

The San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
November 25, 2001 Worship Service

Work on What has been Spoiled

Transcript of the sermon by Dr. John Kao

Scripture References:

The First Reading: The Book of Changes – Chapter 18

Work on what has been spoiled

The Chinese character ku represents a bowl in which food is spoiling. This symbolizes decay. It has come about because the gentle indifference of the lower trigram has come together with the rigid inertia of the upper, and the result is stagnation. Since this implies guilt, the conditions embody a demand for removal of the cause. Hence the meaning of the hexagram is not simply “what has been spoiled” but “work on what has been spoiled.”

The judgment:

Work on what has been spoiled

Has supreme success.

It furthers one to cross the great water.

Before the starting point, three days

After the starting point 3 days.

What has been spoiled through man’s fault can be made good again through man’s work. It is not immutable fate, as in the time of standstill that has caused the state of corruption, but rather the abuse of human freedom.

Work towards improving conditions promises well because it accords with the possibilities of the time. We must not recoil from work and danger – symbolized by crossing of the great water – but must take hold energetically. Success depends, however, on proper deliberation. This is expressed by the lines, “Before the starting point, three days. After the starting point, three days.” We must first know the causes of corruption before we can do away with them; hence it is necessary to be cautious during the time before the start. Then we must see to it that the new way is safely entered upon, so that a relapse may be avoided. Therefore we must pay attention to the time after the start. Decisiveness and energy must take the place of the inertia and indifference that have lead to decay, in order that the ending may be followed by a new beginning.

The Second Reading - Mathew 6, verses 22-29

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, they whole body shall be full of light

But if thine eye be evil, they whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness.

No man can serve two masters for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment

Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.

And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these

It may seem a bit incongruous to present a sermon entitled “Working on What has been Spoiled” during the Thanksgiving weekend. but in some ways I would say that is probably the best time to be taking up this challenge.

Over the past few weeks, I had the opportunity to take a grand tour of what has recently been spoiled. I’ll give you a few examples. First of all, I visited New York City. I went to Ground Zero of my hometown of New York City and saw up close what a large hole had been ripped into the fabric of that wonderful place. on September 11 New York was preparing for what those of you familiar with the city know is a typically glorious entry into the fall season. Also I visited the Pentagon a couple of weeks ago to meet some people inside a structure we might say is optimized for wars of the past. There’s an old saying that generals are always preparing to fight the last war. it’s a huge building filled with brave and noble people who are looking for a new mission, for a new doctrine. the damage to the structure of the pentagon is a story dwarfed by the twin towers, but is impossible to imagine without being there. It’s an enormous physical piece of damage. It’s also an enormous emotional piece of damage. The Secretary of the Admiral that I was visiting became tearful 10 seconds after saying hello, just remembering what had gone on a couple of months earlier.

And then there’s our home town of San Francisco. Laurel and I moved out here because we wanted a ringside seat for the technology boom which has turned into the technology bust, I’ll Give you three examples of conversations I’ve had over the last few weeks that tell the story.

A conversation with a noted technology consultant, a freelancer who called me up last week and said, “you know, I have to come to your office and pick up my check early because otherwise I’m going to have to sell my car to raise some cash in order to have some cash for Thanksgiving.”

A well-known venture capitalist in the community from one of the premier firms on Sand Hill Road who confided to me in a state of some agitation, “I can’t get over it! Everything I created over the last three or four years has gone up in smoke!”

And finally the head of a technology investment banking unit of one of the global money-center banks who over a ta-ta lunch in London said “you know, I’m really upset; I had to fire some of my best people last week, people who work in my own office,” He said, and I quote, “I’ll probably burn in hell for this, but I had to do it And now my biggest problem is that everybody is sitting and staring at their computer screens, nobody wants to do anything.”

And so people aren’t just upset about what is going on these days. I would say with ready finger on the pulse of the economy that if you scratch the surface, people are furious, they’re calling lawyers, they’re in despair. We’ve seen the moving vans taking people out of San Francisco back Eastward, back to presumably a safer, more coherent environment.

But you really don't have to go to the pages of the *New York Times* to look for examples of what has been spoiled either. I think that's probably at the core of this sermon - that what has been spoiled is a daily experience that occurs to each of us in our everyday lives. It's what falls short. It's the family reunion that fails to meet expectations, that seeks to cover up a sense of imperfection or disappointment. It's our personal dream that somehow has become the very imperfect reality. So the notion of what is spoiled is, in a sense, all around us. It's at the heart, I would argue, of who we are as human beings as we travel on this road together.

So I want to make three points about working on what has been spoiled. First of all, looking at what has been spoiled is not something that occurs in a vacuum. It doesn't come out of nowhere. there's a certain rationale underlying that which has been spoiled.

Second, what has been spoiled contains the seeds of a treasure or a great opportunity, a challenge for us.

And third and as implied by the reading from the *Book of Changes*, how we deal with what has been spoiled has the ability to transform our lives and in so doing to transform the world around us. So let me try to address these three large points in a few short minutes.

First of all, what is spoiled does not exist in a vacuum. It is always in relation to something, there's a certain kind of logic to it, if only an *ex post facto* logic, When you think about New York City on the 11th of September, imagine a beautiful cloudless day, the kind of day that one

United Airlines pilot afterwards said was, “the kind of day that made you think that you had the best job in the world if you were an airline pilot.” What a difference an hour makes. New York was just beginning the great Fall season where everything feels possible and then all of a sudden we were in an era that the pundits are now calling an era of ambiguous warfare, it was almost as if history took a left turn when we were expecting that it was going to continue to go right. And a host of confusing, extremely painful questions announced themselves. We were surprised, profoundly confused. Who were these people that did this to us? When did this war, if it is a war, start? Who is fighting? What do they want? What do we want? What is the desired outcome for us? In short, I think we were caught by surprise.

And yet now on reflection I think we realize that the subtext of what happened is enormous, that portions of the world have been neglected and marginalized, and are now demanding attention. Afghanistan is, in some respects, the inner city of the global community, sort of our global ghetto. One of my history professors in college said something profound in context of what’s going on today, which is that “war is communication by other means.” I don’t mean to gloss over the horror of what’s been going on. But here we have a graphic illustration of a kind of peer-to-peer world, in which everyone is connected. that’s the good news. That’s the engine for building a future that fits with what we want for ourselves, but that’s the bad news as well because while we’re all connected, we are at the same time profoundly disconnected. what does that mean?

We at our little firm downtown in the weeks following September 11 tried to draw out a conceptual map of the two worlds that had just come into such dramatic conflict– in such terms

as their values aspirations, complaints, etc. These were, in short, the Judeo-Christian, San Franciscan post-modern kind of world on one hand and the world of fundamentalist, politicized Islam on the other. And we could find almost no way to connect these worlds.

this is the challenge before us. Our sense of disconnection is stark. And yet we are connected. We have no choice but to make that bridge and it is in some respects the power, the eminence, the wealth we enjoy in this country that has begotten jealousy or the hostility; the desire to bring the big guy down. Which is why the targets of that fateful day in September were chosen as much for their symbolic as economic value.

So I think that this notion of what has been spoiled often comes to us with such a sense of surprise, how could this happen, how could we be here, how could this have happened to us? I think the bottom line and the first real point I want to make is that the seeds of what has been spoiled whether on a macro historical level or for ourselves individually and personally, are there all along. “What has been spoiled” is not something that comes out of the blue. It has a rationale that we are obliged to seek.

Which leads to my second point, namely that what has been spoiled contains the basis of a great treasure. It may be surprising to hear those words, but I think from a psychological and social perspective that it is true. I want to invoke a psychological concept, which comes from the work of Carl Jung. He spoke of something he called the shadow that is very relevant here. Let me read

a quote from Robert Hopke, one of the interpreters of Jung, that gives a concise explanation of what the shadow is. He writes,

“Just as any bright light must always cast darkness somewhere, the conscious brightness of the ego, who I see myself as being and who I want other to see me as being, always casts a shadow in one’s personality. A shadow with the same relationship to the ego’s power and potential as a photographic negative has to the actual photograph. Those unpleasant, almost you might say immoral aspects of ourselves which we would like to pretend do not exist or have no effect on our lives, in other words, our inferiorities, what is unacceptable within us or that which we feel ashamed of, the shadowy side of our personality is difficult and painful to admit. It contradicts who we would like to see ourselves as, who we would like to seem to be in the eyes of others. Shadow becomes unconscious or may even be actively ruthlessly suppressed to maintain the sanctimonious treatments of our imagined and illusory perfection.”

Pretty pungent words, but I think useful ones, because I think the shadow as I tried to tee up some context here is a universal phenomenon. It’s everywhere around us. St. Augustine said that to act is to sin. And any entrepreneur - and I’m sure there are many in this audience - is familiar with the notion of creative destruction, that nothing new can be created whether economically or socially without the destruction or disappearance of something else.

So the shadow is universal. It’s also about a drama that unfolds over time, over our personal as well as collective lives. In some respects you could argue that in the first half of our lives, civilization exacts a price from us that sets the stage for the emergence of the shadow in our own lives. We’ve got to get good at certain things. We get competent at forming a family, gaining skills, disciplining ourselves in a hundred ways. Meanwhile, as Jung says, the shadow is what is suppressed; what he calls the inferior function. It remains. It doesn’t go away. But the way we

traffic with the world during what Jung called the high noon or middle of life, in which we are rewarded for being who we present ourselves to the world as being, is balanced by the growing influence of the shadow, of that which has been suppressed.

Here is a little more life cycle psychology. In the second half of life, Jung says we are trying to bring together that which has been fragmented and separated so that we may experience a sense of wholeness and fulfillment. So the healing of what has been split, restoring, making whole, finding the holiness of life in a sense, is our challenge as we strive to bring everything together. You might say that the structure of your life as you build it, as you desire it, from a life cycle perspective contains the seeds of its own destruction. And that being spoiled at a larger and deeper psychological sense is almost inevitable if we persist in a certain way of doing things without opening ourselves up to what has been fragmented and split off so that we can literally pull ourselves together. This is why a lot of career theorists say that when you turn 50, you should immediately stop what you're doing and pick up a brand new career. Career change is a proxy for trying to get into a very different head space about who we are and what we need in order to be complete and fulfilled. And so our maturity and our fulfillment is about how we manage this transition and about how we deal with this notion of the shadow, of that which we would like to keep at bay. In a sense you could argue that this is a religious task. Religion, in the sense of that which is about putting together, integration, about healing the wounds of separation, not the either /or but the both/and the and/also.

So finally to the third point - how we deal with what is spoiled, how we actively deal with it - makes all the difference in the world. *The Book of Changes* quote is instructive because it talks very specifically about taking action. Prepare and think about the situation for three days, then do something, and then reflect on it for three days and then presumably repeat the process. This is not simply about coming to some conceptual breakthrough. It's about being active. I think this all boils down to one point both psychologically and in terms of the collective, which is that to own one's shadow, to own the darkness, to own that which has been split off is the key to the pathway of fulfillment that we all seek. If we heed the lessons contained within this experience of imperfection, if we embrace this notion of working on what has been spoiled, therein lies the path of full realization.

And of course there are a lot of easy outs. There are many ways of avoiding this challenge. Denial, for one. "We have no problems. Everyone likes us. The stock market will keep going up. Osama Bin Laden isn't really powerful enough to do anything to hurt us. We'll continue to be smarter and more powerful than most places in the world. The internet party will go on forever." Hollywood is very instructive because it is the litmus paper of our psyche. As we speak, Harry Potter is on his way to becoming bigger than Luke Skywalker. Don't get me wrong, I think Harry Potter is a great film and a great book, but I think that it's instructive to look at the current explosion of interest in magic, and magical thinking, the search for a resolution somewhere out there in another land, over the rainbow. Or take films that are about "Back to the Future," for example, Jim Carey's forthcoming show, *The Majestic*, the notion that a Capra-esque fair tale will save us from ourselves.

But there are harsher realities to be addressed. Denial is about not putting up a reviewing stand in lower Manhattan so that ordinary people can take a look at ground zero, something that is only now being contemplated. There are a lot of people who continue to look at the WTC as a construction site problem as opposed to something profoundly moral in its instruction potential. And of course we could always respond with other “easy” answers as well. “Give up.” Downsize. Move to Montana. Cash in our Chips. Get off the fast track. React.

I love the second hymn we sang during this service (Once to Every Man and Nation). I used to sing it in high school chapel all the time. Its lyrics express the heart of our dilemma, our belief that we choose, express our intentions and win. We have the ability, the hymn says, choose the good or evil side.

But to fully embrace the shadow is to enter into a game that is beyond winning, it’s beyond polar thinking. It’s about trying to realize a larger synthesis. So to find ourselves, we must take up this challenge, which is about bringing that which is dark, about the shadow into awareness. Because to bring it into awareness fully is to take its teeth out, it is to de-claw it, to create conditions for greater balance and harmony. The shadow then becomes not a dread contradiction - good vs. evil - but a paradox. And a paradox is an invitation to a set of mysteries and to growth.

The scripture reading tells us about the light. “If thine eye be single, the whole body will be filled with light.” If our point of view is integrated, if we can encompass that which is paradoxical, our

body will be filled with light, in other words, we will find the holy path. So we start with contradiction which is ample and all around us. But to suffer that confusion and contradiction is the first step on the path of healing. When the pain of contradiction is transformed into the mysterious and into a paradox that we can apprehend, that's where the single eye can bring the light of understanding. This is a real skill. F. Scott Fitzgerald said that the mark of a well-educated intellect was the ability to hold contradictory ideas in the mind at the same time. It's the notion of bringing things together. Win/Lose. Strong/Weak. Big/Small. Rich/Poor. And to assert and to embrace what has been suppressed. Maria Von Franz was a colleague of Jung's, another Jungian – they didn't call them Jungian analysts in those days – although she was an analyst. She had a rule in her house – a kind of cooperative living environment. Any body who had particularly good fortune that week had to take out the garbage for a week. Jung himself would often greet friends by asking them if they had suffered any terrible successes recently.

I remember about a year ago, my team did a project for Royal Dutch Shell, at the time the second largest company in the world, they were trying to ponder what the future of that company was. We knew we couldn't address them head on in the voice of intellect because they had been consulted to death and were jaded. So we invited them to a dinner to open this event. And on the way to the dinner they had to step over a homeless lady who was sleeping in the doorway of our office, something that happens a lot south of Market Street. They came in and had this grand dinner. And all of a sudden the homeless lady came into the room and started talking to them and saying, "I'm really hungry. Is this chicken?" these people were pretty straight-laced European folk and they thought to themselves, this is America, maybe we should call the police. It took

them a couple of minutes to figure out that she was an actress and that her role was to bring to the table the challenge of taking action to a company that says they want to make the world a better place, which was Shell's mission statement. This is another example of bringing the truth of what had been suppressed to the table. And this again at its deepest level is a religious opportunity, the word "religion" consisting of *re* meaning in a sense to do again and *legare* the Latin means to bind to bond or bridge together. So it's not about finding the answer, it's not about resolving conflict, it's not about winning in the narrow sense. But it's rather about acknowledging that there is an inner paradox, this engine for understanding if you will, that asks to be explored, to be recognized, to be developed. It is a way to bridge from our ego - our sense of who we would like to be seen as - to the shadow which represents everything we have suppressed because it is in some respects that which has been spoiled and which we would just as soon not see.

So the balancing of these two realms, finally, is a very active process. In a way, it's like jazz. Jazz musicians are great managers of paradox because they have skills, but they have to be open to new possibilities they are disciplined but they have to be free and every note they play is a choice that is not about getting the answer but about doing their dance which hopefully is about increasing the possibilities for fulfillment, beauty and for the creation of meaning. And so in our lives as we embrace this notion of the shadow and embrace the notion of what has been spoiled and as we embrace it to try to find the truth with it, I think we would do worse than to follow the lessons of the great improvisers, whatever discipline they come from, which consist of acknowledging through our acts as well as thoughts that improvising requires skill, discipline,

openness, patience, a certain quality of attention bravery, and also above all, faith. And so it should be also in our lives I would say as well as we deal with the challenges of working effectively on what has been spoiled.

So if you would join me in prayer, Let us pray.

Heavenly father, we are challenged by difficulties that in a sense spoil how we would like to see ourselves and spoil how we would like things to be. Give us the clarity to understand the source of these difficulties, the honesty to not give in to simplistic views, and the strength to carry forward, recognizing that the treasure that we are seeking is equally in ourselves as well as in the world around us. Help us to see and experience the divine in and through our varied imperfection. Show us the light. Not the light of a sentimental Hollywood sunrise or sunset, of things as we would wish them, to be, but rather the rich color-filled light of a truly complete understanding of things as they are. Amen.