

*White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church*

## Did You Get What You Wanted?

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**FIRST READING***from Mary Oliver*

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse  
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox  
when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,  
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?  
And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,  
and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,  
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,  
and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.  
When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.  
When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.  
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

## SECOND READING

*from Martin Luther King, from his final sermon*

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize— that isn't important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say.

### **Did You Get What You Wanted?**

*You know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, said Martin Luther King, in Memphis, Tennessee, at a mass meeting in a crowded church in April 1968, You know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons through the wilderness on toward the promised land. But I wouldn't stop there. I would move on by Greece and watch Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes around the Parthenon as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality. But I wouldn't stop there. I would go on, even to the great heyday of the Roman Empire and I would even come up to the day of the Renaissance, and get a quick picture of all the cultural and aesthetic life of man. But I wouldn't stop there.*

He described all this travelling through history.

*I would come on up even to 1863, and watch a vacillating President finally come to the conclusion that he had to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. But I wouldn't stop there. Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy." Now that's a strange statement to make, he told the people in the church that night, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. Something is happening. People are rising up.*

He talked about that – about global movements for social change, not just in Memphis, but everywhere. *I'm just happy*, he said, *that God has allowed me to live in this period to see it. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.* The next day he was murdered by a white supremacist, but we know now that really, like so many before him and so many since, he was killed by white supremacy.

King understood, as we are only just beginning to, the depth and breadth and potency of that comprehensive reality. And still he said, *I'd want to be right here*, not in the golden ages of the past nor even in some far-off future, where people might be smiling and singing, in safety, free from trauma, free from fear, singing in amazement and relief, “we did overcome.” That’s not where he wanted to be. He told the people, we are in the midst of this struggle, in this life, with eyes and heart and head and hands open to this reality, this brutal, even lethal, reality here and now, with all its openings for courage, grace and moral transformation, all its openings, all around us, for dignity and decency and social transformation. He found his purpose in the work at hand, the world at hand, not in any other. As a progressive Baptist theologian, King understood the promised land as a dimension of the present moment: it is where you’re headed, absolutely, but it is also how you go. The hope therefore, our hope therefore, is present in this moment, not only in some far-off future that none of us can guarantee.

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*And did you get what  
you wanted from this life, even so?*

The question comes from Raymond Carver, a white poet in the twentieth century, from a small, lovely poem called *Late Fragment*, which poses its eternal questions to us all:

*And did you get what  
you wanted from this life, even so?  
I did.  
And what did you want?  
To call myself beloved, to feel myself  
beloved on the earth.*

For King, for others then and now, that sense of innate and inalienable belonging did not come from the success of any boycott, or the passage of the Voting Rights Act or the Civil Rights Act, or any kind of man-made legislation signed by white men's vacillating pens. It came from within him, as deepest faith, a sustaining universalist conviction, and it came from around him, from the beloved community of family, friends, and followers who understood that everyone's beloved on this earth by definition, and our only job, our only purpose, is to act as if that's so. He already had what he wanted; his calling, his prophetic ministry, and ours, was to help make others want it, too.

This was partially about returning to people of color a sense of their own beauty, their power, Black power. It was also, and is still also, about recalling for white people their own innate belovedness, inviting them to regard themselves as their God regards them, to hold themselves as the Holy holds them, to feel truly at home in the great sacred family of things. You can't respect or dignify someone else if you can't respect yourself, if you're uneasy, even and especially subconsciously, in your own skin. White people, King believed, were not evil so much as lost, distanced by fear from their own history and their possibility.

He said, *this world is all messed up*. That was true in 1968; it is even more true now. Michael Eric Dyson, another powerful, convicted black preacher, and historian and writer, says in his most recent book, *It is grievous that in a world where Martin Luther King has spoken, where Billie Holiday has sung, where James Baldwin has written, where Sidney Poitier has acted, where Muhammed Ali has boxed, where Harriet Tubman has escaped, where George Washington Carver has invented, where Barbara Jordan has politicked, where Julius Erving has dunked, where Katherine Dunham has danced, where Serena Williams has smashed, where Toni Morrison has created, where Barak Obama has presided, that is still necessary to proclaim our genius or assert our humanity or argue for our beauty, our dignity, our worth, our simple ability to make it through the day without a single policeman using his baton to beat us or his Taser to stun us or his gun to shoot us*.

It is grievous, it is messed up, the nation is sick, trouble in the land, confusion all around, and white supremacists come and go, through the streets, through the Congress, through the White House; white supremacists come and go, but white supremacy remains.

In a different book called *Tears We Cannot Stop: a sermon to White America*, Michael Eric Dyson writes,

*Beloved, let me start by telling you an ugly secret: there is no such thing as white people. And yet so many of them, so many of you, exist. Please hear me out. I know you're flesh and blood. I know that you use language and forks and knives. I'm not talking about your bodies or your garages or your grocery stores. I'm talking about the politics of whiteness. I'm talking about an identity that exists apart from the skin you're born in. I'm talking about a meaning of race that supersedes the features you inherit when you come out of the womb. You don't get whiteness from your genes. It is a social inheritance ... And it's killing us, and, quiet as it's kept, it's killing you too.*

*Race has no meaning outside of the cultures we live in and the worlds we fashion out of its force and energy. Whiteness is an advantage and privilege because you have made it so, not because the universe demands it.*

*So I want to tell you right off the bat that whiteness is made up, and that white history disguised as American history is a fantasy, as much a fantasy as white superiority and white purity. Those are all myths. They're intellectual rubbish, cultural garbage.*

*My friends, I know ... this frightens many of you. It may even anger you. Please bear with me. Until you make whiteness give up its secrets none of us will get very far. Of course the paradox is that even though whiteness is not real it is still true. I mean true as a force to be reckoned with. It is true because it has the power to make us believe it is real and to punish those who doubt its magic. Whiteness is slick and endlessly inventive. It is most effective when it makes itself invisible, when it appears neutral, human, American.*

This is the struggle, the place where we live, the reality we must acknowledge, admit, own, and even choose, if we would have a hand in dismantling it, transforming it. And the openings for transformation abound.

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This morning I feel haunted by the presence not only of Dr. King but also Mary Oliver, two giants in our midst who died long before we were ready. They were only seven years apart but hailed from two completely different galaxies, the southern black Baptist with a Nobel prize bending the arc of history as he marched and thundered in the streets, and the white lesbian introvert poet with a Pulitzer prize, born in Ohio and most at home in the forest, the meadows, the seashore marshes of Provincetown. Yet both were asking in a way, they gave their lives to asking, in a way, the same questions, the poet and the prophet:

What is your calling here and now?

Are you paying attention to this world unfolding all around you?

Is your heart sufficiently cracked open, every day, by beauty and brutality?

Do you understand your role in it all?

Are you willing to risk everything – or anything- on behalf of what you say you love, what you believe in, what your God or your conscience requires?

*Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?*

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

They were asking the same questions.

In the drum major sermon, the one in the reading, King was talking about ego, mostly, about how we mostly look out for ourselves, and when we do join forces, we like to side with winning causes, with proud outcomes, real results. We want to be effective, make a difference. But he said that's not what matters most. Center your heart, your mind, your limited energy, limited time, the days you are given, on what needs to be done, what needs to be said and sung and healed and lifted up, on what needs to be condemned as wrong and sanctified as simply right and true. *Say, I tried to feed the hungry, tried to clothe the naked, and visit those in prison*, he said in his last sermon, delivered to the people at Ebenezer who loved him not as a celebrity but as their pastor, their favorite son who had come of age among them, found his voice among them, his instrument, his faith, and made mistakes, no doubt, among them, and who was still, in that moment, pretty young, 39 years old. Don't be all puffed up, he said, or tangled up in outcomes. Laws will change because of your work, and that matters. (After the Selma march, King remarked, "It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me.") Public opinion and public behavior may change because of your sacrifice, your vision, your commitment, and that matters maybe even more. But the entire filthy system of race hatred and greed and human fear will not be eradicated in your lifetime, or any human lifetime, not completely. Be doing the right thing for the right reason always, without ceasing, anyway. Be about the Lord's work, the holy work, as you define it. *You don't want to end up simply having visiting this world.*

What do we want in this life? It's *to call ourselves beloved, to feel ourselves beloved*, part of a beloved community on this earth. At the very end, if someone asks, *did you get what you wanted?*, you'll know: not world peace but to have worked toward it, side by side and hand in hand. Not perfect justice, perfect equality, perfect freedom, perfect love, but to have worked toward these, every day, with your eyes laser-focused on the prize. The older and original version of that sacred song, the version we sing with Carol, the one that people held as slaves likely sang until slavery was no more, was *keep your hand on the plow*, which is something you do to survive, to feed your family, to earn your living. It's not work ever finished once and for all: you keep your hand on the plow till the season for harvesting comes round, and then you take up the plow again. What we want in this life is to know what our work is and to do it.

I think of us in this community, struggling sometimes in our social justice work, our sanctuary work, or the group called Facing Race, that gathers once a month to hold white supremacy and racism and hope in our midst, not always sure nor ever sure what we should be doing, or what we can, as a mostly white congregation in a mostly white rich suburb in a mostly white state in a terrifying time. The task is not always clear. How can we bring to bear our unspeakable privilege and power, and our large hearts, our broken hearts, and our outrage and compassion and our strength? Last year, after a two-day interfaith workshop in St. Paul, the Facing Race team identified three goals. We seek:

- *A deeper understanding of the ways in which racism and white supremacy pervade all aspects of our own psyches, our choices and our common life – and new ways to articulate this understanding in our own church and beyond*
- *New partnerships, new collaborations and covenantal relationships with interfaith allies beyond our congregation to provide mutual support, challenge and wisdom*
- *Transformation: to be cracked open and to re-commit to healing for the long haul (healing within and healing the world)*

Every month we begin with the same question round the circle, “how has white supremacy show up in your life lately?” and the sharing starts slowly, haltingly, until someone takes a breath and tells us what they’ve seen or done or not done, what they’ve felt which is sometimes righteous anger, but isn’t always proud or pretty, ways we’ve maybe helped, and ways we’ve likely been complicit. The circle is full of gratitude, fortitude and forgiveness.

The lofty goals can take all kinds of concrete forms, from the music and the sources that we hear on Sunday mornings, to what and how we teach our children, what art is on the wall, the vision guiding whom we hire and how we spend our money, how we respond when communities of color, the immigrant community, for example, says, “Help. We need you here, and now, to help in this specific way, which may involve risk, and will involve love beyond your wildest imagining - oh, and also maybe money. And humility. And patience. And a willingness to keep your hand steady on the plow for a long time, even when your eyes can’t see the prize at all, or see what’s in it for you.” We’re learning how to follow, how to unlearn white savior behavior (that tricks us into believing we’re called to save the world, and that because we’re smart and white and Unitarian Universalists we know what’s best for everybody, which we don’t); we’re learning slowly how to unlearn some of that, how to get out of the center but stay fully present, how to listen, how to step up and also step back. All this is uniformly perplexing, painful, clumsy, awkward, insufficient, often unwittingly racist, despite our best intentions, embarrassing, tiresome, and holy. (With that ringing endorsement, we welcome you to join this team.) What we know about our calling, all of us here, is that it asks us to hold this work, to be this way, for the long, long haul, not to ever lay it down as if it were a hobby, or a project or a burden too cumbersome to bear.

It is not too cumbersome to bear.

There is a Ki-Swahili term, *Maafa*, coined years ago by anthropologist Marimba Ani which refers to disaster and how humans respond to it. *Maafa* refers specifically to a unique catastrophe: *the disruption and uprooting of the lives of African peoples and the continuous commercial exploitation of the African continent—from the fifteenth century to the era of Western globalization. The African Maafa entails the multidirectional, violent, and catastrophic phenomenon that pervaded the entire continent, not just its western coast. Thus the concept also encompasses the trafficking of Africans across the Sahara, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, which occurred centuries before the commencement of trans-Atlantic trafficking.* *Maafa* refers to a crisis spanning continents and centuries, and the people’s response

to it; in America, of course, Maafa is about slavery and kidnapping and displacement. It's about the Middle Passage and rape and murder and the sundering of families. It's about Jim Crow and mass incarceration and police shootings and how people hold all of this in memory, and deeper than memory even, in their bodies, in their cellular structure, and how they live their lives forever as some kind of response. *Maafa* for people of African descent is like the *Shoah* (the holocaust) for Jews, a term to encompass what happened and what is still happening and how the people hold it. In Palestine, and elsewhere in the Arab world, the people speak of the *Nakba*, the catastrophe in 1948 when Israel annexed the people, their culture and their land. Like the Shoah and the Nakba, the Maafa requires constantly of every person affected, and the communities they create, evolving definitions of identity, home, family, community, country, purpose, belonging and belovedness. Survival is a miracle, a hand-made, hand-wrought, hard-won miracle.

The trauma lives in white people as well, but differently. In 2019, January 20, 2019, 90 years since the birth of Martin Luther King, 156 years since Emancipation, 54 and 51 years respectively since the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act, nearly 600 years since the start of the transatlantic slave trade, and 2 ½ years since Philando Castile was killed in Falcon Heights, in 2019 we dwell in a specific time and space, and the trauma abides in white people, though differently, constricting us, contorting us – until we see it, speak it, own it, and make of our lives, one by one and all together, a continuing response. Our purpose here and now, in the only time and place we know, our agenda as dismantlers of white supremacy, and as parents of children, good people in a messed up world, is less a list of actions and activities than a covenant, a conversion, a commitment and a calling to ways of being and seeing that are relentlessly honest, defiantly hopeful, humbly accountable and radically brave.

*Did you get what you wanted, to call yourself beloved on this earth?*

*Tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

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The citation on Maafa is from the Glossary/Appendix to Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*.