The Drummer Boy
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Ellsworth, Maine
Leela Sinha

We are all born empty-handed.

We are all born empty although some of us are born with more money, more connections, more family, some are born in hospitals in homes, in fields, in stables—but we are all born naked with the same fists clutching empty air; weak and vulnerable we come bearing need and hope, need, hope, and our own tender hearts.

Even that long-ago story of Jesus, of Mary and Joseph and the no room at the inn, even that story is the same. The babe who brings a new age, salvation, could be anyone, *any* one, even at this late date you or me. At any moment we could become the one we've been waiting for. At every moment we are---always—that one.

But how can that be? We live at a time of national and international crisis. There are wars and economic troubles, rampant illnesses ranging from cancer and severe depression to AIDS and superbugs. Corruption, fear, and anger are everywhere—*everywhere* around us. And with each passing day the few things we hold—a little money, a lease, food on the table—seem more precious and more precarious. We are standing in a hurricane and watching our lives as we know them whipped away by forces beyond our understanding or control.

Somehow we ourselves are rooted, we are fastened to the earth against this great wind, and we will not blow away. We will not. We will be saved, but if we think we will not be changed we misunderstand. Like trees we are learning to duck and flex and sway; we are learning to bend rather than break in the gale, but even now we know that when the wind eases and the storm ebbs, we will be standing in a foreign landscape with empty hands. We hope that we will still have our homes, our work, some small savings—and some will; some will not.

But when the wind and rain settle, if we work at it we will have ourselves, and we will—if we wish—have each other.

The self and the other. Martin Buber wrote of two possibilities in relationship: I-it, and I-thou. I-it is between self and object. *It* depersonalizes. I-thou is the other possibility. Unlike our usual modern understanding, "thou" (as Buber says it) is a word of intimacy; he has taken up the old usage, far less formal and more connected than "you". Since my childhood we have lost the option of claiming closeness by language—everyone is first name to everyone and it does have a leveling effect, but in the process of bringing us closer to strangers it has drawn us apart from friends. An I-thou relationship sees deeply into the humanity of the other, bringing them, in fact, out of otherness and into true communion with us.

So here we stand after the whirlwind, giftless
pa rum pa pum pum
and the world stretches out before us.

Once upon a time a little girl's parents stood in a cold boxcar with their infant child in their arms, pa rum pa pum pum

We may have nothing—or what we have may seem totally inappropriate to the situation. Who abandons an infant girl?

Who gives an infant boy metal bricks, embalming fluid, and incense? The three astrologers didn't come bearing child-gifts. They came bearing items of trade-but they were so moved by the holiness of a baby that they gave him what they had. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
It makes good pageantry, three richly-dressed people carrying lush gifts. But what did they really give? Three sages left their homes and their communities, drawn out of Arabia, walking and riding for a very long time. travel was dangerous and hard and the road was long; they were following a star and a hunch.

But they did it, they followed the star and they found the babe. What they gave was their time, their attention, their faith, their constancy. And we are so impressed that we tell the story as though they were real all along, history notwithstanding. They gave profoundly of themselves and that is what matters. They gave deeply. They gave their best for him.
Pa rum pa pum pum.

Sixty-seven years ago today, the US was attacked by another country on US soil. World War II had been raging for years in Europe and the US had aggressively pursued a policy of isolationism, of separation, of not getting involved. Even as dangerous and dehumanizing powers marched across the globe, we somehow thought that it was not about us.

Thousands and then millions of people were suffering, dead, and dying, but this was a time before easy international travel, internet, and nearly universal phone service shrank the earth to the size of a marble. The world didn't feel connected then the way it does now, and it wasn't our place. It wasn't our problem. American citizens were as unsure, as divided as American leadership.

And after the attack on Pearl Harbor, did we do what was right? Even hindsight cannot answer that question. The second world war has become the iconic moral dilemma for at least two generations of Americans. If we had brought our best, interconnected, wise, and loving selves to the process, would we have stayed out? Would we have entered the war before we thought we might be building a weapon that could end it? Would that have meant more senseless loss of lives? Would we have swung the balance of power in Europe? Would we have had the safety and resources to develop the atomic bomb? If we had not, would someone else have done so? What about our internment camps here, and the thousands upon thousands of people that we stripped of their possessions and imprisoned in their own country?

What about the similar choices our government is making on our behalf today?

Fear is never a good master. We humans always deserve better from each other.

Even when we are empty-handed, even when we are depleted, we can do better. *Always*.

In Three Cups of Tea, a poor family in the Himalyan foothills shares a meal with a western mountaineer, and their generosity inspires his life's work. Especially when we are empty-handed, what we offer has the power to inspire and transform beyond our wildest dreams. What that village family gave was more than a meal—warmth of the heart, hospitality, open arms. What they gave him was welcome. What they gave him was love.

There is honor in empty hands. Even a "fair fight" is one fought with skin, not with guns or knives, just two people facing each other in all their strength and weakness. Of course, the best fight is no fight at all, and the closer we get to our beginnings, naked, alone—the more likely we are to see our commonalities, to feel our vulnerability, and perhaps to set aside our differences and work together.

So, too, may we nourish each other in this way, most easily authentic when we have the least. Sharing what we have, whatever we have, is a truly radical form of hospitality that is harder to practice in lean times, but somehow we are more moved to it. This congregation—you, all of you—have increased your charitable giving this year, and it feels good. Scary, perhaps, but good. Both are possible—both are true. We are practicing generosity, we are practicing faith, we are driven to be the best of ourselves because we are perhaps all we have to offer after all. We are all we have to offer, after all.

Must we not, then, offer the best?

When we can offer nothing but our hands and hearts and spirits, the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts, when that is all we have and we are all children of the earth and sky together, must we not offer to all the holy children—all of us—the very best? Does not the sacred heart of each of us deserve at least that much?

This is not the same as demanding of ourselves an impossible perfection.
No one is perfect. Not even all gods are perfect. Certainly the Hindu, Greek, and roman pantheons are populated with fallible, flawed deities. I would even argue that the god of the Hebrew scriptures is imperfect—wrathful, vengeful, inconsistent—he is working his way toward a mature love for his people and the world but by current cultural standards he's not there yet. He is a humanoid god, a struggling god, a god you can argue with. Jewish tradition shows a lot of arguing over 5000 years. And if entire religions, faiths far older than Christianity, are based on imperfect gods, then who are we to be perfect?
we are not.

But we can be our very best.

My partner teaches. She has taught everywhere from inner-city Chicago to a semi-private school in a small town, and the resources, students, and curricula have varied widely. She has taught geometry with only 30 textbooks and been offered the chance to dream about a whole new science wing, but one thing is always the same. Her job, her calling, is to call the best out of her students. Her work is to prod, poke, foster, and encourage the very best. For some students that

means they pass, or they don't pass but they show up every day. For some students that means understanding the material the day *after* the unit test. Every time. And for some students she has to make up extra credit work because they are bored out of their minds with her regular assignments. But she always demands the best. Because she knows they have it in them.
In New York City Taylor Mali, a public school teacher turned professional slam poet, wrote a widely popular poem called "What Teachers Make". It is brilliant and real and captivating and I recommend the YouTube video highly.
He begins,

He says the problem with teachers is, "What's a kid going to learn
from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?"
He reminds the other dinner guests that it's true what they say about
teachers:
Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

I decide to bite my tongue instead of his
and resist the temptation to remind the other dinner guests
that it's also true what they say about lawyers.

Because we're eating, after all, and this is polite company.

"I mean, you're a teacher, Taylor," he says.
"Be honest. What do you make?"
and continues:
I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could.
I can make a C+ feel like a Congressional medal of honor
and an A- feel like a slap in the face.
How dare you waste my time with anything less than your very best.

http://www.taylormali.com/index.cfm?webid=13
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It's a good poem.
But classrooms are not the only places where we are called, over and over, to be our very best. Churches are like that, too. Not perfect, but brilliant. Not perfect, but excellent.

Rev. Marianne Williamson writes,
Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

(A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles", Harper Collins, 1992. From Chapter 7, Section 3])

And whatever you call it, however you have it, you *are* here to serve the world; we are all here to serve the world. To *serve* the world. And if you are exhausted, if you are discouraged, if you are depressed, if you are in the very bottom of the dumps and you cannot get out, let me tell you this: service helps, so give it up to the world, girlfriend. Give it up to your loved ones, boyfriend. Give it up in the little ways, the tiny things, the miniscule gestures that you don't even know are gifts at all, make a cup of tea, give away a quarter, or a nickel, or a penny, give a little drop of your heart if you can't give your stuff, say a thank you, make a phone call, just go be, go be with someone, go sit quietly in the presence of someone who needs it. It doesn't matter if they need it worse than you, it doesn't matter if they have more stuff or more hope than you, find the nearest person and do something. Do a little something.
Remember Scrooge? Remember Ebenezer Scrooge at the end of the story, after Marley and the ghosts of past, present and future, remember the joy that it was still Christmas morning and he is beside himself with revelation? That flung-open window from which he shouts down the first boy he sees is the window of his heart.
It opens his heart.
And he gives a little something. The man is rich. He could buy entire buildings. He could buy a street. But his heart has just.creaked.open and so he flings a coin out the window and gives away a Christmas turkey.

(Dickens, Charles. "A Christmas Carol". http://www.stormfax.com/dickens.htm)(accessed Dec 4, 2008)

And it is the beginning.
It is just the beginning.
Beneath all the fear and trepidation and sense of looming crisis is now and is always the human spirit. We are underneath, beside, around, and we are peeking out, waiting for our cue, listening for our cue, and it is the human spirit that will rise up and throw off the mantle of oppression and depression and poverty; it is the human spirit: mine. It is the human spirit: yours.
And we must stop waiting.
Our empty hands are the first and finest gift we bring, undefended and un-armored spirits with our own sweet will, and with these hands we build community and we fill coffers for charity, for food banks, for guests and neighbors, and for ourselves.
It begins here.
Blessed be and amen.