

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
January 18, 2009

Vessels of Clay

By Donne Hayden

To begin, I must acknowledge the significance of these days. Never in my life has there been a time so filled with cause for lamentation and celebration. Lamentation because of the 22-day siege of Gaza; no cause for celebration, but at least relief that yesterday marked a unilateral ceasefire by the Israelis and today, Hamas agreed to a one-week ceasefire. I have been overwhelmed by events in Gaza so that I haven't felt as much joy at what is happening in our country as I would like to. And there is cause for celebration, beginning today with inaugural events that will culminate day after tomorrow, when our country inaugurates its first president with known African American lineage. And tomorrow is National Service Day, Martin Luther King's birthday, a day on which we are called to participate in community service in tribute to Dr. King, a role model for us all. (By the way, I have a list of service opportunities within fifteen miles of the city of Cincinnati should any of you be interested.)

These are momentous times, but you hear a great deal about these things on the news, and quite honestly, I don't know what to say. I find it overwhelming. I had a message put together about Gaza, but I realized there was no way that I could find right now to leave you with hope, and I didn't want to do that to you. So aside from holding up the significance of these days and events, I am not led especially to speak of them, at least not yet.

Instead I'm going to share with you the unfolding revelation I had this week as I was reminded that we are creatures of the earth. But not *only* that. A couple of weeks

ago, I spoke of human beings as matter-made-conscious, and that idea continues to challenge me, intrigue me—the notion that our bodies are *containers* for Energy, *containers* for the Life Force, for the Light, for “that of God” within us.

First, last Monday afternoon when I was taking care of Hyland, my grandson, we watched a Pakistani film titled *The Clay Bird* about a young Muslim boy. The film is set in contemporary Pakistan, showing the conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities. The boy’s devout Muslim father refuses to let his children do or have anything he considers frivolous. When the boy brings home to his little sister a beautiful clay bird, she must hide it so their father doesn’t take it away. I won’t tell you the rest of the film—you might want to watch it—but Hyland and I were talking about it later, trying to figure out why the movie was called *The Clay Bird* when the bird made only that one brief appearance in the movie. I thought of the phrase “Dust to dust, ashes to ashes,” and that one could also say “Clay to clay.” We decided that the bird was significant for its fragile beauty, so easily broken. It was like the children in the movie, and indeed, like all human life. Beautiful, fragile and easily broken. We humans are made of sturdy matter, and yet we are *always, all* of us, only inches away from death. A slip of the foot, a slip of a hand, at just the wrong place or time, and we could be gone.

Talking with my grandson about this, I was reminded of the time I found a dead man in a Sears’ parking lot. It happened like this. In 1980, my nine-year-old daughter, Krystin, and I lived in Cripple Creek, Colorado where I taught at the local high school. One spring morning we got up early and drove down the mountain to go shopping in Colorado Springs. At Sears, I pulled into a parking space across from another car already parked there. Both my daughter and I noticed the old man sitting in the car opposite us. His head was leaned back against the headrest and his mouth open. A

small dog, like a Chihuahua, stood beside him on its hind legs, front paws propped on the dashboard, watching us intently. After a minute or so, my daughter asked, “Is he dead, Mom?” She surprised me because she hadn’t ever seen anyone dead. I was sure he couldn’t be dead, however, surely not; and I replied reassuringly, “Oh, no, honey. He’s just asleep—looks like he’s snoring away. He’s probably just waiting for his wife or something.”

Krystin and I went into the Sears store and shopped for an hour or so and then went out to get in our car. We got buckled in and I started the car, but again, our attention was caught by the man and dog in the car opposite us. Now the little dog was jumping, bouncing and barking, even jumping on the old man. But the old man had not moved at all. After a minute or so, I turned off the ignition and opened my car door. “What are you going to do, Mom?” Krystin asked. “Well, I’m going to go tap on his window—if he wakes up, I’ll be embarrassed, but . . .”

So I did. But as soon as I bent down to look in the car window at him, I knew he was dead. I had never seen a dead body (except my great grandmother who died when I was nine years old, and she had been “prepared” by the funeral parlor). But it was absolutely clear to me when I looked at the old man that *no one was there*. What was left—the body—looked like a wax figure, like a sculpture made of clay. Whoever the old man had been, *he* was gone, leaving his body behind like an empty container. Like a vessel of clay.

On Tuesday night this past week, another conversation brought up our relationship to the earth. In the Entering the Castle spiritual nurture group, we spent some time on the topic of humility and humiliation; humility wasn’t bad, but humiliation was quite unpleasant. We discussed why humiliation would be included as

an early step on the mystical path. In passing, Charlotte Hullinger mentioned that the word “*humble*,” “*humiliation*,” and “*human*” share a common Latin root, *humus*, which means “of the soil,” “of the earth.” I had never thought of that connection between “human” and “earth” before, though I have always been charmed by the fact that the word “Adam” comes from the Hebrew word for “earth,” and thus, “Adam” means literally, “earth creature.” Turns out, “human” also means “earthling.”

When I got home, I spent some time looking up words, trying to understand why such an unpleasant thing as humiliation could help one along the spiritual path. In a dictionary entry, I stumbled across this quotation from poet John Donne: “Humiliation is the beginning of sanctification.” My first reaction was “I’m not sure I *want* to be sanctified”—but when I looked up the word and removed it from the context of organized religion, “sanctification” seems desirable. “To sanctify” means “to make holy” or “to reserve for sacred use.” So long as I am proud and concerned with maintaining my status among other humans, *I am using me*. Humiliation, which brings me lower, reminds me of my limitations as a creature of the earth, makes me less proud, less engaged in asserting my worth and improving my status, and thus more open perhaps to being used by God or the Light. To use the image of a container, if I am emptied of human arrogance, I may be filled with compassionate Love. God can better use me if *I am not so full of myself*.

So I have in mind images of earth creatures, of humans as clay vessels for the Spirit, which reminded me of two of my favorite quotations (in the bulletin) though I never put them together before. Both of them so beautiful, I would like to read them.

First these verses from 2 Corinthians 4:7-18:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed... So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day ... because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

And a poem by the Indian mystic, Kabir:

*Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains,
and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!
All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds and millions of stars.
The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels.
And the music from the strings no one touches,
and the source of all water.
If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:
Friend, listen, the Holy One who I love is inside.*

Even George Fox uses images of containers, though he refers to another New Testament image, “You are new bottles, full of new wine from Christ the vine—the new wine which makes all your hearts glad . . .”

Finally, I was led back to a book Kathleen Stern loaned me last week called *Gathering Sparks*, a collection of interviews from *Parabola Magazine*. On the first page is an explanation of the book’s title in the form of a story identified as being from Palestine in the 16th century. I had read the story before, and knew that it comes from the writings of the great medieval Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria, but I had not heard it told in quite so lovely a way. Here is the story:

One Rosh Hodesh the Ari led his disciples outside at night and told them to follow him. He led them without a torch, so that only the stars lighted their way. Yet it seemed to them that there was another light that guided them, an aura that emanated from the Ari.

At last they reached their destination, the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. There the Ari began to pray with great intensity, and all the others joined him,

swaying back and forth, until it seemed as if they were being rocked in a cradle of stars.

At last they completed the prayers, and there was silence. This lasted long into the night, and for all of them it was as if they had discovered the world on the first day of creation.

Then, at midnight, the Ari began to speak. And every word seemed to them like one of the words with which the world was created. For there he revealed the mystery of the Shattering of the Vessels and the Gathering of the Sparks. How, long before the sun cast a shadow, before the Word was spoken that brought the heavens and the earth into being, a flame emerged from an unseen point. And how sparks of light sprang forth from the center of that flame, concealed in shells that set sail everywhere, above and below, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light.

How the frail vessels broke open, split asunder, and all the sparks were scattered, like sand, like seeds, like stars.

That is when they learned why they had been created—to search for the sparks, no matter where they were hidden, and as each one was revealed, to raise it up and redeem it. For when all the scattered sparks had been gathered, the vessels would be restored, and the footsteps of the Messiah would be heard at last.

Just as the Ari finished speaking, a comet streaked across the sky. And when they saw this, all of them were filled with wonder, for they understood that they were not the only ones who had heard the words of the Ari that night. The words had also been heard in heaven.¹

In this story, “vessel” is used in the sense of a ship, as the sparks of light “concealed in shells that set sail everywhere . . . like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light.” The task of humans is “to search for the sparks, no matter where they were hidden, and as each one was revealed, to raise it up and redeem it.” Perhaps some of those sparks are hidden in vessels of another kind, i.e., within each of us a spark of Light contained in these vessels made of clay.

This story is background for the concept of *tikkun olam*, which is another message in itself. Some of you may be familiar with *tikkun olam*—there’s even a magazine these days called “*Tikkun*.” It is the idea of *restoring* the world, *repairing* the world, gathering up all the sparks of light and putting them back together.

¹ From *Gathering Sparks: Interviews from Parabola Magazine*, Selected by David Appelbaum and Joseph Kulin (New York: Parabola Books, 2001).

Living as long as I have, I know that growing older in an earthly body, or being ill in an earthly body, is a humbling experience. If you're young, you don't know this yet; if you're well, you don't know it yet, but you will eventually discover it. At the same time the wasting of the body is humbling, it leads powerfully to the understanding that the body is not *all* we are—as my friend Sue says, “I am not my cancer.”

Inside these clay vessels we know as our bodies, *something* remains always whole, unchanged, ageless, and eternal.