Readings

(1) Matthew Fox in *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Inc., 1983

...There is no question whatsoever in my mind that ... ninety-nine percent know about original sin; and barely one percent have ever in their lives heard about original blessing. This is the great price we have paid in the West for following a one-sided, fall/redemption theology. There is a genuine scandal involved in this dangerous distortion of life and biblical data. The scandal is one of ignoring – and then despising – creation and those who love creation, such as Native American peoples or matriarchal religions. Even if original sin is to be taken literally (which it should not) still the facts are as follows: that, if we take the universe to be about ... [fifteen] billion years old, as scientists are advising us to do, then sin of the human variety is about four million years old, since that is how long humans have been around. But creation is ... [14],996,000,000 years older!

Fall/redemption theology has ignored the blessing that creation is because of its anthropomorphic preoccupation with sin! The result has been, among other things, the loss of pleasure from spirituality, and with this loss the increase of pain, of injustice, of sado-masochism, and of distrust. ... [Fifteen] billion years before there was any sin on earth, there was blessing. (p. 46)

(2) Elizabeth Deutsche Earle in *This I Believe* (2006), an update of the Edward R. Murrow series published in the 1950s; she is a plant biologist at Cornell University, and at age 16 she was included in the original series in 1954. As an adult, she wrote a few years ago about the blessings of our path:

Being a kind person and striving for social justice remain high priorities for me... The “simple faith in the Deity” expressed in my teenage essay has faded. Still after the events of 9/11, I returned to the Unitarian Church, the same denomination in which I was active when I was sixteen. I’ve come to appreciate once again that communal reflection about life’s
deeper matters is sustaining and uplifting and provides a consistent nudge in worthy directions.

I believe it is good to spend time engaged in the present. I recently heard and admired the phrase “wherever you are, be there.” This may not work for everyone; dissociating from misery may be wise. But someone like me, who focuses on lists of the next day’s tasks and often reads a newspaper while walking outdoors, should remember also to look up at the sky and the people around me. I love that image! She continues,

I now know that it’s not always easy to see what should be done and even harder actually to do it. Nevertheless, I’m grateful that I still have some time to keep trying to get it right, and to savor each remaining day in my life.

“ORIGINAL BLESSING”
Sunday, October 13, 2013
Rev. Bruce Southworth – Senior Minister

Christopher Columbus and other explorers after him in search of spices and riches not only did not find India, but also failed in their imaginations to comprehend fully what was before them.

The so-called New World on the one hand was stunning in its “natural endowments.” Historian Frederick W. Turner reports, “The land often announced itself with a heavy scent miles out into the ocean.” In 1524, Giovanni di Verrazano and his crew “smelled the cedars of the East Coast a hundred leagues out.” Henry Hudson and those with him on the Half Moon in 1609 were astonished “by the fragrance of the New Jersey shore.” Other ships as they traveled “up the coast occasionally swam through large beds of floating flowers. Wherever they came inland they found a rich riot of color and sound, of game and luxuriant vegetation.”

However, all this seemed to mean very little.

Turner concludes, “Had they been other than they were, they might have written a new mythology here. As it was, they took inventory.” (Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness, Frederick Turner, Viking Press, 1980, p. 256; quoted in Matthew Fox’s Original Blessing, 43)

The sense of Original Blessing… of natural beauty and abundance of which we are but a small but exceedingly precious part… this story was not the one told. The values and imprint from Christian Europe favored a vision of inventory, consumption, and materialism that surround us still today.
Yet a counter-cultural story, a challenging narrative… an Awareness of Original Blessing… is a jewel in one of the most sparkling of contemporary theologies – Creation-Centered theology. Creation-Centered theology is often associated with former Dominican brother Matthew Fox, who was silenced in 1993 by Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict. Matthew Fox, still grounded in Christian tradition, became an Episcopalian priest, even as his wisdom in books such as *Original Blessing* has expanded far beyond that tradition, especially with his Institute for Creation Spirituality.

We live and move and have our being in the cosmic context of a blessed Creation… not as depraved sinners, but as co-creators… an emergent theology in the 1980s, a liberation theology, that has powerful radiant kinship with our religious path now nearly 200 years in the making.

Original Blessing… co-creators… a gracious Creation filled with beauty and abundance… embraced by many in our tradition with our multiple symbols and anchors.

Stories about human Creativity and Hope, about cosmic connection and the interdependent web, and about human worth and dignity and salvation by character, these stories resonate – conspire together – and are themes I find sustaining in my life.

I think of a Unitarian Universalist Mary Feagan who writes:

I am a millions-of-years-old wonder.

I am an international – no, cosmic – treasure.

I ought to be safeguarded in a museum somewhere like Paganini’s old violin. I ought to be gasped at, talked about in hushed, amazed, reverential tones. Viewers would touch me gently and feel lucky.

Daily newspaper headlines could say, "Mary Feagan Exists Again Today!" Radio and TV shows could discuss me, my ordinary events—that I saw a bluebird with my millions-of-years-old eyes and heard it sing with my highly advanced, evolutionary ears; that my graceful hands with opposable thumbs fed my sensitive mouth delicious strawberries that it tasted.

Then, without a conscious thought, my brilliant brain directed my masterful, complex, digestive system to assimilate and use them for fuel to wash dishes, write poems, hold babies, laugh, and give kisses.

No one would completely understand or dare to finally say how my marvelous magical, famous, fine self exists, really.

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I am just, bottom line, a millions-of-years-old wonder.

You are too.

In For All That Is Our Life, Gene and Helen Pickett, Eds.

Each of us an Original and a Blessing…

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron invites us into the “pleasantness of the present” – a trustworthy, deeply trustworthy experience, which is at the heart of this good life, a part of the transcending Original Blessing of this gift of Life.

Barbara Brown Taylor, former Christian church pastor and now seminary professor, has pondered Chaos Theory, quantum physics, and the origins of the universe. She asks core faith questions. “Am I alone?” And responds: “How could I ever be alone? I am part of the web that is pure relationship, with energy available to me that has been around since the universe was born.”

From Herman Melville, a counter-point about the messiness of this gift of Life. Herman Melville, a Unitarian, in 1860 was on a clipper ship the Meteor, which was captained by his brother Thomas. He records in his diary a storm that lasted for “three brutal days…’snow, rain, hail, sleet, mist, fog, squalls … smoky cabin, drunken ship…” and also reports a few days later that a “young sailor from Nantucket was blown from the rigging to the deck and was killed instantly. After the funeral service, presided over by Tom, the body was tipped into the ocean and the blood washed from the deck.”

Melville reported, “All goes on as usual as if nothing had happened – as if I did not know that death is indeed the King of Terrors.” (“Melville’s Second Act,” Christopher Benfey, NY Review of Books, 6/26/08, p. 49)

Ah, but something else had happened; they had paused… held a funeral… taken a sacred moment in this loss of a sacred life. They had marked the time.

And if, for you, the word “sacred” is empty, or filled with supernatural baggage, or simply not useful, then maybe substitute some thin thing like moment of reverence for sacred moment.

This morning I am looking at the faith, belief, conclusion, hunch, speculation, conviction… premise… that Creation, the Life Process, the Cosmos is Sacred, and we humans are Sacred. That does not mean at all that the universe is made to please us, nor does it mean that everything we do is sacred, for we humans surely can and do violate what is good and beautiful and act badly, horribly, even cruelly at times. Tragic choices mark our species…. Choices… not fate or depravity… for we are the universe itself coming to consciousness… Star-stuff!!

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And one more observation from Melville about his tormented hero Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick*. In a long, deck-top discourse, both lamentation and exultation upon his 37 years at sea, Ahab says to his first-mate Starbuck:

“... stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God.”

...Look into a human eye...
So many paths tempt with all these ruminations on the cosmos, and our place in it, as star-stuff... the universe come to consciousness.

Years ago, one of my sisters-in-law and her husband gave me a delightful new translation of Judaism’s book of Genesis. The mythic story of creation there – the poetry of the story – speaks of each day’s work of creation being good. Then with the creation of humankind on the sixth day, these words: “Now God saw all that he made, and here: it was exceedingly good! There was setting, there was dawning: the sixth day.” (Gen. 1:31)

Not just the typical “very good” on the 6th day, but “Exceedingly good.” Despite our heartaches or poor choices, we are an exceedingly good thing!

James Weldon Johnson for a moment overcomes my abiding dis-ease with anthropomorphic, masculine imagery of God in his poem “The Creation,” which begins,

And God stepped out of space,
And he looked around and said:
I’m lonely –
I’ll make me a world....

After the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, the seas, the green living things, the creatures of the air and land, “God looked on His world/ With all its living things, /And God said: I’m lonely still....

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
This Great God,
... Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay...
blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.

And it was not just good; it was exceedingly good… which, if you were to turn to stories about Jesus, you find just as well.

That is certainly what Jesus was trying to do when he said to the so-called nobodies of the world, the outcasts, the lowly, and to everyone, “You are the light of the world.” He said, “You are precious, whoever you are.” Encouragement, putting heart into, putting love into others and blessing the world…

Islam says that original sin (which is not a primary focus for it) is forgetfulness, and somehow Christianity, much of it, forgot what Jesus was saying.

Some years ago, a taxicab driver in Mexico City by the name of Manuel Lubian spent two days hunting for a passenger who had left $53,000 in his cab. He explained why he did not just keep the money this way: “I felt that I would lose the beauty inside of me.”

The beauty inside… an original blessing…

That beauty can be obscured, and pondering our politicians and government shutdown and threats/extortion about not raising the debt ceiling… our beauty is shy of what we can be.

One hundred years ago, in the Tennessee state legislature, there was a similar disarray among the factions among the Republicans and Democrats… cross-party alliances, internal factions, and deeply partisan, pretty vicious politics. It reminds me of… well let me tell you a story…. A mostly true story as told by Fred Craddock, who is a teacher, minister, preacher and retired professor at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.

He reports that he was driving through the state of Tennessee some years ago. He stopped at a restaurant for a meal, and he was intrigued as one man went from table to table greeting everyone sitting there.

When he came to Craddock and learned that he was a minister, the man insisted on telling a story. He said that he had been born in the mountains not far from where they sat and that his mother was not married when he was born. The father had already been engaged to and then married his long-standing fiancé. In that time and in that culture, the single, unmarried mother was frowned upon and indeed scorned.

The boy himself would feel as he grew up the love of his mother, but also the scorn of the townsfolk. At recess, his classmates would ostracize him, and he learned
to keep to himself then, and also at lunch, in order to avoid the taunts that came his way. Even walking downtown was a hardship because of comments of passersby.

The boy at age 12 took up going to church on his own. A new minister had come to the church near his house. He would slip into the building just as the services began, into the back row, and leave before it was over so that no one would challenge him by asking, “What’s a boy like you doing here.” [And if you think about it, what church ought to be, summoning our better selves, is not what church always is; we know how things often are when prejudice reinforces prejudice.]

However, one Sunday the boy forgot to slip out, so taken was he with the service, the singing, whatever. Before he could quietly exit, he felt the big hand of the minister on his shoulder, light and gentle. The preacher looked at him and asked, “Who are you, son?” “Whose boy are you?”

Once again, the boy’s heart sank, and perhaps his pain showed on his face. But then the preacher answered, “Wait a minute. I know who you are. The family resemblance is unmistakable. You are a child of God.”

With those words, he patted him on the back and added, “That’s quite an inheritance. Go, and claim it.”

Craddock reports, “As the boy changed to manhood in that restaurant, the old man said, … ‘That one statement literally changed my whole life.’ He explained that his name was Ben Hooper and he had twice been elected governor of Tennessee.”

A word of encouragement… to encourage means to put heart into, to put love into… to bless.

Governor Ben Hooper from 1911 to 1915 in Tennessee, despite bitterly partisan political turmoil and partisan splintering,

… obtained passage of laws limiting child labor and requiring that the wages of women be paid directly to them, rather than to any other persons (employers previously had the option of giving women’s pay to their husbands). Hooper also enacted a state pure food and drug law, and authorized counties to issue bonds to establish hospitals and to purchase school property.

… he signed measures that required mandatory school attendance for children between the ages of eight and fourteen, and ordered county school boards to provide for the transportation of pupils. Hooper also established inspections for state banks, implemented a parole system for state convicts, and … Pensions were authorized for veterans and widows of the American Civil War. (Wikipedia)
Perhaps, all this or some of this happened, because he had a sense of our shared blessings, all of us children of a gracious creation. Truth be told, in later political roles he could have been more responsive to the railroad unions, but his family, political and personal choices in most instances were exemplary… offering abundant blessings to our world and his community. Perhaps, we too can recover from our nation’s factions.

The invitation surrounds us… to celebrate the sacred within and around us… to live with compassion and kindness… to encourage others and put heart into them…. to be grateful for the blessings of Life… all of which is liberating and transcends our wounds, fears and weariness.

Pete Seeger, a fellow traveler with us at Community and raised a Unitarian, is among those interviewed in a wonderful book titled REFUSE TO STAND SILENTLY BY, An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964. Along the way, Seeger speaks in that book about his own religious journey:

I used to think I was irreligious until I found out I was having a lot of fun meeting and talking with a lot of religious people. I had sung with Catholics and Protestants and Jews and Moslems and Buddhists all around the world, and I found out we had a lot in common, so I can’t call myself irreligious anymore…

I confess if somebody asked me what’s my religion, I’d say, I don’t know. But I do put a last verse on [my version of “Gimme That Old-time Religion”]: [singing]: “I will arise at early morning, when my Lord gives me the warning, that the solar age is dawning, and that’s good enough for me. Give me that old time religion.”

Then Pete Seeger adds, “I guess that’s my religion. I walk out of here and I feel like yodeling when I see the sun come up.”

Creation-centered… affirming the shared Original Blessing within us and about us and beyond us. The beauty within and around us and in each other….

What remains, of course, is guidance… for the daily stuff. How shall we live? E. B. White – essayist of grace who helped humanize the world in mid-20th century with his love of Life, noted: “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

How shall we live? With both, as we try to save and to savor!
When I am forgetful, or weary, or distracted, or pedantic, or self-absorbed, I return to a simple message from a theologian, who taught at Union Theological Seminary, and on the west coast... a simple, challenging, and healing reminder.

The late theologian Robert McAfee Brown helps me when I forget what I am about, what I ought to do, what is important. He also addresses the charge that Caretakers of Wonder have no concern for ethics, for others.

I conclude that my concern for beauty is not a moral cop-out. It leads us firmly into the midst of all that is going on in our world. Where there is beauty apparent, we are to enjoy it; where there is beauty hidden, we are to unveil it; where there is beauty defaced, we are to restore it; where there is no beauty at all, we are to create it.

All of which places us, too in the arena where oppression occurs, where the oppressed congregate, and where we too are called to be. (CREATIVE DISLOCATION - THE MOVEMENT OF GRACE, p. 142)

Who are you? A child of Creation? And Creativity and Beauty... an Original and a Blessing...

"Where there is beauty apparent, we are to enjoy it; where there is beauty hidden, we are to unveil it; where there is beauty defaced, we are to restore it; where there is no beauty at all, we are to create it."