

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Life's Longing for Itself

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Sunday 13 May 2018

**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING *from Alison Luterman*

Invisible Work

Because no one could ever praise me enough,
because I don't mean these poems only
but the unseen
unbelievable effort it takes to live
the life that goes on between them,
I think all the time about invisible work.
About the young mother on Welfare
I interviewed years ago,
who said, "It's hard.
You bring him to the park,
run rings around yourself keeping him safe,
cut hot dogs into bite-sized pieces for dinner,
and there's no one
to say what a good job you're doing,
how you were patient and loving
for the thousandth time even though you had a headache."
And I, who am used to feeling sorry for myself
because I am lonely,
when all the while,
as the Chippewa poem says, I am being carried
by great winds across the sky,
thought of the invisible work that stitches up the world day and night,
the slow, unglamorous work of healing,
the way worms in the garden
tunnel ceaselessly so the earth can breathe
and bees ransack this world into being,
while owls and poets stalk shadows,
our loneliest labors under the moon.

There are mothers
for everything, and the sea
is a mother too,
whispering and whispering to us
long after we have stopped listening.
I stopped and let myself lean
a moment, against the blue
shoulder of the air. The work
of my heart
is the work of the world's heart.
There is no other art.

SECOND READING *from Ibtisam Barakat*

Stirrings

I thank the women who came before me,
 who, as they stirred sugar into tea
 and lemon into lentil soup,
 had stirrings of freedom in their chests. . .
 Some spoke of that,
 and some served the food silently...
 But all the longing
 conquered the long road,
 fed the ground,
 until it grew strong for me now to stand on it.
 Stand my ground,
 stand,
 walk,
 and run my ground
 as a master of my spirit . . .

THIRD READING *excerpt from Julia Ward Howe, Unitarian*
from her speech in 1870 for Mothers' Peace Day, the first Mother's Day

Arise then...women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be of water or of tears! Say firmly: "We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs." As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, Let women now leave all that may be left of home, for a great and earnest day of counsel. Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace...

Life's Longing for Itself

Arise! said Julia Ward Howe to the women, to the mothers, who were weary of war in 1870, between the Civil War and the next one brewing. They were weary and wary and so she said, *Arise!*, to the mothers, to the fathers also, to the people who had had enough – and so they rose and marched and sang and lobbied and wept with rage and hope, and organized. The war came anyway, as war so often does, and then they arose again - we arose again, and again and again,

and this goes round and round through history,
 this rising and resistance to tyranny, aggression and oppression,
 it goes round and round as needed, which is pretty much all the time,
 and you could grow discouraged,
 and yet we don't, most of the time;
 we don't become discouraged or cynical or disillusioned,
 or if we do, momentarily, we stop and fortify each other,
 we spell each other, bear each other's burdens, remind each other of the long, long arc of time,
 because the children are watching us,
 and the ancestors are watching us,
 and we are in this for the long, long haul:
 in this life, this world, this long continuing human story.
 We are, all of us, chapters in a story that began before our birth
 and will go on and on,
 and thus we bear a kind of obligation which is also a joy,
 in the same way that drawing breath is a kind of obligation, but also a joy.
 We are conscripted by choice, all of us, in this lifelong struggle,
 to become, as a species, more compassionate, more brave, more wise, more human and humane,
 so when someone says,
Arise!,
 we do,
 even if the cause seems hopeless in the moment.
 We know, we trust, we have evidence
 (we are the living evidence),
 that all this rising matters.
 We have faith and we will keep the faith,
 that the cause of peace,
 which is the cause of justice, of freedom, of equity –
 we have faith that this work is *cumulative*-
 that everything we do for love will matter.
 Every tiny thing.

Arise then, women of this day! – that was the first Mother's Day in America, "Mothers Peace Day," and it makes sense, because the work of mothering and parenting, the nurture of children (our own and everybody else's) is just like all the work we ever do for justice and for peace – endless, thankless, with no real guarantee of measurable success, and yet because it is all about the ancestors and the descendants - the long story of which our lives, our families, our own kids are just a microscopic part – because we understand ourselves to be part of a much larger and

evolving human story, we pour our life and strength and blood and breath into the day-to-day thing. The work of mothering, of parenting, of teaching, of hoping – that’s all the work of peace, because it’s not just about specific love, but about life’s longing for itself. Our love and care and presence are investments in a future we won’t ever live to see, but we believe in it. Sometimes against all probability, we believe in it.

*Your children, said the poet, are not your children.
They are the sons and the daughters of life’s longing for itself.
They come through you, but they are not from you,
and though they are with you [for a time] they belong not to you.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
Let your bending in the archer’s hand be for gladness. [Kahlil Gibran]*

Lucille Clifton, African American poet and grandmother, looks at a photo of her grandchildren and speaks a silent prayer. Her piece is called “Photograph:”

*My grandsons
spinning in their joy*

*universe
keep them turning turning
black blurs against the window
of the world for they are beautiful
and there is trouble coming
round and round and round*

She is speaking to a particular black terror in America, a prayer for all the children, mainly boys, who will not grow up in joy and may not grow up at all. *Universe, keep them, hold them, guard them protect them, love them, for they are beautiful, and there is trouble coming round...* When you look that way at children whom you cherish, or at anyone or anything in this world that’s beautiful and fragile and vulnerable; when you look that way, with constant fear and boundless hope, with love so fierce you have to pray about it, whether you believe in God or not – well, then you’re looking on that thing, on that child, with mothering eyes, whether you’re a mother or not, whether you’re a parent or not. You are inhabiting what the Buddha meant when he said,

*Even as a mother watches over her child,
so with boundless mind should we cherish all living beings,
Radiating friendliness over the whole world.*

And that is a radical, religious “friendliness,” nothing casual about it.

Radiating friendliness over the whole world, above, below, and all around, without limit.

Ibtisam Barakat, Palestinian American, gives thanks for the ones who came before her, the women stirring sugar into tea and lemon into lentil soup, strong women with stirrings of freedom

shimmering inside them. Some spoke of it, some didn't, but growing up she felt their strength. It gave her ground to stand on, even though as a Palestinian there's not been in her lifetime any land or ground or state or patch of earth to claim as home and call her own, and there may not ever be. Still, there's something in that legacy of love and hope passed on to her like a recipe or a quilt, that inheritance of fierce maternal tenderness and groundedness, that makes life beautiful, makes you feel that you belong in it, even if the whole world says you don't. We are here, all of us, to hold each other and to hold our hope, in that fierce, mothering embrace.

Tomorrow, as many of you know, the Poor People's Campaign, a national call to moral revival, begins 40 days of concerted action across the country to bring attention to the fraying of our social contract, the failure in our policies and politics and practice to hold everybody safe. Over the next six Mondays there will be demonstrations in St. Paul and 40 other capitols focusing on poverty, health care, and a living wage, racism, immigration, voting rights, environmental degradation, and underneath and through it all, militarism. It's unlikely that any of these actions or all six of them together will bring about any kind of immediate, tangible change in our country or our state, but by simply showing up – arising in concert as one people from different communities, agencies, areas of concern and identities, by showing up and speaking up we shift the narrative, the national conversation. We insist upon a telling a different true story about our country, which is not a new or made-up story but an old, continuous story of resistance and hope, which we have inherited and which we mean to pass on. We claim a moral identity which is different from the amoral or immoral posturing of people currently in power, and we root it in deep principle, in spiritual, religious principle. We center the voices and struggles and wisdom and demands of those on the margins (center the poor and the sick, the young, the old; gay and gender non-conforming people, religious minorities, immigrants, women, the mentally ill; black people, brown people, native people; veterans, prisoners; and the land itself, and the water and air). Reminding each other that all of this matters, matters; telling the old story in a new key always matters, the story of life longing for more life, more joy, more hope, more health, deeper wisdom, common sense, larger love. We'll never arrive there fully, in the land of love and justice, the land of milk and honey- but there is no question that progress is made. We're never done, but small victories accumulate. It's like gardening, or housework, or parenting, or breathing: you can never lay it down, and you're never done until you're literally done- and even then, something continues right where you left off. Someone else picks up the thread. Someone else picks up the hoe, the dishtowel, the banner, the baby, and the recipes and lullabies and stories about freedom and peace. There's joy in that, in the ordinariness of extraordinary love.

A member here, one of you sent me a poem last year, right around Mother's Day and a few days after her nephew, a beautiful young man, completed suicide. The poem is *Invisible Work*, from Alison Luterman:

*I think all the time about invisible work.
About the young mother on Welfare I interviewed years ago,
who said, "It's hard.
You bring him to the park,
run rings around yourself keeping him safe,
cut hot dogs into bite-sized pieces for dinner,
and there's no one*

*to say what a good job you're doing,
 how you were patient and loving
 for the thousandth time even though you had a headache."*
*...I thought of the invisible work that stitches up the world day and night,
 the slow, unglamorous work of healing,
 the way worms in the garden tunnel ceaselessly so the earth can breathe
 and [how the] bees ransack this world into being...*
*The work of my heart
 is the work of the world's heart.
 There is no other art.*

Cutting up the hot dogs and stirring the lentils, going to our jobs each day and standing sometimes in the public square - our work for the love of this world is unceasing, and unglamorous, most of the time, and it's holy therefore, all this grubby hope, and we do it each day not for thanks nor for praise, nor even for tangible results. There are almost never guarantees, that the cause will be won, the war averted, that the child will grow up happy and healthy and perfectly safe, or the deliberate smiles that you bring to your co-workers and strangers in stores and in the skyway and the street will ever be noticed, much less have effect. So much in this life is out of our hands, and you do it anyway, and try to do it carefully, reliably, honorably, reverently, and well, which I guess is the trademark of people of faith. We believe all this accumulates.

Robin Tanner, a minister and mother, writes about a holy sacrament, performed in the dark, by herself, late at night:

*It's late
 I creep in past midnight with eyes blurred from work
 And bones aching
 You won't remember that I gave you a kiss
 Or that I tucked your naked cold foot back under the covers
 As I paused to listen to your soft snoring.
 You won't know ...
 that I prayed fiercely
 That this legacy of violence
 Would not endure
 Not shackle you and your children—
 Who I hope to meet but this night I wonder if we will survive.
 You won't know that
 I loved your mother against
 All legislation and shouts of shame
 Or that I found truth,
 Hoarse from the haze of tear gas,
 As the world I was taught to worship with gold-plated bull enamel melted away.
 I hope you will know this...
 when the voices [shout], "nothing endures"
 And you wonder if they weren't right after all—*

*I hope ...,
You will know:
Love
endures
forever...*

She pauses there, and lifts her gaze from that quiet scene to a larger view. She goes on:

Love is so cheapened these days with commercial holidays and dollar signs; it is a word to roll your eyes at, but the kind of love that commands you to put your child in a boat to flee certain death—that endures. The kind of love that gives courage to come into the world for the first time fully you in the midst of transition—that is a love that endures. The kind of love that defies the dictator’s trigger-happy fingers by staying solidly without a blink in the resistance of nonviolence—that love endures. The kind of love that works two jobs and picks up extra hours to feed the babies, endures. The kind of love that holds the hand of your beloved who is dying, endures. It is this love which the psalmist must shout three times. It endures forever! So know it in your bones, and believe it when all else is lost: love endures forever. Know it against the false story of empire. There is a cornerstone that holds, and it is within you.

It is within you, and among us when you share it.

This past winter I had a strange experience, a mystical experience, on a beach in Florida, close to Cape Canaveral and at the epicenter of college spring break action, (so not really the most sacred space for me). I was there briefly visiting my mother on the way to a ministry conference. Early in the morning, walking on the beach, picking my way through the red beer cups, I was listening to a podcast that I wouldn’t have found if I hadn’t been traveling. It was a guided meditation. You’re supposed to listen sitting down, with your eyes closed, but mine were open, walking down the beach. The teacher said something like this:

Straighten you back and relax your shoulders. Take a deep breath, and be at ease, be open. Feel the air pressing lightly on your back, and feel the gentle pressure of your mother’s hand, or the hand of a woman you knew as a child, as a safe and loving person. Know that if you lean back, her hand will hold you up... because behind her, her mother’s hand is pressing firmly and gently on her back. You actually can feel the strength of both of them. And behind that older woman, your grandmother, stands her own mother. You may not know her name, and she does not know yours, but she knows you, because she imagined you once, long ago when she was young. The strength against your back is mighty now. You couldn’t fall if you tried, because there’s all this power behind you. And there are more, in a long, long line, and these are strong people now, back there, because if they hadn’t been, they would not have survived and you would not be here. They held some vision of the future in their hearts, in their minds, in their hands, these women, and some died young and some were very old, but they’re all there, holding you. If you lean back, you can feel them.

This went on for some time, long enough to get me further down the beach than I had meant to go, past the busy and commercial part to a more open, quiet and deserted part. The sun was

rising out the ocean, as it does down there every single morning, and when I found Alison Luterma's poem this week, I remembered that walk on the beach:

*There are mothers for everything, she writes, and the sea is a mother too,
whispering and whispering to us
long after we have stopped listening.
I stopped and let myself lean a moment, against the blue shoulder of the air.
The work of my heart
is the work of the world's heart.*

I turned to go back, and all the way the wind was behind me, so it did feel like generations of strong women, all the way back to that long ago time when we were all related. And to me it did not feel so much like a line as like a net, because I felt behind me my mother and her mother and so on, but also teachers, mentors, neighbors I'd known and colleagues, and their people all the way back. I thought about my birth mother whom I've never met (I was adopted as a baby), and that genetic line of women and men who live on in me somehow. I had never considered that long line before, and how I bear them forward now, with gratitude and confusion and wonder and with some sense of obligation.

Pretty soon I was back to the beer cups and the sandy-blanket bodies of hung-over partiers, and then I was back at my mother's apartment, and much to her surprise, in her pajamas and her slippers and her cup of tea, I gave her a hug, and said *thank you*.



Spirit of life and love, moving in all things,
through water and wind, in trees in bud and prairie grasses,
in blood and bone, and in the voices of birds, the voices of children, and in each one of us,
God of a thousand names, and beyond all naming,

To all the women, living and dead, who have chosen, in their freedom,
to open their bodies, open their hearts, open the days and nights of their lives
to the mothering of children, we say in humility and wonder, blessed be;

to all the women who had no choice because they had no freedom,
and mothered children anyway, we say in humility and wonder, blessed be;

to all the women who have borne the anguish of infertility, of miscarriage,
of the death of a child by illness or accident, we say in humility and wonder,
in sympathy and solidarity, blessed be;

to all the women, living and dead, who have chosen, in their freedom,
to have no children of their own, but choose instead to bless the world
and mother it with other arts and other uses of their powers,
we say in humility and wonder, blessed be.
Amen and blessed be.