

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
Mahtomedi, MN

The Heart of the Matter

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, March 19th, 2017

READINGS

A reading from Quaker Christin Snyder:

Simplicity is not so much about what we own, but about what owns us. If we need lots of possessions to maintain our self-esteem and create our self-image and to look good to our neighbors, then we have forgotten or neglected that which is real and inward.

If our time, money, and energy are consumed in selecting, acquiring, maintaining, cleaning, moving, improving, replacing, dusting, storing, using, showing off, and talking about our possessions, then there is little time, money, and energy left for our other pursuits such as the work we do to further the Community of God.

A reading from Simplicity and Sanity by Scott Russell Sanders:

In the long run the industrial economy will undermine our ability to feed and clothe and shelter ourselves,
but in the short run we are likely to find it easier
and more convenient
to buy groceries at the supermarket than to raise them in the backyard .
. . to hop in a car and drive to work than to bicycle there or ride the bus .
. . to turn up the thermostat than to feed a woodstove or put on an extra
layer of clothes . . .
to buy a new gadget or garment than to mend the old one . . .
to sink into the couch and watch a music video
than to learn to play the fiddle and gather neighbors for a dance.

The practice of simplicity is more strenuous than the pursuit of luxury; it demands more of our attention, intelligence, perseverance, labor, and skill.

The reward for this effort is a more gathered and meaningful and joyful life.

In a letter written the year after publication of *Walden*, Thoreau asked: “To what end do I lead a simple life at all, pray? That I may teach others to simplify their lives?—and so all our lives be simplified merely, like an algebraic formula? Or not, rather, that I may make use of the ground I have cleared, to live more worthily and profitably?”

He sought to live in a materially simple way so as to create the conditions for spiritual and intellectual richness.

The root of the word simplicity means all of a piece, single, whole; thus it is closely aligned with sanity, whose root means health or soundness.

What generations of readers have found in Thoreau is a robust sanity, a harmony of action and values, an antidote to scatter, clutter, distraction, delusion, and sham: To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.

It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically...

No life is perfect, but every life can become nobler, finer, saner. Just because we can't live without doing harm doesn't mean we can't do less harm.

The world's crisis is an opportunity—to reorient our lives away from material consumption and toward inner richness, to heal ourselves as well as the planet.

A reading from Kim Crawford Harvie; Crocus Prayer

It takes courage to be
crocus-minded.
...I'd rather wait until June,
like wild roses,
when the hazards of winter
are safely behind
and I'm expected
and everything's ready for roses.

But crocuses?
Highly irregular.

Knifing up through hard-frozen
ground and snow,
sticking their necks out
because they believe in spring
and have something personal
and emphatic
to say about it.

...I'm not by nature
crocus-minded.
Even when I have studied
the situation,
and know there
are wrongs that need righting,
affirmations that need stating,
and know that

my speaking out may offend,
for it rocks the boat --

Well, I'd rather wait until June.
Maybe later things will
work themselves out,
and we won't have to
make an issue of it.

Forgive me.
Wrongs won't work
themselves out.
Injustices and inequities
and hurt don't just dissolve.
Somebody has to
stick their neck out;
somebody who
cares enough to think through
and work through
hard ground,
because they believe
they have something personal
and emphatic to say about it.

Me -- crocus-minded?
Could it be
that there are things
that need to be said
and I need to say them?
I pray for courage.

SERMON

“Write down five words that describe your identity”

the presenter said to us -

*“it can be related to your job, your family, your interests or passions,
it can be your personality or work ethic or approach to relationships –
five words that describe the core of who you are.”*

What words to choose?

What words of family – husband, father, son

What words of career – minister, justice seeker, care-er

What words of identity – Midwesterner, millennial, child of God

So I put some words down

and then they said, “now...cross one off”

And we had to decide – what was least central to who we were?

“Now look at your list, make any changes...

and cross another one off.”

Uh-oh – I could see where this was going.

It got down to three – minister, husband, father –

then, sorry to all of you, but minister flew out the window –

and I was asked to choose – husband, or father.

And that’s the moment where the heart breaks open.

And remind yourself of what is at your core.

And you try to say – well, these are all part of an integrated whole, I
can’t fully separate these.

True – but too bad for this exercise.

That's the point – the take a hard close look at your identity,
about culture and family and work and passion –
to get right down to the heart of the matter.

Simplicity is not so much about what we own, but about what owns us.

- writes Quaker Christin Snyder.

*If we need lots of possessions to maintain our self-esteem
and create our self-image
and to look good to our neighbors,
then we have forgotten or neglected
that which is real and inward.*

What is at your heart,
what is, what the word heart comes from, *cardo*
core to who you are?

What words would you choose, what words would you cross off,
and then – how might that practice
impact how you live?

Or, as Mary Oliver puts it, *tell me, what do you plan to do with this one
wild and precious life?*

In the early spring in Minnesota,
there is not a whole lot
that doesn't look or smell just a little – funky.

The thawing earth in the uppder Midwest has a mush-i-ness to it,
a muddiness, a raggedness.

You begin to notice when you move inside, from outside, and don't
realize right away the trail of mud you have laid behind you – until you
notice one of your children trying to eat it...not that that's happened to
me...

Maybe you or your friends have a practice of noticing or documenting
first signs of spring, of new life, of green – new shoots, early risers to the
season.

Unitarian Universalist minister Kim Crawford Harive writes,

*It takes courage to be
crocus-minded.
...Knifing up through hard-frozen ground and snow,
sticking their necks out
because they believe in spring
...I'm not by nature
crocus-minded, she writes,*

*Even when I have studied
the situation,
Well, I'd rather wait until June.
Maybe later things will
work themselves out,
and we won't have to
make an issue of it.*

*Me -- crocus-minded?
Could it be
that there are things
that need to be said
and I need to say them?
I pray for courage.*

The crocus is a courageous sort of plant. Among the first, before it is popular, to proclaim spring, to shoot up through the ice.

I don't know about you, but I tend to lean more toward Asters – late bloomers, a little hesitant to speak up at times.

Maybe it's part of my culture growing up with Scandinavian heritage in southern Minnesota. It was a value to be tempered, measured, calm, cool, collected – don't ruffle too many feathers, don't rock the boat.

Hold your horses.

And, at times, there is truth and wisdom in that approach, too. It can be easy, and sometimes dangerous, to get swept up into the intensity of emotion of the raw impact of an event or a conversation or controversial societal issues – to speak too quickly, our many truths.

We know from our own selves, how we spread false information too quickly, or post an article and someone politely, quietly, posts the *snopes* article declaring what we just posted as false.

It is good sometimes to take a breath, slow down, take a moment to reflect and think – we know too well the damage of speaking first and thinking later, if at all – it seems to be a modern political norm.

Walter Cronkite once said, “the problem with 24 hour news is you never take a breath...”

Breathing is good.

Thinking is good.

Stopping and reflecting and not spouting out the very first thing you think, as if everything we think needs to be shared – filters and waiting and thoughtfulness are good things, to dive down deeply into what we believe, who we are, and how and when to speak our truth. But we can't just stay in that place, either.

Somewhere between
speaking without thinking,
and thinking without speaking,
there is a place, a moment, and opportunity,
different for each of us in content and style and delivery,
different for each of us in experience and social location and passion,
where the time to be hesitant ends
and the time to be courageous begins.
The Crocus does not spring up out of nowhere
without forethought or purpose –
it is the moment when it is ready just at the right time –
having done the hard winter work
of knowing what it is, what it can do – and how then, to live.

To have a crocus heart is to know deep down what's important to you.
To have courage is to filter through the tangled thicket that is this life,
this world –

from every distraction
telling us who to be or what to do or when to fear

and find what is at our core – our heart –
and from that place – speak our truth, live our values
to crack the ice and break through
to the beauty and the light
of integrity, authenticity – a gathered life
where we put our energy and time
as much as we are able – into who we are, what we do,
how we spend our time and *live the life we imagine.*

It takes courage to simplify a life
because it causes you to make choices
and decisions
about what is truly, actually,
the most important thing, or things, to you –
to know your limitations and your gifts;
to know what is calling your heart
and find how you can live in constant rhythm
with your deepest held values
and make them come alive
in the constraints and realities
of every day life.

It might not mean changing careers,
even if you have that privilege and choice –
it might mean how you do your work
or how you live your identities
more fully, more authentically,
and infuse them with the values you hold dear:
justice, inclusion, compassion, hope, resilience, love.

Naomi Shihab Nye says it this way,
*I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.*

Where in our lives can we center down,
filter out the distractions
and find our core,
and our courage,
to speak plainly and act plainly
with our deepest convictions.

You know that moment, don't you –
when it's been as if you have been preparing all winter –
preparing in the fallow season
preparing what to say, how to say it,
struggling to think of the right words, the right tone,
agonizing over every word and caveat –
closed in from fear of doing it wrong
the wrong time
the wrong way
to the wrong person
with the wrong intention –

There's that feeling in your gut, is there not?
Like a fireball just waiting to be released
and the intensity of it
scorches your core – your gut, your heart, your soul.

Courage is like a fire in your belly, a fire in your heart –
and all the hesitations, all the moments
when you question yourself
question your ability, your identity, your moment
every social stereotype and pressure
telling you that you don't measure up
you don't belong and you can't do it
is like a bucket of cold water
on the burning embers of your core
which give you life.

But if you have every put out a big campfire
you know that a bucket of water will stop the flames
for a little while –
but there are embers deep underneath,
deep in the core of the wood
still glowing, still hot,
just waiting for kindling, for a spark
the light up the world again.

Most of our lives we live somewhere between
the doused, soaked embers
and the raging fire.
We live somewhere between
the crocus and the aster.

And the question becomes –
where in our lives can we no longer afford to be like the aster,
and we are not only ready but by our own sense of wellbeing and
integrity, required, to break through the ice with a crocus heart?

Sometimes it happens
when someone is afraid of what their parent,
their sibling, their religion,
will say about them, treat them,
because of their identity
and they break through their own fear
and the prejudice of the wider world,
and say to their parent, their cleric, their friend
their deepest truth, a core part of who they are:
I'm gay. I'm a lesbian. I'm trans. I'm queer.

It might be a small phrase
with volumes of struggle, or anxiety, or pride, or all of them behind it:
I'm going to quit.
I'm an alcoholic.
I need help.

It might be a few words patched together,
so common to the ear but still like fire in the heart:
I don't believe in god.
I do believe in God.
I'm pregnant.
I had an abortion.

It might be an act
of getting up again
of trying again
of moving through and anxious bundle of nerves within you
to open your heart, your mind,
and begin to have a conversation,
to break through
into testifying your values
giving voice, even as it trembles in your throat,
like a prayer
like a statement of faith
these phrases like the best of what a creed means –
a creed, at its best, is what you give your heart to...
so the heart opens and speaks through your voice -
proclamations of ethics and hopes and possibility:

And yelling for justice becomes a prayer chant
and the street or the field becomes holy ground
as the words spoken speak from deep within our best selves
Mni Wiconi – water is life.
Black Lives Matter.
Immigrants and refugees are welcome here.
The earth is sacred. Science is sacred.
Love is love is love.

I was at a birthday party recently for a niece –
turning 1.

You can picture this, can't you -
The adorning family gathering round
for opening gifts –
wrapped boxes or bags filled with tissue paper.

And it's almost like one of the first experiences
of family-style coaching –
There is a certain age when a young child
begins this Olympic-like family sporting event
by taking the tissue paper out
and then becoming fixated and enthralled with the tissue paper.
And once past the tissue paper
then they just love the bag, or the box,
or whatever packaging
and you see all the different personalities in the room
revealed in the process –
the type As wanting a good order and tracking system
of cards first, from whom, read them aloud,
and then move into the package.
Or the free spirits simply cheering the child's whims on...
but inevitably someone says,
"there's more" ..."keep looking" ...
And in the coaching, and in the gift itself –
we realize quickly –
we all have many layers –
and as beautiful and fun as distractions can be –
if we keep searching, deeper,
we might just find something more.

We are a layered people
encumbered by things cast upon us
by family, by culture, by our own selves –

we are a layered people
stuck in the midst of a swirling storm
of political climates and newsfeeds and misinformation
and prejudice and fear and a lack of understanding –
we are a layered people –
like rings on a tree or like an onion
or a wall covered in paint or wallpaper over years, decades, centuries.

Layer by layer, we are built;
it is what makes us who we are –
and yet – there is something at the center.

It can feel vulnerable to peel away all that exterior protection –
it can feel vulnerable to break up through the ice before it's popular –
and yet and still,
more often than not,
when you look a little deeper
and closer you find something more true
and deep and lasting
at the core.

Whatever is the core –
beauty, compassion, love, god, spirit, resilience –
then a simple life is about keeping as your vision toward
what the old hymn calls the *god of your heart* –
whatever words you use to describe your sacred core –

it is what you attune your heart to –
away from the industrial materialistic consumerism
and complete devotion to your core values –

the hymn continues
*riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise –
thou my inheritance now and always
great God of heaven,
my treasure thou art.*

The paradox of simplicity
is that when we sweep the clutter
and remove the excess
we begin to find so much more.

May it be so, and Amen.