The Venerable Bead

A sermon by Jackie Clement
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Baubles, Bangles and Beads. I have always loved that song. The part of me that delights in Hollywood musicals; the part of me that sighs in appreciation at Howard Keel who played the ne'er-do-well father of the young woman who sang that song in *Kismet*; the part of me that is easily distracted by shiny objects—all these parts love that song. The feminist theologian part of me, however, is given pause by lyrics that appreciate the bangles and beads not for their beauty or fun, but for their value as bait to catch a husband.

Much as I love this song, it stands in direct opposition to Liz Gilbert's words in this morning's reading that speak of the structured uses of beads for spiritual deepening in the age of the spazzy-free-for-all. Still, even in this song, in the plot of Kismet, the beads are a means to an end, a symbol of something beyond themselves.

Beads have been used throughout the ages for purposes both frivolous and fraught with meaning, and more often than not they stand as pointers to something beyond themselves. Beads found in Africa have been dated to 10,000 BCE so they have been playing their symbolic roles of complementary and contrasting meaning for a very long time now. They have been used as ornament, as a means of economic exchange and to assist in arithmetic calculations. We have seed beads, peace beads and worry beads, but the very word itself is rooted in religion. The modern English word B-E-A-D derives from the Old English B-E-D-E which meant a prayer, and so, at least for English speakers, beads are inextricably linked to their religious uses.

One of my first experiences with the religious use of beads came in a very secular setting, one that highlighted the clash of cultural values. When we lived in Massachusetts, we often took the local van service to Boston's Logan Airport. Despite the drive from stop to stop picking up passengers along an often circuitous route, it was still one of the surer ways of arriving before flight time. Generally, it was an 8-passenger van, but one day an enormous shiny black stretch limo drove up our driveway. The exterior of this gargantuan vehicle was disconcerting in itself, something that could figure in a Terry Southern novel, but, when I opened the door to get in, things got even worse. The vast interior was but dimly seen behind the tinted windows. Strands of plastic encased twinkle lights sparkled on crystal bar ware. And seated there in the dark recesses between the champagne flutes and miniature TV screen were two nuns in full habit. I may have goggled for a moment.

Finding that I was a religious professional, the conversation quickly turned to matters of faith, and as we drove through Boston's suburbs these two lovely and kind women taught me to pray the rosary and gifted me with a set of beads. One Unitarian Universalist minister, two Roman Catholic nuns, a stretch limo and a rosary. What are the odds? And yet, the sheer unexpectedness and improbability of the setting left me open to hear what they had to share in a way I could not have received it in a more traditional setting. Perhaps some of our best lessons of the spirit come from surprise.

Anyway, I learned to pray the rosary that day, something I've never actually done since though several other times in my ministry I have been given rosaries and prayer beads – a set of mass produced yellow plastic beads, a wooden set blessed at the site of a miracle. While the reading was very clear about the Crusades as the origin of the rosary, the real history is a little murkier. A strong case can be made tracing the beaded rosary back to the knotted prayer ropes used by the Desert Fathers as early as the 3rd century. The commonly known version of 54 beads plus an additional string of 5 is attributed to Saint Dominic founder of the Dominican order in the 13th century, an attribution that is looked upon with great skepticism by church historians. Variations exist such as the Eastern Orthodox rosary with 100 beads, and certainly the materials used vary widely from humble clay to precious metals and gemstones.

The Catholic rosary is perhaps the first thing we think of when we hear the words "prayer beads" but they are certainly not the only prayer beads, neither the earliest nor the latest. The mala strands used in Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh traditions are the earliest known prayer beads though their origin is not really known. All have 108 beads and these, too are made from many different substances. Tulsi wood is perhaps the most common, considered by some to be divinity itself. It is said to have properties that clear the aura and balance the elements. Crystal is also common being prized for its healing properties. Sandalwood, too, offers healing properties and promotes tranquility. In Hinduism the strands are known as *japa mala*, *japa* meaning the recitation of the name of a deity and *mala* meaning garland or wreath. Buddhist malas have different names based on the language of the country where the tradition originated – pinyin in China, juzu in Japan, and so on. Names aside their function remains largely the same, to focus the mind on meditation through a simple repetitive gesture of moving the beads through the fingers.

Islamic prayer bead strands known as Misbaha or Tasbih have either 99 corresponding to the names of God or 33 beads which are repeated 3 times. In the Baha'i faith there are 95 beads to correspond to the 95 daily recitation of the prayer "God the All-Glorious." Prayer beads in the Anglican tradition are a much more recent introduction dating to the 1980s and composed of 33 beads organized into "weeks" where Roman Catholic rosaries are organized into "decades."

There are even Unitarian Universalist prayer beads. My colleague Erik Wikstrom has written about his prayer practice using beads in the UU World, our denominational magazine, in curricula and in books. Several web sites offer other UU prayer bead practices. Of course, as with each of the traditions I've mentioned the form and content of the accompanying prayers is unique to our tradition.

The one world religion I can think of that never really adopted prayer beads is Judaism, perhaps because of their strong association with other religions, but some Jews use the knots of the tzitziyot, the strings that hang from the edge of a prayer shawl, as a touchstone during prayers much the same way others use beads.

From tradition to tradition, the number of beads, the pattern they are strung in and the words said differ greatly, but what all these strands of beads share is a purpose—that of spiritual deepening. They act to focus the meditations or prayers, to assist in moving from the mundane to the sacred, or at least to the introspective. It is not always easy to make that shift from the daily round of cares into care for the soul, and so we develop rituals that act as gateways into a shifted perspective, we use objects as points of focus to shift our vision – candles, altars, icons, beads.

Certainly not every spiritual practice is a silent or solitary pursuit, nor do they require stillness. But those associated beads – prayer and meditation – often call for a stillness of body and mind. Being still is hard. It does not come naturally to us, conditioned as we are to get things done, to be creating, producing, improving, serving. Being still takes a great deal of intention. It also requires a certain trust, a trust that there is something there for us in the stillness, something of *being* beyond the *doing*. It requires patience to get there and incurs risk. In stillness we have the possibility of being confronted by things we would rather rush past. We can be challenged in stillness to sit in the presence of the uncomfortable, the ungainly, the inconvenient—truths about ourselves or our world which we would rather avoid. Recognition of these truths might require of us something we are not ready to give.

The stillness and the truths that it may bring are meant to deepen our understanding of the things of the spirit, and more to care for that part of ourselves that we can think of as simultaneously the deepest and the highest part of ourselves. In the book *Care of the Soul*, psychologist Thomas Moore writes that the great malady of our time is the loss of soul. He defines 'soul,' or rather doesn't define it, this way: "It is impossible to define precisely what soul is." He writes. "Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that the soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars—good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in memory and touch the heart."

Failure to attend to the care of this creative, generative part of ourselves, Moore contends, erupts as obsession, addiction, violence and loss of meaning. And so, throughout the ages, humans have found myriad ways to attend to that which goes beyond thought; to care for that part of us that defies definition but acts as the seat of awe, reverence, meaning, value; to fuse false separations of mind and body, the spiritual and the material. With body, mind, heart, will, soul we enter into the liminal through the gateways of many different types of practices.

Moore goes on to say that "care of the soul is not a project of self-improvement nor a way of being released from the troubles and pains of human existence. It is not at all concerned with living properly or with emotional health. These are the concerns of temporal, heroic, Promethean life. Care of the soul touches another dimension, in no way separate from life, but not identical either with the problem solving that occupies so much of our consciousness. We care for the soul… by honoring its expressions, by giving it time and opportunity to reveal itself, and by living in a way that fosters the depth, interiority, and quality in which it flourishes. Soul is its own purpose and end."

Something as simple as the humble bead can lead us there if we put it into regular practice. And so I offer you the venerable bead—as frivolous as a bauble, as useful as an abacus, as valuable as the care of your soul.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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