

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

# **Divine Proportions**

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**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

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**FIRST READING** *William Henry Channing, Unitarian, mid 19<sup>th</sup> century*

To live content with small means,  
 to seek elegance rather than luxury and refinement rather than fashion,  
 to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich,  
 to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly,  
 to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart,  
 to bear all cheerfully,  
 do all bravely,  
 await occasions,  
 hurry never...  
 In a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common-  
 This is to be my symphony.

**SECOND READING** *Walt Whitman, "Preface" to The Leaves of Grass, 1855*

This is what you shall do:  
 Love the earth and sun and the animals,  
 despise riches,  
 give alms to everyone that asks,  
 stand up for the stupid and crazy,  
 devote your income and labor to others,  
 hate tyrants,  
 argue not concerning God,  
 have patience and indulgence toward the people,  
 take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men,  
 go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of  
 families...  
 re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book  
 and dismiss whatever insults your own soul-  
 and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency, not only in its words,  
 but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes  
 and in every motion and joint of your body.

**THIRD READING** *Murray Olyphant, a member of this church for many years until his death in 2009, from an email message in 1999*

When I was a kid – you won't believe this but I'll tell you anyway – when I was a kid you would wish on a hay wagon going by. Make a wish on a hay wagon – but don't look back, because if you saw the wagon again the wish wouldn't work. And all the kids wished for material things. Normal kids, I guess. But you know what? I wished for wisdom. Even as a little kid, I wished for wisdom.

## Divine Proportions

“You won’t believe this but I’ll tell you anyway...” I think Murray Olyphant began almost all his emails with these words. Murray was a longtime member here who was full of sage advice and other advice, and always deeply kind. “When I was a kid you would wish on a hay wagon going by... And all the kids wished for material things. Normal kids, I guess. But you know what? I wished for wisdom. Even as a little kid, I wished for wisdom.”

At what age do you start wishing for wisdom? Not to be intelligent, or savvy, not street-smart or cunning, but simply, deeply wise? Wisdom connotes a certain equanimity; contentedness more than happiness; a sense of perspective, the self - the ego - in right relation to other selves, to time and history, eternity; the self in right relation to necessary limitations. I think of the ancient understanding of *divine proportion* when I think of wisdom, I think of poise and balance, the golden mean between extremes. In the ancient world, in Greece but also India and China, the Middle Way, the Golden Mean, was an attribute of Beauty and a path to Truth. In ethics as in art, it was not a fixed line; wisdom is not about finding middle ground and camping there, placid, tepid, neutral and disinterested. It’s more about the delicate balance, risky balance, the tightrope walk between doing too much and doing too little, having too much to having too little, between caring too much and never enough, between self-interest (which is not always a sin) and self-sacrifice (which is not always a virtue). Wisdom lives without anxiety in ambiguity and continuous uncertainty, always asking *what is right?* One Muslim theologian, writing 1000 years ago, said “What is wanted is a balance between extravagance and miserliness in all things, with a goal of distance between extremes.” A sense of proportion, alignment, grace.

Last month a small group here tried brainstorming the attributes of wise people we have known. They weren’t necessarily smart, in a brainy way –although that doesn’t hurt. Wisdom is humble more than smart. It is bemused, not easily offended; it is courageous, willing to take risks, even unreasonable risks, because with wisdom comes a clear understanding of what matters and what doesn’t, what lasts forever and what doesn’t, what you can control and what probably you can’t. Wisdom isn’t reckless, but it’s brave.

Imagine having the wisdom to wish for wisdom as a child! We associate wisdom with age, with the accretion of years and experience, but kids have it, and the wisest adults I know are ever alert to what we can learn, before it’s too late, from the young – what we can learn from those just coming up before it’s too late for us. Wisdom, unlike expertise, has open eyes, beginner’s mind.

One of you sent a story not long ago, a true story about a conversation between a father and his 10 year-old son. They live in Jackson, Mississippi.

*Aiden, the child, said, "Do you remember what was going through your head when you first saw me?"*

*"That was the most proud moment of my life," said Albert, the dad, age 31. "Don't tell your brothers, 'cause there's three of y'all. But it was like looking at a blank canvas, and just imagining what you want that painting to look like at the end, but also knowing you can't control the paint strokes." Albert was afraid on that birthing day, and he told Aiden this. He said, "You*

*know, the fear was just, I gotta bring up a black boy in Mississippi, which is a tough place to bring up kids, period, but there are statistics that say black boys born after the year 2002 have a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison, and all three of my sons were born after the year 2002."*

*Which led Aiden to ask, "Why do you take me to protests so much?"*

*"I think I take you for a bunch of reasons," Albert said. "One is that I want you to see what it looks like when people come together, but also that you understand that it's not just about people that are familiar to you. It's about everybody. Did you know the work that Martin Luther King was doing was for everybody and not just for black people?"*

*Aiden wondered if his father was proud of him.*

*"Of course I am. I just love everything about you. Period," said Albert. "My dream is for you to live out your dreams. If you decide that you wanna be a cab driver, then you gotta be the most impactful cab driver that you can possibly be. There's an old proverb that talks about when children are born, they come out with their fists closed because that's where they keep all their gifts. And as you grow, your hands learn to unfold, because you're learning to release your gifts to the world. And so, for the rest of your life, I wanna see you live with your hands unfolded."*

This story, a true story, was heard on StoryCorps, the public radio series of one-to-one conversations. I love this one. I love this dad telling his kid that babies are born with fistfuls of gifts, how he tells his child, who is a black child - so already he's endangered, just by definition, in our world - "As you grow your hands learn to unfold because you are learning to release your gifts to the world. I wanna see you live with your hands unfolded."

Wisdom isn't reckless, but it's brave. It's about the balance, the ratio, the divine proportion, between great love and terrible fear, about how we work that out. When do we learn to be wise? Albert is 31 years old; Aiden is 10. Murray was a little kid. When did you start wishing for wisdom and passing it on? Who teaches it to us? Is it ever too late to get wise?

Wisdom is about self-knowledge. It has to do with awareness of your own agency, believing in your own power to decide what kind of person you are going to be, no matter what your circumstance. Close-fisted (like a new-born child) ... or open-handed? Wary, guarded, beleaguered, afraid, ashamed and small... or large-hearted, open-hearted, open-minded, ever-learning, never done with learning?

Reason, which is a certain kind of intelligence, might direct you one way in certain situations. Empirical evidence and logic, the facts of life and realities of this hard-edged, dangerous world, can rightly lead a person to react and act accordingly, to keep your head down, fists clenched, gifts hidden and hoarded, your back to the wall on orange alert, primed for disappointment and betrayal - we all get like this sometimes, some for years and years and decades of years. We fall into clenched habits, spending our natural resources sparingly and with reluctance- all the beautiful, abundant, renewable resources with which we're all endowed: optimism, idealism, hope and radical love. It's easy to be miserly with these, because so often it makes sense to be pessimistic, jaded and discouraged; it's prudent to be selfish and self-interested, bitter,

isolationist. It's easy, sometimes smart, to be sparing with your compassion, your generosity, your trust. The evidence out there argues, convincingly, against indulging these impulses, calling them naïve, telling you, "Watch your back." "Don't be a fool." But wisdom taps a different source. *I wanna see you live with your hands unfolded.* Wisdom weighs the odds on a different scale, and is not about what you mean to do or ought to do or what you mean to earn or buy, but how you mean *to be*: how you mean to greet the day, greet other people, greet disappointment and good luck. It's about what you worship, really, how you walk, how you mean, ultimately, to leave this life, whenever that day comes.

How do you intend to be? Eve Ensler is a writer, a playwright. She asks, in an essay,

*Why are we suddenly a nation and a people who strive for security above all else? In fact, security is essentially elusive, impossible. We all die. We all get sick. We all get old. People leave us. People surprise us. People change us. Nothing is secure. And this is the good news. But only if you are not seeking security as the point of your life. Here's what happens when security becomes the center of your life. You can't travel very far or venture too far outside a certain circle. You can't allow too many conflicting ideas into your mind at one time as they might confuse you or challenge you. You can't open yourself to new experiences, new people, and new ways of doing things. They might take you off course. You cling desperately to your identity... Real security cannot be bought or arranged or accomplished with bombs. It is deeper. It is a process. It is the acute awareness that we are all utterly interdependent and that one action by one being in one town has consequences everywhere. Real security is the ability to tolerate mystery, complexity, ambiguity—indeed hungering for these things.*

We walk that line all the time, between love and fear.

I've been thinking on all this following a conversation this winter with Carl Bandt, who together with Mary, his partner of 52 years, joined this congregation a few years back, after years of active membership and dedicated service in another church. Their children purchased a sermon topic at our November auction and gave it to Carl for Christmas, and I am so glad they did. Carl did not bring me a specific idea, but instead an invitation to hear and hold with him some of the questions, philosophical, ethical spiritual questions, that he's wrestled with a long, long time as he's gone about making a living and making a life. It's been an honor to do this.

Carl wrote in his notes, "I think we all have a cross to bear. That cross is our mind. It is continually pestering us with thoughts, some of which we don't ask for and may not even know whence they come. Nonetheless, it becomes our task to deal with them." Among the thoughts he's dealt with all his life is the question of altruism a pragmatic world, how to keep your hands open and unfolding, how to achieve some tangible and measurable good. He asks, "Should the cost-to-benefit ratio, the pain-to-gain trade-off figure in" when we're deciding how much help or money or time or attention to give to others? "In the absence of absolute truth and certain evidence, don't we always just go on faith?" What guarantees do we need that our efforts will pay off? He said, "Shakespeare says, *This above all: to thine own self be true*, but did he mean head, heart, soul: which one?" Carl wrote, "I am not a cynic. To the contrary, I enjoy life greatly, do not take myself too seriously, and am intrigued by life's curve balls, serendipity, change and chance. Adding substantially to my happiness is my recent introduction to Unitarian

Universalism which is a great religious, spiritual fit for one such as I who tends not to be absolutely certain. He likes the Bertrand Russell quote, “Dogmatism and skepticism are both, in a sense, absolute philosophies: one is certain of knowing, the other of not knowing. What philosophy should dissipate is certainty, whether of knowledge or of ignorance.” Carl says, “Although I [have no proof of it,] I am happier living my life as though I have free will.”

(Every year at Auction time I forget to stipulate that only easy sermon topics are for sale – no philosophy, no Bertrand Russell, no deep complicated questions, just easy stuff, unless Luke is speaking, or maybe one of you.)

Carl is holding old questions here, old and excellent queries about the moral life: What work will do the most good in this world? What will make a real difference? What efforts are worthwhile, in terms of likely outcome, and what others are *worthy nonetheless*, of our care, our attention, our sacrifice, our love, our marching, our prayers, our tears, even if nothing’s likely to change? You try to be pragmatic, systematic, sensible, deliberate with your time and money and passion; you want a good prognosis at the outset and hope to see good returns on your investments, signs of progress- but sometimes faith is all you’ve got to go on. I asked Carl if he’s hopeful about the world his grandchildren will grow into. He was quiet for a moment. It was a long moment. Finally he said, “I don’t know.” He said, “I’m the luckiest guy that I know. It’s not that I’ve not worked hard, but I am so grateful to be alive, to have this beautiful world around me. I need to step aside and spend a moment contemplating that. I love the beauty of this world.” He was too modest to say so, but it’s clear he’s used his days so far to shape his love into gratitude, and gratitude into cheerful and deliberate service. That’s the work of a lifetime, that’s spiritual work, a work of art, and that’s where the hope is, I think. It’s not inextraordinary change-the-world efforts, but in a steady, studied willingness to give yourself to goodness, to kindness, to beauty, every day; to strike some kind of balance between growing your soul and serving the world, between complacency and action, between love and fear. It reminds me of those lines from William Henry Channing, Unitarian minister in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his elegant, simple strategy for living: simple, but not simplistic –plain, clear, disciplined - the kind of spiritual ethics that you practice over and over, like working out, so over time you build up a kind of moral muscle memory. Gradually your integrity becomes graceful and may even look easy to those around you ... but it isn’t. This is a deliberate and difficult way of being: to act as if you do have free will, to use your will to decide to be glad and grateful and amazed; to choose, in response to glimpses of luck and beauty that you’ve known, to be of use, mindful that you could choose otherwise.

*To live content with small means, to seek elegance rather than luxury and refinement rather than fashion, to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich, to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly, to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart, to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never... In a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common- this is to be my symphony.*

There’s elegance there, and balanced wisdom. If a person’s life can be a symphony, Carl’s has had four movements so far. He says he’s lived his life in chunks, each season spanning a period of years when a certain kind of work was front and center and he gave it his full energy in its proper time: first it was his career as a dentist and a teacher, and the years of establishing a

family; then, after retirement, it was his dedication to congregational community, especially social justice and mission work; the third chapter involved physical labor, both at the church and at his home, all those infrastructural improvements; and now this fourth stage, which he calls “taking care of myself.” *I’m more mindful of my time*, he says. *I may take up piano. I think about yoga and cooking and the gym, and esoteric things. I’m growing and learning. I want to catch up with everything neglected up to now.*

I’m struck that three of the four stages unfolded after he retired. There’s elegance in this, wise balance over a long arc of years. You don’t do all things all the time with all your heart, but take things in succession, in chapters, as you’re able and as your heart is moved. And through it all, underneath and all the while, runs a deeper intention, your original intention, like groundwater, through all your choices, every day, at every stage of life, everything you make happen and every response to what happens to you. You’re still walking the same line, mindful of the same divine proportion, asking the same urgent and essential questions: Open-handed or close-fisted? Curious and trusting or suspicious and small? Grateful, creative, bedazzled by beauty, or cynical, judgmental, embittered and entitled? Your first wisdom about this only deepens over time, only grows. We’re never called to do everything or all things at once, not called to perfection, but to be whom we intend to be, to be who we are and whom we believe we’re called to be, opening our hands a little wider every day, from childhood through the day we die, always releasing our gifts, giving and giving away. The people I love best are the ones who after year and years of living keep opening worn and gnarled, arthritic hands, as if each morning, each encounter, were a new start.

Parker Palmer, Quaker teacher, writes,

*From the beginning our lives lay down clues to selfhood, though the clues may be hard to decode. But trying to interpret them is profoundly worthwhile- especially when we are in our twenties or thirties or forties, feeling profoundly lost, having wandered, or been dragged, far away from our birthright gifts. Those clues are helpful in counteracting the conventional concept of vocation, which insists that our lives must be driven by “oughts.” As noble as that might sound, we do not find our callings by conforming ourselves to some abstract moral code. We find our callings by claiming authentic selfhood, by being who we are . . . . The deepest vocational question is not “What ought I to do with my life? It is the more elemental and demanding “Who am I? What is my nature?” The human self has a nature, limits as well as potentials. If you seek vocation without understanding the material you are working with, what you build with your life will be ungainly . . . .*

You’ll be out of balance, out of divine proportion, thrown off the golden balance beam, harming yourself and who knows who all else.

“Faithful be to thyself and mystery; all the rest is perjury.” Those words from Emily Dickinson are the blessing we offer to graduating high school seniors every year; I think there’s wisdom there for students of life in any age.

This afternoon, at the family dedication service, we’ll bless our children with a slightly different benediction, familiar now to most of you. I invite you to hear these words we normally offer to

children as blessing for your own journey, your own clumsy, graceful tightrope walk, the one you try to make with open hearts and minds, and open hands unfolded:

*May you never unlearn your sweet gentleness.*

*May you keep tame that which rages dangerous within us all.*

*May you respect yourself and envy none.*

*May you never once be used up.*

*Remember who you are.*

*May you win no victory that harms either yourself or another.*

*May you ask for forgiveness openly, and grant it often.*

*May you know good teachers all your life, honoring their vision, walking forward in their name.*

*May you give sympathy to all living things, and by your actions lessen the tides of human sorrow.*

*May you find a noble calling, adding to the sum of human happiness and singing your heart's own song.*

*May you know great joy, great peace, great love. Amen.*