

April 16, 2020

Dear Trinity family:

During Holy Week I read Louise Erdrich's newest novel, "The Night Watchman." It's spectacular. Please read it. The story is based on Erdrich's grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, who, in the 1950s, worked as a night watchman in a jewel-bearing plant. At the same time, he served as tribal chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa and in that capacity successfully rallied against federal legislation aimed at eliminating the tribe. The novel follows Gourneau's story, along with an intricate weave of subplot relationships, conflicts and consequences. One such thread is Thomas (the character based on Erdrich's grandfather) and his visits with his father, Biboon. "Biboon, Winter, bone thin," writes Erdrich. "With age, his skin had lightened in patches. Laughing, he sometimes called himself an old pinto. He wore a creamy long-john shirt, brown work pants, moccasins so worn they looked like part of his feet. He could still keep the fire going and insisted on living alone."

The scenes between father and son are infrequent, yet, to me, the most meaningful. In them Thomas learns from his father what kind of person he is to be as he rallies his people to speak to local and congressional lawmakers and impress their right to exist. In the book's middle lives this lovely encounter:

As he did at the change of every season, Thomas gave his father a pinch of tobacco and asked for the story of his name. This story tied them together as Thomas was named after his grandfather, whose name had become the family surname. The original and real Wazhashk was a little muskrat.

"In the beginning," said Biboon, "the world was covered with water. The Creator lined up the animals who were the best divers. First the Creator send down Fisher, the strongest. But Fisher came up gasping, couldn't find the bottom. Next Mang, the loon, ducked under the way they do." Biboon curved his hand. "Loon tried. But failed." Thomas nodded in appreciation, loving the gestures he remembered from childhood. "The Hell-diver flashed into the water, bragging it would succeed. The Hell-diver pulled itself deep down, and down. But no!" Biboon waited, took a deep breath. "Last the humble water rat. The Creator called on that one. Wazhahk. The little fellow dived down. He took a long time, a very long time, and then finally Wazhashk floated to the top. He was drowned but his paw was clenched. The Creator unfolded Wazhashk's webbed hands. He saw that the muskrat had carried up just a little off the bottom. From that tiny paw's grip of dirt, the Creator made the whole earth."

"Mii'iw. That's it" said Biboon... "I'm an old pinto pony, scrawny and always hungry. This winter might do me in," he said. His voice was light, amused.

"Don't say that. We need you... This thing that's coming at us from Washington. I need you to help me fight it."

"Oh fine," said Biboon, putting up his fists.

The muskrat imagery threads itself through the novel, and we see Thomas live into his namesake by greeting the adversity with determination, sacrifice, and humility. Time and again, Thomas

chooses this way of being. In a concluding scene, Thomas seeks out the US Senator, the sponsor of the termination bill, after he has testified before the legislative committee. “I wanted to thank you for your concern for our people,” he tells the senator, “...I was struck by the kindness showed to us in your carefully listening and thoughtfully weighing our testimony on the termination bill.” “In all of my days as a senator,” he replies, “nobody has ever thanked me for listening to their testimony.” “I call that an omission,” said Thomas.

I was struck, in reading the book, by its lesson about the spiritual power of humility. The kind of mature and hard-won humility that understands, at some deep level, how hard living actually is, and to what extent we are completely and totally NOT in control. I wonder if now, in our current state, isn't also a time that calls for the spiritual practice of humility.

If you're like me, the pandemic is bringing up many existential questions about life's meaning, God's will and our future, about my place in the world, and about mortality. And it is casting a long, dark shadow over my misguided sense of what I think I can do for myself, what I think I can control. I wonder if now, in our current state of isolation and quarantine, we might begin to more intentionally chew on some of these spiritual questions. But the starting line on that spiritual journey seems to be humility. “When we come to the place where we no longer know what to do,” writes the poet Wendell Berry, “then our real work begins.” I don't know about you, but I think I may have arrived at the place where I no longer know what to do. The way forward is not clear. And it may be that the real work begins now, a month into quarantine, by diving down deep, and with all the determination, sacrifice, and humility we can muster, scooping up what we can of God's grace and guidance. It may just be that with the tiniest grip of epiphany, we'll have what we need to help God create the new reality, the new world, after pandemic.

During the season of Eastertide, we'll explore – in Sunday Zoom Church sermons and Adult Forum – spiritual truths being revealed to us in this time of crisis and transition and how we can choose a deeper knowledge of God, and, in the process, transformation. Stay tuned.

What's Helping Me Right Now

I highly recommend the Netflix documentary “Crip Camp” about the birth and early years of the disability rights movement. I cried and laughed and was deeply inspired by the capacity of people to confront, overcome, and move beyond adversity and confinement. It all started at a “summer camp for handicapped people, run by hippies.”

When my kids were little, they were early risers. At that time, PBS ran a very early morning segment of what became our family's favorite TV show: *Reading Rainbow with LeVar Burton*. I don't know if PBS still offers reruns of that show, but if they don't, they should. In each show Burton would read a children's book, and then, he'd go out into the world to learn more about the theme or the culture of the book he read. Burton is a curious, kind man who can talk with, and listen to, just about anyone. I associate his voice with kindness and comfort, hope and imagination. This past week I somehow stumbled upon a podcast (*LeVar Burton Reads*) in which Burton reads short stories. Drawing from a wide range of authors, Burton posts 2-6 times per month and each story is better than the last. Burton also reads live on Twitter twice each week (@LevarBurton or #LevarBurtonReads) -- a children's book one day, and a selection for

young adults on another day. There is something very comforting to my inner child about being read to, and even more so being read to by a gentle person with a soft yet animated voice, and an incredible love for living.

Blessing

(from: *To Bless the Space Between Us*, John O'Donohue)

This is the time to be slow,
Lie low to the wall
Until the bitter weather passes.

Try, as best you can, not to let
The wire brush of doubt
Scrape from your heart
All sense of yourself
And your hesitant light.

If you remain generous,
Time will come good;
And you will find your feet
Again on fresh pastures of promise,
Where the air will be kind
And blushed with beginning.

May God bless you, my holy muskrats, and hold you close in these times of uncertainty and possibility. Your Trinity community is here. God is here.

Devon