittygrittiness, and yet, in the midst of that, you stand before the holy presence of the mystery of life. You are grateful, extremely grateful for the wonder of that one thing--and this is every day!

The Presence of the Way is a touchstone of authenticity. It can not be possessed, you can not deny it, you cannot argue with it. Being bends you to be

looked at him and said, "People say you are a saint yourself. That cannot be true, because you have a wife and three children." So the man went back and threw his wife and three children into the well, and was made whole by the saint. When he went home again, he found that his family was alive and well. That story is depicted on the wall of that temple even today. The sacrificial lifestyle for us means that we are called to abandon that which we hold as precious; the family, the refrigerator, values, and your uniqueness so that we can participate in the Way. Life will be given back to you in its fullness. The Way is about releasing care in every last human being.

In essence, this spin was about the fact that the Presence of the Way is like a dog whistle, a shrill, high whistle that becomes clearer until it is extremely discernable. Presence is when you are aware that things are not the same. Presence is that in which change takes place. One is forever different in the Presence. Presence is when the mystery of life shines through, motivates you and makes you stand in its awful presence.

And now to go back to the poetry:

It's just you and I...
Common and everyday...
Who never seem to know the answer
Who ourselves are helpless against despair
Who can only point to the mystery
And ask and ask and ask
What makes it possible
To say yes...to love life
To decide...to grab a hold
What mysterious love of life...
Gives you and I and John and Maria
The will to live a yes to our vitality...