

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Test All Things

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING*Philip Booth*

Narrow Road, President's Day

As I drive by
the architect's
house, his wife's
just opening up
the sideyard window
and leaning out
on her elbows to
talk with three
backyard sheep.

She smells spring.
Given sun trying
to break through
dawn fog, fog after
all-night rain, on
top of two months
of old snow, she
gives herself
gasps of light.

Not a mile back,
just beyond Harman's
Farm Stand, all
boarded-up against
winter, almost at
the new place where
they sell Russian tractors,
I sniffed
skunk, first time
this year. Had to
swerve my pickup
to keep from side-
swiping the skunk,
already dead.

And next to him, for
Christ's sake, a big
mother porcupine,
dying hard.

I kept on driving
 to work. I keep
 on now, holiday
 or no, my whole
 morning messed up
 by road-kill, wannabe
 Presidents, street
 bombs, cyberspace,
 Bosnia, and what's to
 become of the former
 United States, an
 America only once
 divisible.

Half-blinded
 by freeflow tears and new sun,
 I find myself
 still touched by
 the woman talking
 with sheep. I try
 to figure what they
 say to each other;
 and when, if spring
 happens, the new
 lambs will come.

SECOND READING

Howard Thurman

How good it is to center down!
 To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!
 The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
 Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,
 While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.
 With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;
 A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our
 chaos.
 We look at ourselves in this waiting moment – the kinds of people we are.
 The questions persist:

What are we doing with our lives? –
 What are the motives that order our days?
 What is the end of our doings?

Where are we trying to go?
 Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?
 For what end do we make sacrifices?
 Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
 What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.
 As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind – A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.
 It moves directly to the core of our being.

Our questions are answered,
 Our spirits refreshed,
 and we move back into the traffic of our daily round
 With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

THIRD READING

Drew Dellinger

it's 3:23 in the morning
 and I'm awake
 because my great great grandchildren
 won't let me sleep
 my great great grandchildren
 ask me in dreams
 what did you do while the planet was plundered?
 what did you do when the earth was unraveling?

surely you did something
 when the seasons started failing?

as the mammals, reptiles, birds were all dying?

did you fill the streets with protest
 when democracy was stolen?

what did you do
 once
 you
 knew?

Test All Things

A poet writes of driving on a country road in the early morning in the early spring, on his way to work, through melting snow and lifting fog and sunlight striving to shine through. (Philip Booth lived in Maine but the story could take place in Minnesota.) He passes a dead skunk and then a porcupine -sad, familiar sights on country roads- and his neighbor leaning out her window talking to her backyard sheep: ordinary loveliness, ordinary sorrow. All at once his eyes fill with tears, not only for the beauty and sadness of these ordinary things, but the sudden rush of these plus every other thing he's holding. Maybe the radio is on, maybe he'd just put down the paper before getting in the truck. Either way, he bursts out: *my whole morning is messed up by road-kill, and wannbe Presidents, street bombs, cyberspace, Bosnia* [which in our time could be Syria, Afghanistan, or London this past week], *and what's to become of the former United States, an America only once divisible? Half-blinded*, he says, *by free-flow tears and sunlight*, he keeps on driving to work, as he always does, holding all this political turmoil and its effects upon his spirit - anger, fear, confusion- and also the skunk and the porcupine, the fog and the light, and the woman with her sheep, wondering, he says, *when, if spring happens, the new lambs will come.*

Somehow this poem feels like all our days right now. We're holding everything at once. We travel our familiar roads toward our ordinary jobs and come home to our families; we notice the habitual miracles of Minnesota on the threshold between seasons: the red-wings, the herons, the maple buds and swans; we lead our little lives, which have always been complicated and also, often, sweet and blessed. But now we're buffeted nonstop by terrifying news, bewildering reports; we're pummeled constantly by catastrophic tweets and votes, repeals and threats and revelations, and I've heard more than one of you say that these days you're driving through tears, all the time, if the radio's on and even if it isn't; driving not just angry now, but overwhelmed - driving and walking and working and waking in a state of constant anxiety, on ready alert.

*it's 3:23 in the morning
and I'm awake
because my great great grandchildren
won't let me sleep*

Drew Dellinger is a young writer.

*They ask me in dreams
what did you do while the planet was plundered?
what did you do when the earth was unraveling?
did you fill the streets with protest when democracy was stolen?
what did you do once you knew?*

We hear those voices also, the voices of the future children, and the voices of the current children, mingled with the voices of our elders and our ancestors, and if tears are streaming down our faces it's because we don't yet have an answer, or if we do and if we're out there, filling the streets, and filling the offices and inboxes of our representatives, it does not feel like a sufficient answer. We do not yet trust that our small efforts will be strong enough or loud enough or well-

funded or organized enough or our resistance durable enough to make any kind of difference in what one writer calls this world “post 11-9.”

[*Post 11-9* from Gabrielle Civil, “they came in shimmying...,” in *Walk Towards It*, Ellen Marie Hinchcliffe, ed.]

How good it is to center down. Howard Thurman was not young when he wrote those lines – Thurman the great African American minister, theologian, pastor and prophetic activist in the first half of the 20th century, who had by then seen more than his own share of devastations, his own share of disappointed dreams, democracy denied, and lots of free-flow tears:

*How good it is, he wrote in a pastoral prayer, probably in the 1950’s,
how good it is to center down!
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,
With full intensity we seek... a fresh sense of order in our living;
A strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment – the kinds of people we are.
What are we doing with our lives?
What are the motives that order our days?
Where is our treasure and what do we love most in life?
Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.
... floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind
—
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.*

He’s describing the practice of centering prayer, meditation, the moments that you set aside, the moments that you consecrate, the moments you carve out of your cast-in-granite schedule, to breathe in and breathe out and that’s your whole work right then, to remember who you are and whose you are what you love and where your power truly is. He’s describing a serious, not frivolous, intention, the work of simplification, holding for just a moment the portion which is yours to hold. In-breath, out-breath. Repeat.

Our spirits refreshed, says Thurman, we move back into the traffic of our daily round, with the peace of the Eternal in our step. How good it is to center down!

Good and rare and difficult and urgent, the way oxygen is urgent.

I read a story not long ago about Ahmad Salimi, who lives in Iran. Years ago, during the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi warplanes dropped mustard gas and nerve agents on his battalion, and he was completely burned, blinded for months, with his lungs reduced to less than half capacity. Physically he was a mess, and he says, “Also I was angry all the time. I didn’t know how to control this deep helplessness, fear and anger. I was taking a lot of medication, for my injuries and for my rage.”

He saw a psychiatrist who suggested he try music as therapy. He was wary, because, as he says, “music wasn’t fully ok at the time in Iran,” but he’d always loved it, and he found a teacher

nearby, and signed up to take lessons on the *santur*, a traditional hammered dulcimer. He left after only one session, embarrassed by the ceaseless coughing from his damaged lungs. But something in him powerfully stirred, something came awake, and he kept going back, every week, to stand outside and listen under the window while the teacher gave the class. Finally, his wife offered to sell their wedding rings so he could buy his own *santur*, and he kept going every week, listening under the window and then going home to practice. He learned to play entirely by ear, entirely by heart. It calmed him down. It saved his life, he says. In time his rage subsided, the muscle memory of war relaxed and his family relaxed when he was home. He was still very sick, but he no longer needed meds for anxiety or anger. In time the *santur* teacher found out what a fine musician he'd become, and came to hear him play and was amazed, especially since Ahmad had taught himself to play the instrument upside down by mistake. That was quickly corrected. He still plays every day, even though his vision has deteriorated as American sanctions against Iran have prevented further treatments for his eyes. He still plays every day, by heart; he lives by heart, and everything - family, work, spirit, body, politics, war and peace, everything - flows from there.

[Ahmad Salimi, as told to Narges Bajoghli, "Learning to Play by Ear in Iran," *New York Times*, 4.8.16]

...something deep within hungers and thirsts for a fresh sense of order in our living; a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.

The questions persist:

What are we doing with our lives?

What are the motives that order our days?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

As we listen, there is a sound of another kind –

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

How good it is to center down, how good and difficult and urgent, the way music is urgent.

This month's theme, simplicity – is not about material possessions, stripping away superfluous clutter, and it's not about technology, stripping away input, the nonstop noise of a digital age. It's not about stuff or technology, any more than it is about any other addiction or compulsion. If you are addicted to your phone, to your newsfeed, to Facebook, to news itself, to every little tweet, then that will be a problem. Anything that has power over your will, and your intention, anything that you've allowed to be more important than what's really important can be a problem. But it is not about technology, per se, nor even material possessions. Simplicity is not about sparse living or frugality or living off the grid in a cabin in the woods. It's not about joyless and judgmental self-righteous commitments to natural fiber clothing, organic food and hybrid cars – because frankly, those things are expensive, and expensive habits are not generally simple – they're complicated. **Simplicity is about clarity and courage:** the courage to cut through everything that distracts you, that derails you, that de-centers your spirit. As Luke said last week, simplicity is about the core of you, which comes from *coeur*, which means the heart: core, *coeur*, *courage* – the heart of what needs your attention. When we are afraid, when we are anxious, we often throw clutter in the way of the fear, to mask it and distract it; we throw technology and shiny things in the way, we throw our ego in the way, and possessions and stuff, and status and busyness, chemicals, alcohol, rage - all kinds of things in the way, and then sometimes those things take hold of us. They become all we can see, all we can do, all we can

manage, and then it can be almost impossible to let them go, to find our way home, without help and a mighty devotion. Simplicity is about clarity and courage, stripping away what doesn't matter, so you can remember what does.

What centers your spirit, tempers your rage, quiets your fear, restores your soul, not so you can escape the world and its sorrows and its mighty, aching needs, but precisely so you can engage the world with a glad and brave and generous heart? How do you center down, not to escape, but center down in order to rise up, and take on the world and take up your work, your people, your family, the great-great grandchildren and the ancestors included, with heart and mind and soul and strength? What practice can you cultivate till you know it by heart, breathing in, in order to breathe out, in order to breathe in, in order to look out and walk out into the early spring morning and hold both the new lambs **and** the new President; hold all at once, even if makes you cry, the golden light infusing fog that rises out of snowmelt only at this moment in the year, **and** the desecration, the cruelty, dishonesty, the violence - all this heavy, holy work that's calling out our name? Simplicity is about clarity and courage, the practice of living by heart.

There was a memorial service here not long ago for a man who died young, in his early 60's, of a congenital illness that finally caught up. His family was connected to the congregation but he was not a member here. This man had known a great love, together with his husband of more than 30 years; theirs was an extraordinary love story. Someone spoke in the memorial service directly to the man's husband, the surviving spouse. The speaker described a familiar, sad scene: the chaos near the end of a life, as the known world completely unravels; when crisis becomes the new normal, and hospitals and hospice, medication and pain, fluids in and fluids out. It's the narrowing of a large spacious life into a very small room and a small arc of time, the foreshortening of "the rest of our lives" to "till death do us part," and death is large and hungry in the room. The person speaking described one fitful, anxious afternoon, no peace in the air whatsoever, and how the husband came in, and saw the thrashing, saw the fear, heard the frenzied report of new complications. He walked right up to the bed and got up there with all the scary tubes and wires, just parted that red sea. He gently pulled down the blanket, and curled up his own large frame, laying his face, his cheek, against the bare stomach of his beloved, skin to skin, breath to heart. The man in the bed opened his eyes all of a sudden and drew in a sharp breath, but his partner stayed there, and the sick man let out a sigh and his weary arm fell heavily upon that familiar head, and together they just breathed as one, till everybody fell asleep: *breathe in peace, breathe out love*, and all was calm and all was bright. There was nothing in the room then but love and thankfulness and grief. **Nothing in the room at all** but love and thankfulness and grief. The spaciousness returned. It was very simple, very plain – not easy, but simple. Even fear could dissipate and every other complicated thing. What matters in the moment? What matters in this life?

Simplicity is about clarity and courage. It's not about heading to the woods, which almost always requires elaborate preparations. It's not about giving away your stuff or turning off your phone, unless they're getting in your way (which they often are). If they bring you joy, bring them on. Gandhi said that. A young man wrote to him about books, telling Gandhi he'd been able to give away everything he owned except his books, which he loved. Gandhi said, "If they truly bring you joy, you should have them. And if they encumber you, then close them gently one by one. If they get in your way, give them away. You'll know when it's time." Simplicity is about

presence, being fully present in the moment to the people, to the wonder, to the beauty and magic of this life; fully present to the terror and the cruelty and injustice of this life; fully present, not distracted, not encumbered, not wound and wound in layers of comfort, nor layers of avoidance and denial.

This past week the New York Times posted a short video editorial called “How Does Life Live?” It was made by a woman who, over time, gathered the questions that her little girl kept asking: *Why is fire called fire? Where do dogs come from? What do princesses do? Can girls be robots?* And so on. The mother wrote them down and then made a recording. She’d read a question, one of the child’s own questions, and ask her daughter to repeat it, and then she erased her own voice, so she has them all together in the child’s own voice. They are very simple questions about extremely complicated things, questions from the heart, from the very core, of a very young philosopher.

*How many ants are in this world?
 Why are some things special?
 Why do girls have vaginas?
 Why do boys cut their hair?
 How do you make water?
 Why do you like beautiful things so much?
 Why do you pick flowers and then they die?
 Are you old, Mom?
 Will I have another birthday?
 Why doesn't everybody know me?
 Why is she mean?
 What are you talking about?
 Why are you on your phone?
 What happens when I don't like you, Mom?
 Do you love me?
 Why are kids small?
 Where did you find me when I was a baby?
 Why does the heart beat?
 How does food turn into poop?
 Why can't we see angels?
 Do blue butterflies eat parts of the sky?
 Why do we eat animals?
 Why do trees just stand there?
 Did god make the ocean?
 Why is the world so messy?
 Why do we all have cars?
 What does extinct mean?
 How do people get killed?
 What is fragile?
 How does life live?*

[Kelly O'Brien, “How Does Life Live?” *New York Times*, 3.22.17]

They're delightful, and for me they are restorative in their simplicity, their clarity. There's no over-thinking here, just wonderment, deep concern, and trust that the heart's question is the right question. It reminds me, strangely, of an early and famous Unitarian sermon by William Ellery Channing. He was laying out the spirit of inquiry that distinguished Unitarianism in the 19th century from other forms of Christianity. He argued that good, clear, heartfelt, basic questions about God, Jesus, scripture, morality and nature were required in religion, a religion of integrity and power. "Test all things," he said, quoting St. Paul. "Test all things. Hold fast that which is true." There's simplicity in that approach. There's also risk, because the answers may be frightening or disappointing or challenging. Simple questions take clarity and courage. Strip away every superfluous distraction, he said, "Test all things. Hold fast that which is true."

In these chaotic and confounding days, I think Channing's wisdom and the child's example can serve us well when we're driving our cars or lying in bed, with tears streaming down or our hands clenched in fists. *Breathe in, breathe out*, and return to what you know by heart. Return to what you love, the answers and the questions that have held you all along. The questions of adults may be a little different from those of toddlers, but maybe not so much:

Who is my neighbor?

Who is a stranger?

What is an enemy?

Who is worthy?

What does human worth and dignity require in a civilized society?

Who is unworthy of health care, reproductive care, mental health care, adequate food, Meals on Wheels, school lunch, public education, public housing, a home?

What would happen if someone who is sick and poor were turned away?

What does that exactly look like- what does that intimately look like?

What did you do when the earth was unraveling?

When the seasons started failing?

How does life live?

How does love live?

What is fragile?

Why do you love beautiful things so much?

Test all things. Hold fast which is true- and strip away the rest, give away the rest. Find the music that sustains you. Be fully present to your tears and your rage, and the way you love the light in early spring. Be bold enough to ask out loud the most basic, simple questions. Those early Unitarians wanted to boil down their faith, boil down religion to its pure core so it could sustain them in times of sorrow and fear, and also be bright enough, clear enough, to illuminate the days of joy and gladness, all this miracle and wonder.

Center down.

Rise up.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Repeat as long as you need to.

Repeat till death do us part.

Amen.