

Wooden Spoons, Iron Pans, Violins and You

A sermon preached by Rob Eller-Isaacs

All Souls Church
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You can feel it when you hold it in your hand. A wooden spoon your mother used, passed from hand to hand through generations, an old iron pan so well seasoned it makes you sing just to cook in it, an instrument well made, well maintained and well played over time, each retains a certain radiance. Human beings manifest this radiance as well. Good parents recognize that radiance and cultivate it in their children.

In this morning's reading, Robert Graves suggests two ways the word "baraka" might be used. It can mean "the sudden divine rapture which overcomes either a prophet or a group whom it unites in a bond of love." Or it can have a more domestic use. One might speak of the "baraka" of a much loved tool, an old pair of jeans worn soft by wear, or of most anything that's made by hand.

I want to suggest another way to use the word "baraka." But here, let's set the Arabic aside and use instead, as Graves suggests, the lovely old English word, virtue. I don't agree with Graves' contention that the "sense of virtue as spiritual power has become obsolete beyond revival." We have an obligation to recover and revive the language of power and grace. Words like God and Faith and Virtue are not obsolete they've simply been hijacked by self-righteous zealots. I, for one, refuse to relinquish the field.

This morning our Christian neighbors all around the world are celebrating Pentecost. The text for the day is taken from the Book of Acts at the start of the second chapter: "*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*" It surprises me that most liberal churches shy away from Pentecost. I suppose we're a bit frightened of the loss of control or magical thinking that talking in tongues may imply. But to me it seems to be a perfect metaphor to illustrate and reinforce the liberal church. At Pentecost the Spirit is distributed and rests on each of them, on each of us, making of us a priest and prophethood of all believers. Baraka, divine virtue took hold of them and so the church was born. So Pentecost embodies the first meaning of the word as "sudden divine rapture"...that unites us "in a bond of love."

Having already offered some charming examples of domestic uses of the word allow me to suggest a third way we might make good use of it. Each person has certain discernible gifts. They're often hard to see, overshadowed by self-doubt or worse yet driven into hiding by poor parenting, abuse or fear. That's why it's wise to make a habit or better yet, a practice, of recognizing, acknowledging and cultivating the virtues of those that we love. Mother's Day, it seems to me, presents a perfect opportunity to think about the ways we come to know our own good gifts and strengthen them and pass them on.

My mother died almost ten years ago. Our relationship was complicated. Like so many others I grew up feeling I could never meet her expectations. I know she loved me, though I knew it mostly from hearsay. Her friends often told me how she bragged to them of my accomplishments. I'm sure she was proud of me; her friends told me that she was. But she withheld her praise from me fearing, I suppose, that it would make me lazy. The good news is our relationship has improved considerably over the past few years. Now, with three grown children of my own I wish that I could tell her that I finally know she did the best she could.

I've grieved my mother these ten years. I've grieved her well. And grieving well becomes a form of spiritual practice. Approaching grief as practice leads inevitably to gratitude. The two are intricately connected. Old wounds are healed. Old failures are forgiven. So let me then offer an ode to my own mother's virtues, to those essential attributes of her being, which made her unique and radiant. I do this to praise and to honor her, yes; But also to suggest that you engage in a like exercise by contemplating your mother's virtues even and especially if your relationship with your mother is or was somewhat complex.

I have found that one of the best ways to grieve is to ask how did the one now gone best bless the world? What were her virtues and how might I not only honor her memory, but; in a way help her live on by letting those virtues take root and grow strong in my life.

Her name was Rosalia. At her best she saw beauty wherever she looked. When I was young she would point to a flower or a painting and say, "look, just look at it, isn't it beautiful." And I'd act embarrassed or bored but her insistence that I stop and look and see has taken root in me. So when I see a dancer in repose, or watch a weeping willow brush the surface of a pond, when I shiver as I stand before a painting say of winter haystacks weighed down with snow or weep at sunset just because the beauty is too much to hold, I know my mother's virtues are at work in me.

She was gone a lot. She worked for Saul Alinsky in the early days of the Woodlawn Organization. She helped raise the money to build the Neighborhood Club. She was president of the Ray School PTA and served for a time on the Illinois PTA board. I hated it when she was gone. She was a marvelous cook. My father hardly knew how to open a can. I have to admit me that I was fully grown and on my own before I realized that her commitments rose from the same set of values that move me now. Though as a child I couldn't see it, my mother felt a deep compassion for people on the margins. She couldn't stand disparities of race and class. And so she carved out time to try to make the world a better place for other people's children.

I remember one late December evening. We had marched by candlelight to an abandoned house, the clergy wearing robes and stoles, with Santa in the lead, to be arrested for trespass. We marched to point out the plight of the homeless. I saw my children staring through the fence as the police cuffed us and led us away. "Daddy," I heard our youngest shout, "will you be home for Christmas?" I know now my mother's virtues were at work in me.

We have time for only one more virtue in this Mother's Day homage. I remember as a child feeling she was loyal to a fault. Many of her friends struck me as at least eccentric and possibly insane. Scientists and artists lacking social skills would often gather at our table, frumpy and disheveled, to engage in interminable, circuitous conversations, which stole the attention I craved. Though in private moments she could be sarcastic and judgmental, at her best she recognized talent, she noticed other people's gifts. She taught us to be on the lookout for genius.

Now I have friends that embarrass my children. By now all three of my children are old enough to have strange brilliant friends of their own. But when they were young we often welcomed scientists and artists lacking social skills, eccentric friends who made us think, unconventional friends, people who took risks and loaned us the courage to do likewise. I would watch my children squirm and turn away. But to this day I'm grateful for the loyalty my mother showed to friends that others had abandoned. That kind of loyal friendship is a virtue I still choose to cultivate.

Do you see how this exercise works? Do you see how the practice leads from grief to gratitude? Take a moment now. Bring your own mother to mind. She need not have died in order for you to try this approach. Set aside, for now, whatever wounds and resentments remain, step outside the pain, and simply ask, what virtues, what blessedness, what radiance does she possess that I would like to see take root and grow in me. Don't let the inevitable complexities that come from all the holding on and letting go eclipse the rising sun of your gratitude. It may well light your way. This Mother's Day, this day of Pentecost I pray that blest by beauty, by compassion and by these loyal friends here gathered we will yet be united in a holy bond of love.

May it be so and amen.