

The Power of the Vow

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What image comes to mind when you think about making a vow? Perhaps it is the joyful image of a young couple about to be married, who are performing their wedding vows in front of a community of their friends and relatives. You might think of a nun or priest taking their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, a solemn and life changing moment. They vow to devote themselves to a life wholly dedicated to Christ, in which the material world becomes secondary to the inner life of the Spirit.

You might also remember images from the Bible, in which people who made vows to God in exchange for protection or for something that they desperately wanted. There is the story of Hannah who was childless. She vowed to God that if he granted her a male child she would dedicate him to the Lord. She did conceive, and her child Samuel was dedicated to the Temple at a young age.

Some images about vows are dark and frightening - an angry person or nation vowing revenge on an enemy. But such vows have been condemned by our world's greatest souls. On the subject of revenge, Mahatma Gandhi once said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind". On the subject of the vow, he believed that taking a vow is a serious matter that should always be done in the spirit of the betterment of the individual and the world.

Another type of vow is taken at the time of entering a profession. Recently I attended the graduation ceremony for the McMaster medical class of 2010. These young people had to recite a modernized version of the Hippocratic oath as part of this ceremony. Here are a few excerpts from the vows that they took. "I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug..... I will not be ashamed to say "I know not"..... I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure. ...May I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help." The image of these students vowing to uphold the highest principles of medical practice was inspiring. Of course, I also see these students when they come into the Family Practice Unit for further training after their graduation ceremony, and I must say that not all of them seem to be sticking too well to their vows... particularly the part about -"I will not be ashamed to say "I know not"...! "

A fundamental element of the vow is commitment. When we take a vow, we commit to a particular action or behaviour. We often do this in public. Part of the power of the vow is that it is witnessed by a community, its significance deepened by the presence of others. In the traditional Christian wedding vow, the words resonate with meaning. As the couple promises to commit to each other "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health...." , we remember all those who have gone before us who have made these vows, and kept them as best they could.

Some people look to other spiritual traditions for their wedding vows. There is a beautiful traditional Celtic wedding vow which goes like this.

"I vow to you the first cut of my meat, the first sip of my wine. From this day on it shall be only your name I cry out in the night and into your eyes that I smile each morning; I shall be a shield for your back as you are for mine, nor shall a grievous word be spoken about us, for our marriage is sacred between us and no stranger shall hear my grievance. Above and beyond this, I will cherish and honor you through this life and into the next."

In the Hindu marriage tradition, bride and groom take seven vows when walking around the sacred fire. My husband Pradeep is from a Hindu religious background . He and I were married in 1985 in India, in a traditional Hindu wedding ceremony. These weddings are colourful, deeply symbolic and usually extremely long! Pradeep and I had the shortened version, lasting a mere eight hours instead of three days. The groom arrives at the wedding riding on a white horse. The bride and groom exchange flower garlands. Then the pundit lights the sacred fire, while reciting ancient Vedic mantras, invoking blessings upon the young couple. The bride and groom walk slowly around the sacred fire making a vow with each circuit. At the time of our wedding, I knew very little Hindi. Pradeep had arranged for a friend of his to sit beside me and do simultaneous translations of the essence of the marriage ceremony, including the meaning of the vows. However the whole experience was so overwhelming that I absorbed very little of the translation. Many weeks later, Pradeep asked me what I remembered about those vows. I told him that I had absolutely no idea what I had vowed that I would do. Pradeep used this as a point to tease me for years afterwards. He would say, "By the way, you realize that you promised to massage my feet every night - it is one of those sacred duties of the Hindu wife to her husband." It was only when I was

preparing this talk that I finally got around to looking up the meaning of what I had vowed to do so many years ago! The seven vows of the Hindu weddings are beautiful.. here are a couple of them. The fourth vow is a pledge to seek knowledge, happiness and harmony in life through mutual respect, love, and faith. The final vow is that bride and groom will be true and loyal to each other and would remain best friends for life.

Not all vows are made in public, or in the context of a ritual or ceremonial setting. You could make a personal vow, a commitment to a particular way of life. Then this personal vow becomes an aspiration, a touchstone that represents one's deepest values. Sometimes these vows are taken at very difficult times of life. A person who has been struggling with alcohol might have a moment of sudden clarity in which he or she realizes that the drinking must finally stop, forever. The vow never to drink again can be both personal and public. Groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous become the communities in which people in recovery commit to their vow to stay sober.

I remember a patient of mine who had grown up in an abusive environment marked by poverty and violence. Despite all odds, she managed to complete high school and get training as an RNA. She married and had two children. Unfortunately, her husband was disabled at quite a young age in an industrial accident. Despite the struggles they faced, she told me that their home was a happy one. She said that she had vowed that if she ever had children, they would grow up in an atmosphere of peace.

Personal vows can be about specific actions, but can also be commitments to certain ways of living. A beautiful vow written by the Buddhist monk, Thich Naht Hanh, describes a way of living that he aspires to achieve.

I vow to practice mindful breathing and smiling, looking deeply into things.
I vow to understand living beings and their suffering, to cultivate compassion and loving kindness,
and to practice joy and equanimity.
I vow to offer joy to one person in the morning and to help relieve the grief of one person in the afternoon.
I vow to live simply and sanely, content with just a few possessions, and to keep my body healthy.
I vow to let go of all worry and anxiety in order to be light and free.....

Can you think of a personal vow that you might make? Perhaps there is something that you dream about that has not yet become manifest in your life. There may be a set of values that you wish to commit to more deeply. The spiritual practice of writing out a personal vow can be a very meaningful exercise. Then try sharing it with someone you love and trust, someone you can use as a sounding board who will be ready to reflect back to you their perception of your vow.

Let me share with you the inspiration behind my decision to prepare this talk . Pradeep and I lived in India for 11 years. Those years were filled with adventure as well as hardship, the joys of pursuing an ideal as well as the disillusionment of failed ventures. I had always wanted to write something about those years, yet I have found it extraordinarily difficult to do this. Though I have no difficulty completing writing that is of a technical nature, to write something as close to my heart as my journey to India... that is a very different matter. When I would think about writing about the journey, I would wonder- how it would be possible to convey in words the depths of the experience? How could I describe my encounters with people in the Himalayas with tenderness as well as realism? How could I balance my need to describe the struggles of the people without taking over their own voice?

Tangled hopelessly in this mental maze, I would give up the task and abandon the little piece I had written about our life in India. Over the years I have written hundreds of thousands of words about those extraordinary years, but it all remains in computer files and has never been shared with anyone.

Yet a deep desire to write persists. Once, a friend of mine asked, "What would you do if you had only three months to live?" I replied without hesitation, "Well, I'd finish my book about India, of course. "My friend looked at me quizzically. "Do you really have to wait till you have a terminal illness before you write that damn book?" she asked.

It's not as if I haven't tried. There have been many times I have decided to work hard on the book and get it finished. Yet something always seems to distract me and then I am not able to complete it. Somehow other priorities always appear, priorities that seem urgent at the time. A few years ago, I had deliberately taken some time off work with the plan to finish the book. I had a nice writing set up in

a small room in the basement. It was quiet, cool and nobody would disturb me there. My family knew that I was trying to get some writing done and supported me in every way. But this little room where I had chosen to write is situated just next to our laundry room. Somehow, when I sat staring at the computer screen I would suddenly get an urge to check how much dirty laundry was waiting for me. I would then think, let me get this dirty laundry done and after that I'll be able to start writing with a more relaxed mind of course I managed to make the laundry into a long drawn out task, including hand washing some items and doing lots of ironing as well. Days went by. Our family was looking unusually clean, tidy and pressed. But very little writing was done. Pradeep said to me, "I notice that you've been doing a lot of laundry lately. It must be taking away from your writing time. Why don't I start doing the laundry?" I replied instantly, "No, absolutely not! You always make a mess of laundry. You don't separate the dark and the light clothes and you get hand washable and machine washable clothes mixed up. There's no way that I want you doing the laundry." My long-suffering husband stared at me for a moment, and then said, "Well okay, if you're sure..."

This year I've once again decided to try to complete the book. Since I don't seem to have the self discipline or whatever it takes to make progress on this by myself, I got the idea about making a public vow to complete the book. Part of the power of the vow is that it is made before others who are part of the community that one feels close to. Suddenly, you are accountable to a whole group of people, not just yourself. So here I am going to make a vow to everyone in this beloved community of mine, that I will complete this book by the end of this year. Please pin me to the wall from time to time and asking me how it's coming along!

But when I was discussing this whole idea of taking a vow in order to complete my book last night with my daughter she had quite a different take on it. Though she could see the taking of a vow to complete the book might have some practical value, she felt that there should be a better way to do this. Her objection to the concept of the vow is that it sounds to her like a rigid promise, something that might simply reinforce endless striving, a life of effort and tension. Wouldn't it be better, she said, if you worked on the problem in a deeper way? There is part of you that truly wants to write, an authentic part of your being that wants to express itself. Can you work on ways to step back into who you really are, rather than attempting to create an artificial structure to move yourself forward? Finding

that deepest self is a process of stripping away that which we are not and stepping back into who we already are. She pulled out her favourite poetry book to illustrate her point and read me the Mary Oliver poem that you heard earlier...It ends.

the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

As we learn what our place is in the family of things, we can commit to honouring our higher selves and living by that light. This would mean that we stop identifying so much with our minds, our emotions, and the ups and downs of daily events. Perhaps it is in a process of unlearning, of peeling off who we are not, that we uncover the true gold of our authentic being.

So I wish to end this talk about the power of the vow on a note that is not solemn and serious, but light and joyous. Here is a little adaptation of a Rumi poem, which you'll find in our Unitarian hymnbook.

Come, come, whoever you are
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,
Ours is no caravan of despair,
Even if you have broken your vow a thousand times,
Come, yet again, come ...