

FCNL Annual Meeting 2025 Final Worship Offering

Notes as prepared by Mary Lou Hatcher

Hello Friends, it is good to be with you.

We are here, near the end of our gathering, having witnessed and participated in much worthy and weighty work guided by the theme “Still Speaking Truth to Power “.

This is called prophetic work in the Judeo Christian tradition. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, who died this past year, centered the prophets in his writings. He outlined two key prophetic roles. The first is **to NAME injustice and strongly object to harm** - - to call it out. The second prophetic role is **to offer the people a VISION** - - a way forward.

We can feel the importance of prophetic witness at this particular time.

Let us pause in deep gratitude for the wisdom and courage of the FCNL community and our many allies.

Now I hope you will permit me to turn our attention in a different direction, more inward than outward.

The United Church of Christ has for some years flown a banner saying “God is still speaking”. How exactly might Spirit be speaking to us, here, in this room of tiny squares.

How might we prepare ourselves to listen in this time of loss and chaos; this time of tremendous overwhelm?

What is the interior journey, and what are some practices that will **nurture** us and **guide** our walk?

How do we prepare ourselves for our own healing, and for our roles in shaping and repairing our communities?

I am going to offer three guideposts: **the courage to see, the discipline of spiritual replenishment, and a commitment to kindness.**

It takes courage to look reality in the eye – to see it as it really is, not as we wish it to be.

It takes the discipline of deep rest/spiritual practices, individual and corporate, to find guidance.

It takes commitment to take the next necessary next step, and **our best guide for commitment may well be kindness.**

So how can we cultivate courage to see reality, spiritual awareness and a commitment to kindness?

We might **begin by noticing** these qualities in ourselves and others – as they show up in big ways and in tiny ways – and linger there – with what we notice – and fan those flames of courage, insight and kindness.

And, conversely, we might also notice, cultural patterns, or biases, that cloud or distort the path we are pursuing – harmful cultural myths, if you will.

I am going to share some thoughts and observations, use them as they are helpful to you...

We need to cultivate the courage to look reality in the eye – to see it as it really is, not as we wish it to be. Bridget spoke to this as her first reflection in our Opening Session as she said – “face the assault, lean in, get proximate to need”.

One thing that seemed to happen back in January of this year when the assault on liberties, the rule of law and basic decency began with such overwhelming speed, one thing that seemed to happen, was a lot of wailing such as “I can’t believe this is happening” and “they can’t do this” – just a big dose of disbelief. We had plenty of warning, why the disbelief? Well, here’s an idea about that. We have a big cultural bias about progress – about continual growth – our financial system is based on an every quarter expansion – our natural resources extraction is based on unlimited supply by whatever method, for example. Even if we, in this community say we don’t hold these beliefs, they are the water in which we swim, and wishing is hard to resist.

Is moral progress inherently human? Oh, I wish it were so. But history, as Tim Snyder speaks to in On Tyranny, is full of contradictions; and knowing that does not fully protect us from wishing it were otherwise. The cost of that wishing is not seeing the reality before us with clarity and then courage. We can get caught in what Buddhists might call secondary suffering; our anxiety and rage dwells on thoughts such as “this is not fair, this cannot be happening” rather than the real suffering itself, so hard to bare, of “this is devastating, what is my next best step”? When I NOTICE my thoughts going round and round, repeating and repeating, or when I find myself endlessly circling the kitchen table, I get a HINT that I am dwelling on secondary suffering.

The practice of lingering, noticing, and *leaning in*, to real suffering is not easy but it is the courageous way to engage life as it is, not as we wish it to be. Then we can face present loss with real time courage and signs of future harm without denial. We live wide awake. I wonder what might have unfolded if Tim Snyder’s warnings had been taken more seriously, more courageously, in 2017 when they were first published.

Noticing the reality of loss and harm may also open us to seeing evolving realities within the loss. Snyder alluded to this as he spoke about systems that might evolve out of current policy losses; ones that are actually more fulsome than what they replace.

I wonder if you have ever experienced newness of life in the presence of loss?

Writer and farmer, Wendell Berry shared this experience from his book entitled This Day, Collected and New Sabbath Poems.

1980 II

The eager dog lies strange and still
Who roamed the woods with me;
Then while I stood or climbed the hill
Or sat under a tree,

Awaiting what more time might say,
He thrashed in undergrowth,
Pursuing what he scared away,
Made ruckus for us both.

He's dead; I go more quiet now,
Stillness added to me
By time and sorrow, mortal law,
By loss of company

That his new absence has made new.
Though it must come by doom
This quiet comes by kindness too,
And brings me nearer home,

For as I walk the wooded land
The morning of God's mercy,
Beyond the work of mortal hand,
Seen by more than I see,

The quiet deer look up and wait,
Held still in quick of grace.
And I wait, stop footstep and thought.
We stand here face to face.

If you have ever experienced a kind of **bittersweetness** grief I invite you to hold that experience close – as a guide to practicing COURAGE.

So we move into the second part of this reflection, the DISCIPLINE of Spiritual Practices.

It takes wisdom to hold reality well, with great love, spiritual practices guide us with this. Spiritual practices counter another cultural myth, the call to endless DOING.

Practices such as

....spoken and sung prayers

...meditation aided by our body (whether that is quiet sitting, slow walking, running, yoga, or intentional breathing), finding whatever mind/body practice or pace is life giving for YOU.

..... time spent with the arts – music, poetry, visual works, --

... dreamwork...

In an often quoted poem Emily Dickenson wrote:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind —

“Tell all the truth, but tell it slant”..... sometimes Spirit’s truth comes directly and rationally, but sometimes it seems to sneak in - as a dream, or a growing intuition; it comes in slant. Spiritual practices can have the immediate benefit of calming our overwhelm, and they can also come at us slant... not through our rational minds, but through our other ways of knowing.

For a long while I practiced Centering Prayer. I started it to calm my overly anxious and fretful mind. The practice is to sit quietly, with the intention to continually return to “just sitting” as opposed to drifting off into some plan, thought or feeling. To assist your mind, you choose a word and use it as an anchor... folks often choose a spiritually grounding word or phrase such as “holding Light” or “Christ have mercy” but mine was more simple – it was “here” – as in ‘my intention is simply to be here’. Sitting in this chair; I am here. I found it helpful. Then one day, after some years of this..... while sitting quietly, something seemed to rise from the center of my chest, and spill over or out, and it was expressed in my mind as “here, you can have it all” So the word’s meaning had flipped, through no

conscious pathway. It was a new STANCE, a new POSTURE. With the invitation to linger there and notice how that felt – this posture of release and giving.

So Spiritual Practices can offer “simply” a very concrete counterweight to the overwhelm, a way to engage CALM, which is an easier place from which to THINK, calmness. It is hard to think well when one is frantic. And Spiritual Disciplines can function sometimes quite indirectly, or unconsciously assisting us to courageously awake to a new way of being; one that operates from a stance of Trust. Here is another Sabbath poem from Wendell Berry:

Whatever is foreseen in joy

Must be lived out from day to day,
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.

Which bring us to the third healing modality: commitment to move in the world with kindness

To be kind is a discipline and a GRACED mercy.

It is the antithesis of another cultural myth – the myth of redemptive violence. Perhaps it is different because it is relational – it is reciprocal – it involves a giving and receiving.

There is an intimacy to the word KINDNESS. It is in some way RIGHT-SIZED. It conveys a stance towards life in the moment. It has a way of prioritizing the present moment in the way a LIST of caregiving jobs does not.

Do you know what I mean? Kindness conveys a sense of intimacy, affection even.

There is something true to Right sizing our care. In her book [My Grandfather's Blessings](#), Rachel Naomi Remen, tells the story of a young child who had a small Matchbox car that he played with constantly, took everywhere. Friends and family, seeing this, would bring him matchbox cars, and soon he had a whole shelf full. And then he moved on to playing with other things. When asked about this change he said, “Well, I just can’t love so many cars.”

When something is right-sized it can go deep. Kindness can show up as powerful love. I don't know of any better description of this than that offered in the poem entitled Kindness, by the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye . The poem came to her in one full swoop, when she was in her early 20's and had just had a life threatening and terrifying experience. She and her husband were newlyweds, and on a bus trip through Latin America – a big adventure. The bus was attacked by thieves, everyone was robbed of everything, one person was killed. Here is the poem:

'Kindness' by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

The kindness she speaks of is one that looks pain right in the face and reaches out. This must be what the Dali Lama means when he says: My religion is kindness. Kindness is also a practice, small kindnesses prepare us when big ones are needed. And Kindness sets a TONE, it has a POSTURE that makes healing possible.

One might think of the many stories told about Jesus of Nazareth: touching the leper, locating the blind man, calling the tax collector out of the tree, stopping a stoning, accepting a drink from the “unclean”... Perhaps he also said, “My religion is Kindness”

I wonder how someone’s commitment to kindness has shaped YOUR life.

So we have paused here for a little bit of time, together, to ponder “how might Spirit be speaking to each of us, and to the FCNL community, about our own healing and well-being.

How might we each be invited to accept divine grace and mercy in this time of tremendous loss and overwhelm?

What will we endeavor to NOTICE about courage in ourselves and others.

What spiritual practices will we hold close for our own healing and the healing of the world we seek?

How might Kindness show up as our accompanying friend and guide?

And, does this not all speak to Joy?

Please join me in waiting worship.