

Seedbeds and Worms (Buddhas and Flies)
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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INTRODUCTION: Floating Downriver

The power of the haiku format, and what makes the form particularly compatible with Zen Buddhism, is the click of a switch that we experience when a haiku catches an idea or an image or a truth perfectly. So it is with the poet Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828).

I can't help sharing a few:

Even with insects—
 some can sing,
 some can't.

Or:

All the time I pray to Buddha
 I keep on
 killing mosquitoes.

Or:

On a branch
 floating downriver
 a cricket, singing.

Or a long-time favorite of mine:

Poor fly.
 He wrings his hands.
 He wrings his feet.

But the poem of Issa's that I want to consider more closely is:

Where there are humans,
 You will find flies,
 And Buddhas.

Just as Issa's poem about a fly wringing his hands and feet or a cricket singing as it is swept toward probable death, Issa's poem about Buddhas and flies is I think a brilliant summary of the human condition.

We are very happy to be Buddhas. But we would rather not think about the flies. We would rather eradicate those. But, as Issa points out, the connection is inevitable: where there are humans, there will be both Buddhas and flies.

Our theme for the merry month of May is Nurturing Beauty. I'm calling my talk today "Seedbeds and Worms (Buddhas and Flies)." I want to think today about planting seeds—both actual seeds as metaphorical seeds—and about the earth we do that in. And I also want to think about the tensions Kobayashi Issa considers in his poem:

Where there are humans,
 You'll find flies,
 And Buddhas.

ONE: Guess and Fear

It is spring, even though it has been difficult to tell from the temperatures we have been experiencing here in Minnesota.

We have, as is our custom at First Unitarian Society, celebrated the spring equinox. Volunteers are already planning the summer solstice celebration in June.

The seasons pass as we watch our earth turn. We are reminded of the cycle of life and death and rebirth. For me, as an old farmer, the spring brings to mind cultivation and planting. But also the fact of the reckoning we must face for the the bad seeds planted, for the dangerous weather experienced, and the mistakes we've made while planting seeds.

I have mentioned before the inscriptions at the ancient Temple of Apollo at Delphi. As the sacred center of Greek society as well as an important sacred site for people all

around the Mediterranean, the temple proclaiming the central tenants of Greek thinking:

γνῶθι σεαυτὸν (*gnōthi seautón*, "know thyself")
 μηδὲν ἄγαν (*mēdén ágan*, "nothing in excess")
 Ἐγγύα πάρα δ'ἄτη (*engýa pára d'atē*, "certainty brings insanity")

I want to balance these ideas off one of my favorite poems, by the Scottish poet Robert Burns. I am reminded of the poem this time of year, even though Burns wrote his poem about fall plowing, not spring plowing. But it is titled "To a Mouse." The subtitle reads: "On Turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November 1785." A few of the versus go like this:

'm truly sorry Man's dominion
 Has broken Nature's social union,
 An' justifies that ill opinion,
 Which makes thee startle,
 At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
 An' fellow-mortal!

...

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
 In proving foresight may be vain:
 The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men
 Gang aft agley,
 An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
 For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
 The present only toucheth thee:
 But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
 On prospects drear!
 An' forward tho' I canna see,
 I guess an' fear!

I often think of this poem this time of year because plowing the muddy spring fields is not easy to begin with. In Robert Burn's day it was horses pulling that plow. In my day, a tractor. A farmer plowing with horses could stop and apologize to a mouse for

destroying her nest if that farmer were so inclined. In our machine agriculture times, you have to just keep on driving.

Which is, I think, a very good metaphor for the ecologically tragic times we live in.

I always hated looking back and seeing the mice, rabbits, birds, and snakes that were living their normal day until that noisy tractor came along and chopped them and their nests to pieces.

Despite the difference in equipment, I always thought something along the lines of what Robert Burns wrote:

'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
 Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
 An' fellow-mortal!

And the timeless grappling with our shared reality:

The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men
 Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
 For promis'd joy!

Burns thinks that the human lot is worse, however, because not only do we suffer what we suffer, but we also have an imagination that creates dark scenarios for the future:

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
 On prospects drear!
An' forward tho' I canna see,
 I guess an' fear!

Our imaginations are wondrous but also dangerous:

forward tho' I canna see,
 I guess an' fear!

TWO: Certainty

forward tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Who hasn't been doing a great deal of that in recent months? The pandemic. The economy. US political disfunction. War in Ukraine. The world economy due to the war in Ukraine, the destruction of food for the planet due to the war in Ukraine

And, as we all know, the list goes on, from the global to the personal.

#One reason that I've spent much of my life writing poetry is that I deeply believe that poetry can say *the unsayable*, or, if not that, exactly, then that poetry can give temporary closure to what cannot be said and often cannot even be thought.

Take that image of the grasshopper as example. We see that grasshopper in Issa's poem singing away on his broken branch floating on down the river. We see it. And we know that the image is "true." (Even if we don't exactly know what "true" even means, and even if we personally have never seen a branch floating down a river with a singing grasshopper on it.)

On a branch
floating downriver
a cricket, singing.

It's an image that is a moving picture.

#Poetry catches one of the ways the human mind works. For example, I can take the word "god" and use it in a poem or a song. Even atheists have an image of "god" in their minds, I would argue, some sort of image, willingly or not. That image is most likely something out of a one-panel cartoon—an old bearded guy in a robe.

The image arises naturally. We see those cartoons. We pick up such images in the zeitgeist. In that case, the word "god" has become a symbol and then an image.

As a matter of fact, the ease with which most of us call up an image of "god" has been used as an argument for the existence of "god." We couldn't think—so the argument

goes—of “god” so readily if some reality for the symbol did not exist. That’s an old argument.

One *hole* in the argument is that it is an idea from the European Middle Ages, when a particular image of “god” was enforced. That “everyone” thought the same way is an argument for Christian *hegemony*, not the existence of a particular god.

The idea of god—and hence the image and symbol “god”—are culturally conditioned: the medieval Christian god symbol is not the same as the twenty-first century Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist symbol or image.

Oh, but wait! you could argue: the ubiquity of the many symbols of gods across human cultures must mean that there’s something actually there, at base.

That argument is more difficult to refute. But not impossible to refute.

You get the point: You do not need ever to have seen a singing cricket on a branch floating downriver to be able to *imagine* it. Make an image in your mind of it. And further, there’s no need for any grasshopper *ever* to have sang on a branch floating downstream for the image to be “true.”

On a branch
floating downriver
a cricket, singing.

The sort of images and creations and breakdowns of human language and symbol that I’ve been describing here are endemic to language use. That’s why some philosophers and theologians have concluded that language can never approximate reality.

It’s a debatable point. And, we can debate and debate and still not find an answer to the conundrum.

That’s why #Humanism is not an *answer*; it is a *dialogue*. Humanism is an invitation *into* dialogue. Honest dialogue, not merely a ruse for pontificating.

#We know that interpretations of facts change over time. Therefore, “truth” changes over time. Every idea has a genealogy; a family tree that illuminates nuances in a word’s meaning.

This is not reason for alarm—if you’re a person who is fine living with mystery and ambiguity and conversation rather than certainty.

But back to those inscriptions at the ancient Temple of Apollo at Delphi that I mentioned earlier:

γνῶθι σεαυτὸν (*gnōthi seautón*, "know thyself")
 μηδὲν ἄγαν (*mēdén ágan*, "nothing in excess")
 Ἐγγύα πάρα δ'ἄτη (*engýa pára d'atē*, "certainty brings insanity")

"Know yourself." Wise and difficult words if ever there were wise and difficult words. And philosophers have gone to town on what knowing ourselves means.

"Nothing to excess." Yep, there it is: that "golden mean" thing that at least in my day was part of the fifth grade curriculum, along with proper grooming. We don't like it. We don't want it. But *mēdén ágan*—"nothing to excess"—will mess you up if you ignore it.

I speculate that those two bits of wisdom – in some form – appear in every self-help book ever. But there that third saying:

"Certainty brings insanity." That is perhaps the truest phrase of them all: "Certainty brings insanity."

It's telling that "certainty brings insanity" is not well known. That is exactly the sort of wisdom that Europeans and many of the people in the places that Europeans colonized do not want to hear.

#"Certainty brings insanity."

Insanities such as war. Insanities such as theocracy. Insanities such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. And on

#"Certainty brings insanity." Thus, we Humanists know to stay away from certainty.

#"Certainty brings insanity." That's why democracy had to be invented: the certainty of *one* tyrant means disaster. The certainty of *one group* of people forcing their point of view on others means disaster.

"Know yourself."

"Nothing to excess."

"Certainty brings insanity."

We do well to remember all three. These are the ideals of a humanistic worldview. They call us to embrace both wisdom and love.

A humanist congregation is the place where love meets wisdom. The place where we can call certainty the insanity that it is.

This is why FUS Affiliated Clergy Jé Exodus Hooper insists that Humanists must push beyond freethinking into free forming.

#The rusted iron walls of certainty are about *over*-thinking and *under*-feeling. They are about self-delusion; they are about destruction through excess; they are about the insanity that certainty brings. They are about thinking freely but acting—doing—as if we are chained.

CONCLUSION: Going Forth

The temple at Delphi was centered around oracles. Prophecy. Why?

Because people have ever been as Robert Burns described us:

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
 The present only toucheth thee:
 But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
 On prospects drear!
 An' forward tho' I canna see . . .

#The project of progressive religions never changes: That project is to change the rote, cliched, oppressive, uncomprehending way that human societies stumble on, ruining the present and demolishing possible future, all out of an overweening fear of what happens next.

#The project of progressive religions is ever both personal and social. Personal, in helping each of us see our place and our responsibility to the planet and its living things despite our fears concerning the future; social in our attempts to save humanity from itself.

When my forebears went out into the fields in the spring, hopeful but realistic, they knew one of the Psalms, that they taught me too:

He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him. (Psalm 126:6 King James Version)

Yes, that verse is the inspiration for that old gospel song “Bringing in the Sheaves.”

#Taking seeds out and planting them is an act of hope, even when we weep with worry while planting. Sometimes they wither. Sometimes storms or drought take them away. Sometimes,

forward tho’ I canna see,
I guess an’ fear!

Farmers “goeth forth and weepeth” because we know the risks of what the seasons will bring.

Farmer or gardener or not, reality or metaphor, we all nurture beauty because . . . what else is there to do?

Yes, beauty is ephemeral. All life is. We are human. We exist with both Buddhas and flies.

#And so we weep. But we hope as well. The harvest *will* come. As human beings always have, we do what we can do, and we call ourselves and each other to hope, looking forward though we cannot see. Choosing hope rather than fear.

SOURCES and Further Reading

Robert Burns, “To a Mouse.”

Kobayashi Issa poems.

Peter Levitt, "Review of The Dumpling Field: Haiku of Issa." *For background on Issa's poetry.*