

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

The Continuous Life

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

As You Like It, Act II, Scene VII
William Shakespeare, 1599

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

SECOND READING

The Continuous Life

Mark Strand

What of the neighborhood homes awash
In a silver light, of children hunched in the bushes,
Watching the grown-ups for signs of surrender,
Signs that the irregular pleasures of moving
From day to day, of being adrift on the swell of duty,
Have run their course? O parents, confess
To your little ones the night is a long way off
And your taste for the mundane grows; tell them
Your worship of household chores has barely begun;
Describe the beauty of shovels and rakes, brooms and mops;
Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do,
That one thing leads to another, which leads to another;
Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest
Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
To prove you existed. Tell the children to come inside,
That your search goes on for something you lost—a name,
A family album that fell from its own small matter
Into another, a piece of the dark that might have been yours,
You don't really know. Say that each of you tries
To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear
The careless breathing of earth and feel its available
Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending
Small tremors of love through your brief,
Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond.

The Continuous Life

*Bring on the wonder, bring on the song
I pushed you down deep in my soul for too long*

That's a perfect New Year's resolution, perfect in the midst of January's cold, brown ground, hardly any snow and hardly any sun. *Bring on the wonder, bring on the song* is always a proper intention. This life is a gift and a miracle whether the sun is shining or not, whether the snow is snowing or not. In the midst of winter, the midst of other things, like chaos - in the midst of a chaotic, despotic time, so dangerous, so cruel, so hateful and irrevocably damaging, in the midst of everything, honest, unadulterated wonder, childlike but grown-up wonder, at a few beautiful and eternal things, feels more sound and more grounded, more healthy and healing and disciplined than the nonstop cynical, sputtering state of perpetual flabbergast that's normal for us now. Wonderment is healthier, and holier, than flabbergast. I try to think of this whenever I'm watching or hearing or reading the news. For every minute of Twitter or Facebook, 5 minutes of wonder, joy, meditation or sleep. That's my resolution.

*Bring on the wonder, we got it all wrong
We pushed you down deep in our souls for too long*

Bring it on – even though, as another poet has cunningly reminded us for the past 420 years, our little life, is a one-act play with a brief run on a small stage, a few scenes at best. Every life - no matter how special you are, how , extraordinary, famous, diligent, health-conscious, virtuous, admired or unknown - no matter who you are - your life and mine, if we are lucky, will culminate predictably, and relatively soon, in that final. That's the premise, that's the baseline, of every single living life: impermanence, though we scarcely believe it – so all the more reason to make a resolution:

*I can't see the stars anymore living here
Let's go to the hills where the outlines are clear
Let's rest for a while 'til our souls catch us up*

It's not just a whimsical escape. Wonder is a pilgrimage, a haj, a holy obligation, a mitzvah. What else could possibly be the point, be the purpose of this life?

We are task-oriented, purpose-driven, highly responsible high achievers, most of us, or we're trying to be, and thus we are prone constantly to disappointment and discouragement and shame. It's a kind of grandiosity, really: believing you can and should accomplish everything that everyone, including your own inner voice, says you should. I know a lot about this. It's a pathology in our culture and inside of us. It's a syndrome, a symptom, maybe a kind of sin. We are efficient, effective, outcome obsessed – but those are not ways of being; they are ways of doing things, many things, and there is a wide, infinitely wide, gap, a gap as long as a human lifetime, between indolence, or laziness, slacking, sloth and just allowing yourself a little time and space and room to breathe and think and not think and pray and play and just exist. That's where wonder arises, and our sense of true. To be outcome-obsessed is virtuous, commendable,

and also ultimately, ridiculous, given that we already know the outcome – the spoilers were posted as soon as we reached the age of reason: *All the world's a stage, And all the people merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, and each, in our time, plays many parts. But every single time, the last scene of all to end this strange eventful history, Is second childishness and mere oblivion...* without exception, guaranteed. Therefore, says another poet (Annie Dillard, in a piece that's gathered in our hymnal),

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.

In these early days of 2019, resolve to bear witness, along with all the other burdens that you bear.

It's the aiding and abetting of creation that interests me, fully as much as the reverence and the awe. Our purpose, obviously, is not just to wander aimlessly in reverie – which is unsustainable and irresponsible. Wonder leads to wondering: why are we here? What ought we to do? What is our calling? How shall we live, side by side and intertwined? These sound like questions of privilege, reserved perhaps for those who have enough time, money, space, status to write in their journals and stare into space, but I truly believe they belong to everyone, these questions about calling and intention, and that anyone can and everyone must and all of us do hold the treasure of these questions in our hands, and we turn them round and round throughout a lifetime, and offer the world in return, as response, our lives. The gift of these questions about meaning and purpose is exactly what defines us as humans, sets us apart – not our opposable thumbs, our upright spine, nor even our cognitive capacity or language, but the ability to ask, the requirement to ask, why are we here? What is the point? We're human because we ask questions for which we know there is no single, stable answer. We pretty much have to ask them every day. Each morning the world opens to us, beautiful and terrible, terrifying and beckoning. We have to ask every day what our role in all this is, and then invent it.

Some of you remember a song by Cris Williamson that became an anthem of the women's movement and specifically the lesbian movement of the 1980's. I think it touched me when I was first coming out of college and then out of divinity school, because it spoke about vocation in a very different way from that of the career counsellors who only reinforced my worry that I'd never get a job or pay my loans or be of any use at all. "Song of the Soul" begins with lines from an old Christian hymn:

*Open mine eyes that I may see glimpses of truth
Thou hast for me
Open mine eyes – illumine me – Spirit Divine –*

and then it goes on, pointedly,

*What do you do for your living? Are you forgiving, giving shelter?
Follow your heart. Love will guide you. Truth will unbind you. And sing out a song of the soul.*

This is a different way of asking what you want to be when you grow up. This is wondering in a wiser, wider way, asking a more essential underlying question about what and how and who you

mean to be, not what kind of job makes sense, but what kind of character. *What do you do for your living, are you forgiving, giving shelter?* Not just *who are you*, but *whose?* We can't define our purpose on our own, in isolation we have to listen not just to our own heart's desire but to steady thrumming beat of all the other hearts around us. Someone here said not long ago, "I think your purpose is to try to be the person that you needed when you were younger." To listen deep, pray deep into that. Be the person that you imagine you will need and want close by when you are old.

I heard over the holidays the story of a man who found his purpose in Home Depot. At the time, he was grieving the recent loss of both his parents, and had grown out his beard in accordance with Jewish tradition. He is an Orthodox Jew. A young child stopped him in one of the aisles, dragged his mother over and said, "You're Santa!" It wasn't even December, wasn't even close. But his beard was bushy and white, and his eyes – how they twinkled! His dimples – how merry! And other children in other places began to notice, too, and ask him about the reindeer and the elves and Mrs. Claus and they shared their stories with him, trusted him to listen. That summer, he came to understand that not only does he look the part but he has the kind of spirit children warm to; they feel safe with him. And so late in life this Orthodox Jew with no prior experience of Christmas went for it. He bought a Santa suit, got a job in a department store, and loved it -so much so that he's now a year-round Santa with a Santa school training other bearded, kindly, portly men. He'd been lonely and depressed and bitter, and in a moment of vulnerability and grace, his purpose came to him, and he was awake enough, alive, awake, attuned enough to say *OK, then. Bring on the wonder.*

Sometimes it comes right at you, your calling in this life. Sometimes the mystery of what we ought to do and be walks right up and says, "You're Santa!" and that's that, but normally it doesn't. Normally, we're bombarded with a thousand bids for our attention, the demands of the world and the demands we place upon ourselves all shouting all at once for our care and our time, our best effort and our work. We're sucked into the swirl of the newsfeed, social media, other media, the expectations of employers, parents, peers, and children, and it's hard to know from day to day how best to set our hand, how even to set an intention. More and more, millennials are writing about the paralyzing anxiety of this – but really, it affects us all.

I'm thinking of the story in the news this week about the girl kidnapped in Wisconsin who was lost for 3 months and then on Thursday she was found. It's a national story, riveting, sensational. Such a story draws us in for all kinds of reasons. But what are we supposed to do? One reporter, close to the case for all these weeks, posted an unusual admonition to his colleagues in the media, and to us, a rare request, a quiet invitation, really, and it made me think about how we find within the constant noise, our center and our role. He posted, simply, "Let's leave her alone." And then he spoke the obvious, about how she's only 13 years old, and grieving for her parents who were killed, and has survived so far an unspeakably harrowing trauma, and she doesn't need us watching her, clicking through site after site, blow by gruesome blow, ladling onto her misery and her recovery a million speculations, and opinions and advice, until we all get bored, distracted by some other thing. "Let's leave her alone," he said, imploring us to find some other purpose, some other kind of meaning, for ourselves.

Stories like this come screaming into your hand, into your phone, your computer, the TV at the gym, or a workplace conversation and we can click and click and talk ourselves and half the day down all kinds of crazy rabbit holes, but that is not our calling. That is not the purpose or the point of knowing this news, if any point there is.

A story like this hits your heart, knocks the wind away, and what if we could stay right there, in the breathless emptiness? It's a different wondering and a different, sadder music than Dean and Carol sang, but requiring the same deliberate presence of mind. You take a breath, and ponder, you listen to your heart. Unless we're social workers or nurses or police officers right there on the scene, we don't have to do a single thing with this story except hold it, turn it over in our hands, and see what it asks of us, if anything. That's true of so much of the news that distracts us so mightily and deflects us from our lives. So you take a breath, and maybe find that what this story asks of you is to turn from the screen and gaze inward, to unpack evil once again. It's an uninvited invitation to consider anew what you truly believe about human beings and human nature and what we're capable of. That's never a welcome opportunity, but it matters in the spiritual life, especially for Universalists who believe, or want to, that every single person is beloved of God, and worthy of our love. So that's one calling to us, to think again, and hard, about our own theology of evil.

Or maybe the calling here is just to hold our own children closer, and maybe while we're at it to expand the definition of who our own children are, and expand our definition of love into protection, and then set our hands deliberately to action: join the Gun Sense group, or the Sanctuary team, or volunteer at your neighborhood school. We realize that our purpose is to hold our children, all the children, closer.

Or maybe once we stop and listen to what's really calling to us here, what our own role really is, maybe we discover that this time it is nothing more and nothing less than holding her in prayer, this girl, just as we hold each other every Sunday. That's not a high and mighty purpose, but a humble thing, to hold the sadness of a girl we've never met, imagine her fear, and hold it, hold the fragile flame of this child's spirit, hold her power, and her extended family, and her friends in middle school, who must be so confused, so messed up; hold them and hold her in our hearts, and trust somehow, even if you don't literally believe it, trust that our love and hope for her survival are wafting toward her, like light, and that whatever prayer is, it's more powerful and purposeful and even practical, than ransacking the internet for details that do not concern us really. Through all the tumult and the strife, the drama and the chaos raging all around, we listen for our own calling and wonder what's asked of us here, what's ours to hold in our own corner of a beautiful and broken world.

We think of purpose, or calling, or vocation as a big, important, fated thing, the one true thing you're meant to do and suited for, but so often it's so much smaller than that, more daily than that, so much more a habit of being, and more important in the end than any kind of job. The world is noisy and needy and this life is so short; listen for what calls to you. *We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.* That's a pretty big job in itself, and a sufficient purpose for most lifetimes.

Mark Strand speaks in his poem *The Continuous Life* about ordinary stuff - shovels and rakes, brooms and mops, cooking and cleaning, all manner of chores. He seems to be suggesting that this is the stuff that dreams are made of, that this is all we need, that our true purpose, most of us, is not to be found in shiny careers, grand achievements, glittering reputations, death-defying acts of bravery and mastery, but in fact in just the opposite, in all the small gestures and ordinary tasks that remind us we are mortal, and this day in all its beauty and its terror, its grief and simple gladness, and even brown, cold January ground, is a miracle, and noticing is our chief work and obligation. This is not a poem for children or teenagers on the bright threshold, but for people who have reached a certain age; it's when you grasp mortality, for real, and begin to harbor what he calls a taste for the mundane, a love of this life, here and now, because there is no other. Some people don't come to this until they're very old, some not till retirement, when their formal so-called work is done, but some find it in midlife, or even in their twenties- not settling for less, but loving what life is, which is brief and lovely and hard and heartbreaking, and complicated and simple, an amazing gift.

*What of the neighborhood homes awash
 In a silver light, of children hunched in the bushes,
 Watching the grown-ups for signs of surrender,
 Signs that the irregular pleasures of moving
 From day to day, of being adrift on the swell of duty,
 Have run their course? O parents, confess
 To your little ones the night is a long way off
 And your taste for the mundane grows; tell them
 Your worship of household chores has barely begun;
 Describe the beauty of shovels and rakes, brooms and mops;
 Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do,
 That one thing leads to another, which leads to another;
 Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
 With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest
 Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
 Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
 It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
 You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
 To prove you existed. ... Say that each of you tries
 To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear
 The careless breathing of earth and feel its available
 Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending
 Small tremors of love through your brief,
 Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond.*

Our purpose here, and now, on this small stage, is to stay awake while we still can. To give thanks even when we're disappointed or lonely or confused. To forgive ourselves and one another as often as we're able, to be about that business of repair. Our purpose is not to get a job or do a job or save the world or even save a single person, but to watch and listen to the breathing of the earth, to listen and watch and bear witness also to the signs of the times, and

recognize that everyone is struggling, and sorrowing and striving, close beside us and all around this world, and so with gladness and humility, we set our hands where maybe in the moment we can be of use.

silence

CLOSING MEDITATION

from Linda Hogan: poet, novelist and environmentalist, an enrolled member of the Chickasaw nation.

Like snow, I lay my life down one moment at a time until it grows, drifts or turns to shining ice. It is light falling through windows, moving along the edges of earth. Each thing in this earth counts for something and I need to live as if each moment, each person, each action, counts because it all equals something akin to a great snowfall in the end.

And here I am, an Indian woman living in a world so changed. It happened as this winter snow happened, one act at a time, one presidential or dictatorial decision, one man's signature, one warning shot fired, one knife wound, or a treaty signed by someone who did not have the authority to sign it. There were words we believed to be true but they equaled betrayal. Nevertheless, I am alive because I was carried here in the bodies of my ancestors. And here each morning is red on the mountains, on the snow, and through the black pines. For now, this is what matters.

Down by the creek, I see beaver tracks and remember how they were nearly made extinct in the 1700's for hats in fashionable Europe. Then I see the mountain lion pass by. I consider this new virus, West Nile, and how it has affects the birds, entire populations gone by one invisible thing. Ours is an alive world, every changing sometimes dangerous, but always amazing. The formation of our universe is ongoing, and I am one miniscule participant within it, as is one bird, one tree broken, one spreading virus, and I can only hope that my life will offer something back to this magnificent creation, this changing climate, this sacred earth, these lives all around me.

We breathe in peace, we breathe out love.
So may it be.
Amen.

with thanks to Dean Magraw and Carol Caoette for today's music

“Bring on the Wonder” by Susan Enan was among this morning's musical selections.