

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

So Be It. See to It.

Reverend Victoria Safford

Sunday, April 7, 2019

FIRST READING*Ellen Bass*

The Thing Is

to love life, to love it even
 when you have no stomach for it
 and everything you've held dear
 crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
 your throat filled with the silt of it.
 When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
 thickening the air, heavy as water
 more fit for gills than lungs;
 when grief weights you like your own flesh
 only more of it, an obesity of grief,
 you think, How can a body withstand this?
 Then you hold life like a face
 between your palms, a plain face,
 no charming smile, no violet eyes,
 and you say, yes, I will take you
 I will love you, again.

SECOND READING*Octavia Butler, from her science fiction novel, Parable of the Sower*

Create no images of God.
 Accept the images God has provided.
 They are everywhere, in everything.
 God is change-
 seed to tree, tree to forest;
 Rain to river, river to sea;
 Grubs to bees, bees to swarm.
 From one, many; from many, one.
 Forever uniting, growing, dissolving-
 forever Changing.
 The universe is God's self-portrait.

THIRD READING – *from an anonymous Unitarian Universalist source**

May each and all of us be safe, and out of the path of harm.

May we be creators of safety for one another—
 in our homes, our communities, our nations, our earth.

May we find rest from what has wearied us,
and healing from what has wounded us.

May we find wellsprings of energy, spirit, and creativity all around us,
and may we drink deeply.

May courage in action and clarity of conviction be our constant companions.

May we resist the temptation to critique what is wrong
without also creating what could be right.

May we find companions who challenge us.

May each day be graced with moments of joy, wonder,
and a reminder that none of us is alone.

May our imaginations be freed from the limitations of what already has been,
and unfurl toward the audacious possibilities of what another way--another world--could be.

May we all be co-creators of the world for which our hearts yearn
but which our eyes have not yet seen.

**I printed this months ago, but neglected to print the author's name! If you know it, please let me know: vsafford@wbuuc.org.
Thank you.*

So Be It. See To It.

I have seen people do impossible things.
I have seen people work magic.

There is other magic in this world – the magic of snow melt and birdsong and crocus rise and tree bud. There is the magic of sun-up and star shine rain-down and grey fox and grand canyon.

There's the magic of the tiny pumps installed in our tiny chests before we are born, a soft, miraculous mechanism held safe within the bone house of the ribs. All of this grows as we grow, and that pumping heart does not stop. By day and by night while we sleep, regardless of our will or expertise, it beats for 80 years, 90 years, sometimes 100 years. Just because it happens all the time - heartbeat, sunrise, springtime, friendship, kindness, forgiveness, healing, hope, life itself – just because it happens all the time, doesn't mean it isn't magic.

There are the miracles of blood and breath and bone, the mysteries of gravity and evolution – all of these we can understand a little, but really not that much, and once you factor in the human soul, once you factor in the human mind – we have no idea how all this works, no more, really, than people making myths and talismans around their fires 5000 years ago. Theologically, I tend

to be a rationalist, an empiricist, a concrete logician anchoring in evidence and proof and science so much more than faith, yet still most of life is a miracle to me, not only because I don't understand how it works, but because I know none of us and none of our progeny will *ever* understand it, not completely. That's where reverence comes in, and hopefully, humility.

To me, nothing in this world is super-natural, but the natural world itself – earth, air, stars, space, water (frozen water, melting water, snow), and all these pumping hearts - all of this is miraculous, meaning ultimately inexplicable, and thus a little magical. I think part of our spiritual work, our practice, as adults, is to retrace our steps back to wonder, back to the amazement that we knew as children - when we went around open-eyed and open-mouthed, turning over rocks and poking everything with sticks, wearying the grown-ups with our constant, unanswerable questions. Part of our spiritual practice in this technical, literal, material age is wonder - not ignorance but seemingly and appropriate awe – enough to keep us honest and enchanted several times a day. It's magical out there, and in here, in these bodies.

But this is not the kind of magic that I'm thinking of this morning. I'm thinking of how I have seen people, ordinary necromancers, do impossible things. I have seen people work magic and I know you have, too.

I knew a colleague who used alcohol for many years to mask his lack of confidence, to hide his fear of failure, of being an imposter. He drank to put on a happy face on Sundays and at Board meetings and collegial retreats. And when at last the mask began to slip, and his judgement and capacity began to slip, and he came close to losing everything - congregation and career, partner and family, close friends, even close to losing his own life – he stopped. He stopped drinking, stopped drinking in public, stopped drinking alone, stopped working for the congregation where he had done such damage. He stopped and faced the chemical addiction and also his addiction to the idea of his own worthlessness. The magic was not in the stopping. Addiction rarely works like that; you don't just wave a wand and stop. The magic was the shattering, the melting, of something deep inside him, the unlocking of a rusty gate that protected his secret, protected his fear. The magic was that one day his suffering and sadness were so great that he dared to speak it to someone; he opened just enough, and stayed open just long enough for the person's response to get into his bloodstream, into his mind and his heart. The person said: *I see you. I hear you. I believe you can do this. I need you to survive. Let's do this together.* The magic was the opening, the letting out and letting in, just a crack and just enough to get him to one meeting and then another and the next, and hundreds more. He stayed open enough to stay in the struggle, not all on his own, but first and ultimately under his own power (which is what lets in any higher power you may or may not believe in); he stayed open for the rest of his life, even when he stumbled once or twice along the perilous journey of recovery. He stayed in the work and friends and family mostly stayed too, and by this grueling magic, everything was changed – not once and for all, because addiction doesn't work that way, but for one day and the next and then the next, years and years of taking the wand in his hand and transforming his own life. Grace and will and hope and grit and steadfast companions - all of that is magic. You have seen this, too, I know.

I know a person whose soulmate up and died. They shouldn't have. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, they weren't that old, their life together was beautiful and ordinary and joyful and sometimes

annoying because sometimes you just take a person for granted, and sometimes it was golden: they were soulmates. They were sometimes even out-loud grateful, having been lonely in their lives before they found each other. It was good. And then one day cancer came sashaying into their life, swaggering into their house, without warning or appointment, and smashed up their plans and their bank accounts and dreams, ransacking every corner like a burglar breaking up the furniture. And after a couple of years, which were a bleak eternity, cancer left as quickly as it came, having gotten what it wanted, leaving one of them dead and the other exhausted and bereft and more than mourning, more than angry, more than unspeakably sad, more than fearful, just numb, without much will to live at all, without much love of life at all. The impossible thing, the miracle, is that this person did not also die, not physically, and not spiritually. There were many temptations. But somehow, inexplicably, inexplicable to the point of magically, they found the will, the grace, the bit of breath, to whisper and to pray, *please help me*, and in time to open the mail again, to answer the phone, to open the door, to let all these drops of loving, living water from the outside world work magic on their concrete heart, softening that stone. I've seen people do impossible things, and you have seen it too – laugh again, love life again, trust again, amazing, ordinary sorcery.

The Thing Is
to love life, says the poet,
to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you've held dear
crumbles like burnt paper ...,
your throat filled with the silt of it.
... you think, How can a body withstand this?
Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.

That's deep magic, to say yes like that, to walk on the water of change like that, the roiling waters, to choose living and choose life like that, knowing what we know and knowing what we don't. Some people say God watches over us and pulls us through the darkest time, and this may well be true, but I also know people who've summoned from within themselves strength and love and hope that they never knew they had. Who knows where God leaves off and our own power begins, where God leaves off and community begins? The old hymn says, *When I was sinking down, sinking down, friends to me gathered round*, and that is magic also.

Corin Faife, a journalist who's studied contemporary witchcraft and neo-paganism, says, *When I say "magic," I don't mean the stage craft of disappearances, card tricks, and other illusions—impressive as they are. I mean the ability to shape our lives and the world around us through belief, ritual, and the invocation of forces we may not fully understand... Magic, he says, is a spiritual technology.* It's about the power of your will, but more than that, it's about the practice of bringing to the fore your deepest desire, connecting to your truest heart, and then deploying your will not so much toward what you hope to have happen, but toward how and what and who

you mean to be. You can't always get what you want, but you can discern what you need. For some people, this is what it means to pray; for others this is what agency looks like; for many it's both at once. (*Medium*, fall 2018)

I see people working magic all the time. The person with depression who pushes through their day; the parent wild with worry and heartache because their grown child is in trouble, and who without ever enabling, just loves that child, regardless, because there's nothing else that they can do; the small circle of friends, all busy with jobs and family and lives of their own, making meals and sharing rides and doing chores for someone here who's sick, making time when they themselves have no time, like pulling it out of a hat, because it matters.

In a couple of weeks here we'll mark both Passover and Easter, sacred moments in the Jewish calendar and the Christian liturgical year, both based on ancient stories laced with wild miracles, and in each case, with a subtler, deeper kind of magic. Passover tells the story of the Exodus, the central narrative of Judaism, how with a mighty hand and outstretched arm God led the people out of slavery to freedom in the promised land. Their enemy, the Pharaoh, is painted as a kind of sorcerer, conjuring terrible plagues to oppress them: locusts, hailstorms, drought, and in the end he summons a more deadly, conventional power, ordering his soldiers to kill every firstborn infant boy. God responds in kind with different magic, parting the Red Sea so the people can escape. But some rabbis will tell you that the mightiest miracle in all of this, the deepest, oldest magic in the story, is that the people who were slaves in Egypt, who had known no other life and could imagine no way out, imagined it anyway, conjured freedom on their own, found the longing for it deep within themselves, and the courage for it crackling electrically, subversively among themselves. Once they had envisioned it and believed in the possibility, they could not rest another day. *We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes (said Ella Baker, centuries later)*. Some rabbis will say that all the magic, all the miracle, was in the first steps taken in the night, in the dark, with their children and their unleavened bread bundled in their arms. And similarly Easter – there's the miracle of resurrection, the stone that rolled away, the corpse that wasn't there, Jesus risen from the dead – but it may be that a greater transformation took place within the people in the garden, within them and among them, as they shaped their grief and disbelief into memory and practice, saying, *We will not forget the teachings of our teacher. In fact we will incorporate them, make incarnate and pass on what he tried to tell us about justice and mercy and radical love and a preferential option for the poor. We'll remember and embody this, live into so it can live on* – that's the magic there, the transformation of chaos into meaning.

Magic is a mix of will and intention, courage and hope, imagination which flashes out of nowhere, or nothing we can name except perhaps in retrospect. And our own magical powers to transform our lives or heal the world or help a friend are always, always strengthened in community. This is how real magic differs from illusion, the tricks we see upon the stage. Solitary sorcerers are weak and sometimes dangerous.

A few weeks ago, happily, I stumbled on this short phrase from Octavia Butler: *So Be It. See to it*. It sounds to me like a kind of incantation. Butler was a science fiction writer, one of few

women and even fewer African Americans in the field. She invented her craft, and her life, without models, out of the air. (We'll be holding a couple of sessions here in May to discuss two of her novels.) Butler was born in 1947, in Pasadena, and raised by her grandmother and mother, who worked as a maid. Her father, a shoe shiner, died when she was seven. [Abby Aguirre, *The New Yorker*, 7.26.17] After her death in 2006, a librarian found among her papers a notebook, filled with outlines and ideas for books, and also a note she wrote to herself, on the inside back cover:

This is my life.

I shall be a best selling writer.

Each of my books will be on the bestseller lists... whether publishers push them hard or not, whether I'm paid a high advance or not, whether I ever win another award or not. My novels each travel up to the top of the lists and they reach the top and they stay on top for months (at least two). Each of my novels does this. So be it! See to it! [In a different pen, later, she added: I will find the way to do this. So be it! See to it!] My books will be read by millions of people! I will buy a beautiful home in an excellent neighborhood.

And then she goes on to expand the vision, to begin shaping change beyond herself:

I will send poor black youngsters to writers' workshops.

I will help poor black youngsters broaden their horizons.

I will help poor black youngsters go to college.

I will get the best of health care for my mother and myself.

I will hire a car whenever I want or need to,

My books will be read by millions of people!

So Be it! See to It!

There's something so poignant in this. It's prophecy. It's prayer. It's self-help and self-care for a black woman writer in a white male world. She wrote these notes after she had already won both the Hugo and Nebula prizes – the highest honors in science fiction writing – but still she needed to urge herself on. *So Be It* is a petitionary prayer: may this vision come to pass. May this dream become reality. *So Be It* is a prayer, like *may it be so*, or *blessed be*, but *See to It* is a charge, a commission, a summons to her own spirit. So may it be – now make it happen. It is a beautiful, powerful, audacious, inspiring spell. It makes me wonder what it would feel like here if at the end of our services when we say *May peace dwell within our hearts and understanding in our minds...and love of truth forever guide us*, we were to look right at one another and say, *So be it. See to it!* It brings the power back down to earth, where it belongs, where it can be put to use; it restores the magic wand to our own hand. See to it. *Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. See to it. Let us cultivate boundless goodwill*, said the Buddha. *Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state. Let none in ill-will wish another harm.* So be it. I will see to that. Butler's benediction makes these airy prayers tangible, reliable and real. She was brave.

I have seen, and you have too, ordinary people working magic all the time. Sometimes it takes all the power, all the will, all the hope and faith and concentration they've got, to speak the charm, to work the spell, to levitate the spirit, lighten the heart. But people do it all the time; by

grace, by will, and with the help of friends and strangers, you do it all the time, change the structure of the world.

I'll tell you one more story about magic in real time. Last year I clipped a letter to the editor of *The New Yorker*, a letter from a child, 11 years old. She was writing in response to an article about Barbie dolls and Bratz dolls and Barbie's 60 years of influence on children growing up, children of all gender identities. Violette Sera Delfina Hiser Skilling wrote this:

My mom shared with me your recent article about the legal and cultural battles over Barbie and Bratz dolls. As an eleven-year-old girl, I thought that I would share my perspective. I never wanted a Barbie or a Bratz doll until I discovered doll reconstruction. What you do is erase the features of the doll with nail-polish remover, and then remove the hair and make other body modifications. Then you give the doll a new face, new hair, and new clothing. (My favorite part is ripping out the hair, which is very therapeutic.) What I like about doll reconstruction is that I am in control. I can make them pretty, or not. The two dolls that I have reconstructed represent two parts of me: one nerdy and very unfashionable, and one strong and cool. I make up their stories, and they represent my passions, my hopes, and my feelings. When I rip out a regular Barbie or Bratz's hair and wipe off its face, I am changing the stereotypical body type, clothing, and makeup. I give it tiny wire glasses, bright-blue hair, and foam armor—my response to the toys made for my demographic. You should check it out!

I think the right response to the magic of this world, the shimmering natural magic of the natural world, is to claim our own power to imagine change, and shape it. To imagine freedom, justice, health, gratitude, peace within and peace among the people, safety, hope and healing, renewal and recovery; to set an intention and seal it and speak it and share it and lean toward it as if it were real (which is the only way it will be), to gather companions and conjure together the world that we're wanting and willing to live in.

I want to invite you to read together the prayer we heard in the readings, but this time to use it as a spell, a charm, an incantation, by repeating after every line the words of Octavia Butler, *so be it. see to it.*

May each and all of us be safe, and out of the path of harm.
So be it. See to it.

May we be creators of safety for one another—
in our homes, our communities, our nations, our earth.
So be it. See to it.

May we find rest from what has wearied us, and healing from what has wounded us.
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May we find wellsprings of energy, spirit, and creativity all around us,
and may we drink deeply.
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without also creating what could be right.
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the audacious possibilities of what another way--another world--could be.
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May we all be co-creators of the world for which our hearts yearn
but which our eyes have not yet seen.
So be it. See to it.

Amen and blessed be.