

THE PULSE OF SPIRIT



EMISSARIES
OF DIVINE LIGHT

FIRE AND WATER, CREATIVITY AND COMMUNITY

26 SEPTEMBER 2011

Good morning. It's a pleasure to be worshipping with you this morning and to have been among you these last few days. The choir sang this morning about fire and water, so I'd like to speak a few words about the fire of creativity and the water of community this morning.

I wrote a book a couple of years ago called *Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet*. Last night I think we had an experience of that, where the divine and the human meet. Thank you to our musicians and artists. This is what creativity does. And it's good for the artists and it's good for the listeners. Indeed, it takes art to listen to good music. It takes art to appreciate good painting. Where would the artist be, of any sort, without the recipients of one's art? So it is a circle, the circle of creativity. And many, many people know, from their experience either in giving birth to what is creative in them or to receiving the birth of others, that these are some of our most profound mystical experiences—that we travel the rapids of creativity on a raft over which we have no control. We're just being borne along by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas—who, by the way, was condemned by the church three times before they canonized him a saint, so keep that in mind; he must have said something interesting—he says that the same spirit that hovered over the waters at the beginning of Creation hovers over the mind of the artist at work. So the work of creation; here we have people argue about whether it happened six thousand years ago or 13.7 billion years ago—I prefer the 13.7 billion years ago—but the point is, it's still going on. Creation is continuous. And our species, being especially gifted to be creative, is certainly carrying on this great work.

Of course, our species is also radically dangerous for the very same reason, because we carry within us this divine power of creativity. Again, Aquinas said, in the thirteenth century, "One human being can do more evil than all the other species put together." Whoa, it takes your breath away! This was seven hundred years

before Hitler or Pol Pot or Stalin. How did he know that? Because he valued human creativity. He knew that it is a major presence on the earth.

But where is creativity honored in our educational systems? What departments are dropped the moment there's a budget crunch? Out goes art, out goes theater, out goes music. Our culture has not caught up with the reality that creativity is the very essence of what it means to be a human being. This is what distinguishes us. When anthropologists go out and look for bones, to find our ancestors, they don't just look for bones. They look for artifacts *with* the bones. Humans are bipeds who make things. Then they know these are our ancestors, because that's what it means to be human: to be creative and carrying that divine, yes—and quasi-demonic power—within us.

And that is why the earth is in so much trouble today, because humans have raced ahead with our dynamic creativity without asking who's paying for this. Who's paying the price of tearing down rain forests in a day that it's taken God and nature ten thousand years to give birth to? We have to become much more aware of our creativity, both its beauty and its potential for damage.

A song was sung last night about heaven and earth; it might even come back this morning. Meister Eckhart, fourteenth century, says, "We must become heaven on earth so that God can find a home here." We must become heaven on earth, and that means we start creating communities that are authentic so that divinity can find a home here.

Derek Walcott is a Caribbean poet who won the Nobel Prize for poetry in 1992. In his acceptance speech, he had this wonderful line that I want to share with you. It means a lot to me. He says, "The fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of history." The fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of history. This is true not just of poetry but of all art, of music, of dance, of film, of pottery. All art is the work of luring us into falling in love again. And how important that is, especially at this time in history, that we heed the fate of art, that we fall in love with the world in spite of history. History is getting more and more dour and dark—you may have noticed. Many trace it to 9/11—that certainly was one shocker. But the point is that history itself can make you a pessimist, and even a cynic, a dropout, and even an addict, where we would just sit on our couch, eating potato chips and pressing the channels, vicariously watching other people live. Football season is here, et cetera, et cetera. Of course, then there's basketball season, there's baseball season, and pretty soon life is over! We watch others live life for us.

The medievals had a word for this. They called it *acedia*. It's one of the capital sins. And during the Industrial Revolution it was translated as *sloth*, but it's a much broader word than that. It's about cynicism, it's about depression, it's about boredom, it's about despair. Thomas Aquinas said *acedia* is "the lack of energy to begin new things"—the lack of energy to begin new things. Boy, do we need new things today! We need new forms of education. Seventy-two percent of black boys in America are not graduating from high school today. Are they dumb, or are adults dumb, misdefining education, so that we're chasing the young away from education because frankly, it's boring? We need to reinvent new things in terms of economics, an economic system that works for everyone. And not just the two-legged ones, for *everyone*—for the plants and the animals and the oceans and the water and the air. We're in this together. We need new political systems. We need new ways of disseminating information, and of course the Internet is such a way. And we

need new rituals to awaken the best in the community—the joy and the grief that needs to be celebrated, processed, and used as a device to energize us all.

The lack of energy to begin new things is so common in our culture that we've even invented a word for it, couch-potato-itis, this passivity—what is the solution? What's the medicine? Aquinas says zeal comes—zeal is the opposite of acedia—zeal comes from “an intense experience of the beauty of things.” An intense experience of the beauty of things—falling in love, just like Derek Walcott said: “The fate of poetry is to fall in love in spite of history.” We fall in love with the earth, we fall in love with the story of the universe and how it brought each one of us here over a 13.7 billion-year journey. We fall in love with existence itself, we fall in love with music and poetry and flowers and fish and the soil, and artists of all kinds, and with one another, especially those different from ourselves.

The theme of this conference has been “The Creative Field,” and I think that this speaks to the subject. I walked this morning in your fields, and these are sweet-smelling lands that you live on here, and it's very easy to fall in love here. And that's a good and blessed thing.

Now let me speak to the topic of community. One way to define a spiritual term is to go to its opposite first. One of my favorite stories about community, or its opposite, is this: There was an Australian theologian a few years ago who was lecturing in Africa, and as he lectured they were translating him. He would speak two or three sentences; they translated his words into Swahili. So he was going along, going along, going along. He came to the culmination of his talk, and he said, “The number one spiritual problem in Sydney today is loneliness.” The translator asked him to repeat the sentence. Then he huddled with five of his African buddies, came back to the microphone, and said, “I'm sorry, sir, but in our language there is no word for loneliness.” Whoa, what's wrong with these people? Where have they been? We've been inventing loneliness for three hundred years. We have PhDs in loneliness! We've got cosmic loneliness. It's one of our exports. It's really catching on. These are our ancestors—we all came from Africa. These are our ancestors. We all came from Africa, and they don't have a word for loneliness?

What have we done? What has the modern era done, telling us, as we were taught for three hundred years, that the sky was inert and dead and a machine; that matter was dead and inert; that atoms were in this constant battle for survival, fighting each other, and only a few won out? That was the myth of modern science, and it has rendered us cosmically lonely.

When you have community with the trees, the bushes, the flowers, the four-legged ones, the winged ones, the finned ones, the stars, the galaxies, the moon, and the sun, you're not lonely. Sure, sometimes the two-legged ones will disappoint you. But you go to Mother Earth—she's there. You go to Father Sky—he's there. And this is what it means to live in a cosmology, to live in the sense of the universe that embraces us. And it does embrace us. It's an absolute miracle that our strange species emerged after 13.7 billion years of this universe's journey. It's an absolutely astounding situation. And it calls for praise, and it calls for generosity, and it calls for community, the awareness of community, and a realization of what has been lost by our having cut ourselves off. Thomas Berry says our twentieth century was autistic, autistic vis-à-vis the other species, and this is why they are disappearing at unprecedented rates. It's been 65 million years, folks, 65 million years since we've had the amount of extinction of species happening on this planet that's

happening today. This time around, it is humans who are intimately involved in that destruction, no matter what certain presidential candidates tell us.

A deep part of community is that dance, that dialectic between solitude and group. Solitude and group. We always have to learn to respect the solitude. Without that solitude, we don't move out of our reptilian brains, and without the solitude we don't come up with true creativity, we don't come up with something new. And of course with the community we have, and the group, we have a sharing. A healthy community has to dance the dance of action *and* contemplation, or what they call in the East, of action and nonaction, and our action must come from our nonaction for it to be authentic and for it not to do harm to others. Meister Eckhart says we should worry less about what we *do* and more about what we *are*, because if your *being* is just, your ways will be just; and if your being is joyful, your ways will be joyful. So action and contemplation is also about being, being in touch with being. And for that, you need solitude. We need our space.

And of course, community is also about friendship and tolerance, putting up with diversity and learning to delight in it. Some of the people who we may start out with as being tolerant may actually end up to be friends—and some we start out with as friends we actually end up to be a little more at the level of tolerance. But to celebrate the diversity is part of the lessons we learn in our community lives.

And I think it's very important to name the following, especially now that today's physics has moved from the idea of rugged, individual atoms to atoms that actually link up, creating molecules that link up, creating cells that link up, that create organisms that link up, that create communities. We now have a physics that holds, if you will, or undergirds the sense of interdependence that is the basis of all community. So now we can move, I think, rapidly from our cosmic loneliness to authentic community, in our local bio-levels but also in the grander scheme of things.

Let us remember also that the etymological meaning of *community* is *cum-munio*; that is, to share a common task together. To work together. Both inner work and outer work is what we do together. Both are needed, especially at this time in history. Without the inner work we are lost. But with it, everything else gains brilliance, as Meister Eckhart put it when he said: "The outward work can never be small if the inward one is great, and the outward work can never be great or good if the inward is small or of little worth. The inward work always includes in itself all size, all breadth and all length." He also declared that when we return to our origins (which is the purpose of inner work) we learn that our work "draws all its being from nowhere else but from and in the heart of God."

In this regard, post-modern science having taken the lid off of the mechanical universe, finally, we now can speak, I think, openly and candidly about beings other than human beings that also support us. In the traditional language, angels, spirits, whatever you want to call them, and of course the ancestors—always with us, always challenging us. In the Middle East, you know, their idea of history is not like a train, a caravan, where the ancestors are in the caboose. Their notion of history is a caravan of camels in which the ancestors are out front—leading and urging us on.

We say we honor Martin Luther King. We put up this big stone monument and fight over it and all—cool. But the truth is you don't honor the ancestors by looking back. You honor the ancestors by imitating their courage. You don't say what did they do in 1960, or what did Francis of Assisi do in the year 1200? You ask what would they be doing in the year 2011? Would they be as controversial and as wild and off-the-edge in our time as they were in theirs? Of course they would be! This is what made them memorable. They were all called. We're all called to this kind of greatness today, because our species is slipping, and the whole ecosystem is slipping with us, and we don't have the luxury of putting other people on pedestals. We have the responsibility to roll up our sleeves and to go to work with whatever talents we've been given, whatever communities we've gathered to encourage us, and whatever artists and spiritual leaders there are to inspire us and to kick us off of our couches.

I'd like to share with you a brief passage from Thomas Berry. He's one of the great eco-philosophers of our time. He died just a year and a half ago. I begin my book on the *Christian Mystics* with Jesus, and end it with Thomas Berry. So this is the last meditation in my book here, Number 365. But he named, I think, so powerfully the community that is supporting us and that is challenging us and that is embracing us.

“The human venture depends absolutely on this quality of awe and reverence and joy in the Earth and all that lives and grows upon the Earth,” he writes. “In the end the universe can only be explained in terms of celebration. It is all an exuberant expression of existence itself. . . . A way is opening for each person to receive the total spiritual heritage of the human community as well as the total spiritual heritage of the universe. Within this context the religious antagonisms of the past can be overcome, the particular traditions can be vitalized, and the feeling of presence to a sacred universe can appear once more to dynamize and sustain human affairs.”

And finally, he says: “We must feel that we are supported by that same power that brought the Earth into being, that power that spun the galaxies into space, that tilt the sun and brought the moon into its orbit.” The end of loneliness—community at so many levels.

Finally, I want to say a word about vocation. One of the songs last night, I think it was the last song, was about the call, the call of Mother Earth. Gaia is calling us all today. It's clear, it's absolutely clear: she needs us. She needs us. This is why we can't be couch potatoes. We can't hide—we can't hide anymore. Our times are times of chaos. Believe me, they're going to get more chaotic, not less. Wall Street's failures are going to be more visible, not less. Main Street's hunger for help is going to become more visible, not less. Yes, we're in for a lot of chaos. So it's an important question to ask at a time like this: What is it that you can count on? What is sure? What is steady? This is the real appeal of fundamentalism, of course, that it is such a tight box, orthodoxies. This is why a lot of people flock to fundamentalism today in many traditions around the world—they want something certain in their life.

I have come recently to this conclusion: that the one thing that's really certain is not a thing. It's like a river—it moves. It evolves. It is our vocations. Our vocations, our callings, are like a river. And our river keeps moving, and it may come up against a solid rock or a fallen tree. It finds its way around it. It reinvents itself. So your vocation, your calling, may have evolved in many ways in the last ten, twenty, thirty, forty years. I know mine has. But it's what keeps you going.

There's a beautiful book by a fine man, a poet, William Everson, called *Birth of a Poet*. He taught a course on vocation at the University of Santa Cruz for a number of years; he had over 120 students in it, every single class. It was the most popular course on campus. And that book, *Birth of a Poet*, is the summary of his teachings in that class on vocation. It is what young people need to hear about, that you're here for a purpose. We're all here for a purpose, as individuals, as communities. We are needed. The universe brought us forth for a purpose. And here are a couple statements of his about vocation. He says:

"Vocation is like love. Until it is awakened in you, you don't know what it is. When you are a child, you don't know what sexuality is, yet once it awakens within you, there is no going back. From that point on, you are a sexual being."

He says, and this is especially important for young people, that "the imaginative level is necessary, that the human race keeps re-dreaming the things it has always learned. There is an evolutionary rule in the psyche: Each generation is at the frontier of the psychic evolution of the race."

Let me say that again, young people especially: "Each generation is at the frontier"—there is that in front of the caboose, or the camel herd, again—"frontier of the psychic evolution of the race. Through us, the probe of the whole race towards a possible human future is being enacted. You were sent into the world to dream a new dream, a new vision of humanity." That is what you have to be alert for and be aware of.

"Suppose you had the opportunity to become the tyrant of another country. What good would this do for the human race? None, because as far as the race is concerned there is no need for any people to go out and live again that particular myth." We've been there and done it. We've seen empires—we're in the last one, I hope. Let's move on with new visions.

Finally, you call yourselves here in this community, to which I am privileged and pleased to have been welcomed this weekend, the Emissaries of Divine Light. That word *Emissaries* is very interesting. Of course, it comes from Latin, "to send forward." In Greek the exact word is *apostolic*. We get the word *apostolic* from the same word, sending forward. So it's a lineage that people appreciate, that you can talk about being an emissary, being a messenger for light. And I loved the song the choir sang, and I loved their singing of it. I was also struck, you know, by this idea of "lighten the world." Lighten the world—it has two meanings. One is to bring light, and the other is to do something about the heaviness of it all. You know, empires are very, very heavy to carry on your shoulders; they're very expensive. And they take themselves ever so seriously! We need to lighten the load. Humor does that, and humility does that—not to take ourselves, not to take our culture, too seriously.

So what we know about light today is amazing. Moses, as you know, had to go up the mountain to find the burning bush, take his shoes off in reverence, of course. But what we now know from science is that every bush is burning. You don't have to take a pilgrimage up the mountain at Sinai to experience the burning bush. Right after the service today, you can go out here, pick a leaf—it's a burning leaf. There are photons abounding in every leaf. You are a burning bush, every time you look in the mirror. We are all burning bushes. This is a democratization of theophany, of the divine experience. This is a horizontalizing of

mysticism. Our mystics are no longer just locked up in professional prayer places called monasteries, folks. They're wandering in our law schools and in our medical schools and our engineering schools and on the farm and in the subways. There are mystics everywhere. As Emissaries of Divine Light, it's your job to remind people of that.

And above all, to heed the words of Jesus: hey, you've only got one lifetime. Don't hide your light under a bushel. Amen. (*The congregation applauded.*)

So David Karchere and I met yesterday to talk about the service today, and he gave me permission to share with you this prayer that we'll be doing together. It's the Aramaic "Our Father." Some of you may be familiar with it, the "Our Father" prayer that many Christians have memorized and made too much rote of: "Our Father, who art in heaven." Jesus' words are actually far more exciting and mystical and sensual than that translation is. Jesus spoke Aramaic, which is a tribal language related to Hebrew, of course. But like many tribal languages around the world, it plays with words. It plays with words, and so there are many ways to translate the "Our Father," and we've only been using one for centuries—which is one reason we're bored at worship, but it's only one.

So what I'd like to do is two things. First, I'd like to pray with you this different version of the prayer, so I'll have you echo back and see for yourself whether it doesn't feel far more mystical, cosmic, and full of light than the dreary version. And then we're going to do a slight dance. We're going to stand and we're going to take the Aramaic words "*Abwûn d'bwasmâja*," which are the words that have been translated "Our Father, which art in heaven," and we're going to chant that together in a simple dance right in your places here. Okay? Have your permission for that? Good. Okay.

So here is one translation, and actually there are six others you can make out of the Aramaic. That's how playful the language is. So I'm going to recite a verse and then ask you to echo it back.

*O Birther, Father-Mother of the Cosmos,
You create all that moves in light.
Focus your light within us, make it useful
as the rays of a beacon show the way.
Create your reign of unity now
through our fiery hearts and willing hands,
Let all wills move together in your vortex
as stars and planets swirl around the sky.
Grant what we need each day in bread and insight,
subsistence for the call of growing life.
Loose the cords of mistakes binding us
as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.
Don't let surface things delude us,
but free us from what holds us back from our true purpose.
Amen.*

So what we'll do is just chant the first line. Again, echo this back. I'll give you the Aramaic: *Abwûn d'bwasmâja*. (*All repeated it several times.*) Very good, and that is the first line, "O Birther, Father-Mother of the Cosmos, You create all that moves in light." Another translation is "O Thou, the breathing life of all, creator of the shimmering sound that touches us." Okay, now I invite you to stand, and why doesn't the front row come on up here so we can be facing the others, and we can model it for others. Hold hands in your rows, please, and it's very simple what we'll be doing. First we'll bow slightly to open up that heart chakra. So we go like this: (*chanting*) "*Abwûn d'bwasmâja. Abwûn d'bwasmâja.*" So you see, you make an arc. First you open your heart chakra, then you pass it on to your neighbor, that's why we do a bit of an arc like that. And we move, and we'll move twice to the right and then we'll go to the left. So let's do it again. Again, the words, "*Abwûn d'bwasmâja,*" and the music is (*chanting*) "*Abwûn d'bwasmâja. Abwûn d'bwasmâja.*" Ready?

(*All chanted and moved together.*) Very good. Now we're going to have a little sound backing us up, so this is an invitation to really let the air out, to make some noise (*recorded music was played*). Onye Onyemici, the Aboriginal African spiritual ritual leader, says, "When you praise, hold nothing back. When you praise, hold nothing back." So let's stir the angels up here with our noise, okay? Ready. (*All continued dancing and chanting together to the recorded chant and music.*)

Amen. Thank you. It's always wonderful to pray in the original language that Jesus or other ancestors spoke and prayed in. And it's a little mad, but remember that part of the training of a spiritual warrior is that you appear mad; but it's only a disguise.

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Sunrise Ranch
(Conclusion of the Creative Field Conference)
September 18, 2011

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