

**White Bear
Unitarian Universalist Church**

Anything is Possible in this World

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Sunday, April 21, 2019

Readings

Caterpillar *Julie Cadwallader-Staub*

Maundy Thursday Realized (John 13: 1-17) *Nichola Torbett*

the dead shall rise again *Lucille Clifton*

Some Glad Morning *Joyce Sutphen*

Anything is Possible in This World

What would it be like, do you think, on a day when you feel like you reached an utter dead end, a day with no sunshine, a day with no birds, a day with not much hope in sight, or inspiration, or self-confidence, or rest, all the elements that humans need the same as we need water, the same as we need air...

... what would be like, at the end of a long day, at the end of a long week, at the end of your patience, wit's end, when you're all used up, when you feel like you've literally crawled on your belly to get home, what would it be like to wrap yourself in paper, or wind yourself, legs and arms and body, torso, head, in yards and yards of silken thread, and then just rest and breathe and wait – except it's not waiting, because you don't really expect anything to happen; you've just stopped moving, stopped worrying and wondering, stopped striving and trying so hard: what would it be like?

Here is the humble caterpillar, says a poet. What would it be like to be like that?

Look at him rippling towards that twig...

See how he dissolves

from all he knows

into all he doesn't know;

from all that he now is

into all that he is becoming;

how his body accomplishes

what our minds can scarcely imagine...

Julie Cadwallader-Staub wrote this poem after her husband died: not right away, but along the way of finding herself again, finding her footing, her own life again. She wrote it after her husband died too young, too soon, unexpectedly, of cancer. This poem is part of cycle of poems about grief and loss, the catastrophe of loss, and it's about transformation, the mystery and the magic of how change comes, even when we don't believe it can.

See how he dissolves

from all he knows

into all he doesn't know;

from all that he now is

into all that he is becoming...

*He has lived his whole life
on milkweed plants
one foot above the ground.*

*Now, he lives his whole life floating
from breeze to breeze
from flower to flower...*

*... finally flying from Vermont
where I live
to Mexico
where I have never been.*

How does it happen? What would that be like – to live your whole life low to the ground, brownish green, your numerous little feet firm on the floor, without the slightest reason to think that this could ever be otherwise, and then all of a sudden you wake up airborne, in brilliant garments, a monarch among animals?

Anything is possible in this world, says the poet, many months, maybe years, after facing, in her own life, the end of the world, in miniature – which is what a death can surely be. *Anything is possible*, she says, about the caterpillar and the butterfly, and maybe her own spirit - and you know, I think we know this. We may not wrap ourselves around and round in a paper-thin chrysalis shroud, bind ourselves with some sticky black secretion to a branch or twig and then, after quiet dormancy, the very sleep of death, after being rocked by wind, drenched by rain, frozen in the April snow and bathed in April moonlight, suddenly emerge one day, through no effort of our own, with spectacular orange wings, ready to pollinate a thousand budding flowers and then fly on to Michoacan; our bodies and our spirits are not magical *like that* - but we've seen glimmers of what's possible, within ourselves, among ourselves, when the spirit ices over and we feel we can't go on – and then one day, it thaws. We've seen enough to know that almost anything is possible, though it's easy to forget.

*See how he dissolves
from all he knows
into all he doesn't know;
from all that he now is
into all that he is becoming;*

Caterpillars do this without thinking, which is kind of humbling for us, with our big brains and our big egos. We must be more deliberate. We have to prod each other, coax each other, teach each other, remind each other, love each other into remembering, bless each other into believing, when despair and anxiety and hopelessness come creeping over us and into us – we have to bless each other into believing that this life, our lives, this world, is beautiful and good and still unfolding. Again and again, we have to conjure hope and gladness into being.

It may not be exactly true that anything is possible, but I know for sure that almost nothing is possible unless we can imagine it, within ourselves if it is private, among ourselves if it is not.

We have to talk about it, dream it, sketch it out, debate it and discuss it, not call each other crazy or misguided or naïve when we dare to dream a brighter day, a better world, a nation or a neighborhood where justice flows like waters and peace like a river and freedom is for everyone, and mercy is the counterweight to justice, and justice isn't hobbled by white supremacy or privilege or greed, and welcome means welcome, period, especially to those who wash up homeless and hopeless and beleaguered on our shore; we have to dream a human community in which the children are fed, as a matter of common decency and common sense, and the aged embraced as elders, and the sick in body or spirit or mind are well cared for and healed if not cured, because health and wellbeing and compassion are woven into the fabric of what everyone knows a gracious and respectable society requires, and poverty is a distant memory and violence an old, disgusting habit, which children and adults are encouraged not to practice, and the land and the animals and water are cherished as if they were sacred and fragile, the greatest of gifts, held in common for all and for all generations, as if the holding were an honor and a sacrament, and the people are grateful and humble, and from this, not from war, comes their pride; from humility and gratitude and love comes their pride, and never from conquest or bluster.

What can we imagine? When our spirits are weary and ragged, and the news of the day, day after day, almost unspeakably bad (except that we are called to speak, to testify) and our hearts are broken and our hope is faltering, and it feels like our country, and our soul practically, has been hijacked – what can we yet imagine? I don't know if anything is possible in this world, but I'm pretty sure that nothing much of value is until we can see it in our minds, speak it with our mouths, tell stories about it that we learned when we were children and never quite forgot, because those stories were true.

The poet writes about the twig to which the caterpillar fixes itself before the change begins:

*Watch how he attaches himself to it,
binding himself to what he knows he needs.*

*What is it about this attachment that allows him to give over
his known and sturdy body,
his known and sturdy world?*

I think we must be similarly attached to what we know we need, to articulate ideals, to tangible faith, that not every time, but sometimes, change can come. By grace and by will and with help, we ourselves can change, if we can imagine it. You know this, you have done it. By grace and by will and together, we can change this world, incrementally, if we can imagine it. We have done this, too.

It is revolutionary work, what caterpillars do.

It was revolutionary work, what the stories say that Jesus did: not the healing of the sick, but imagining such health; not turning water into wine but imagining abundance; not feeding the people, but naming their hunger, noticing their poverty, naming the unjust economic order, indicting tyranny. It was revolutionary, it still is, to speak of peace in times of war, to speak of inclusion in times of closed borders and closed minds, to talk of turning tables in the temples of power when money is a god. It could overturn the order of the world, to think like that and speak

like that and act on such a crazy, decent vision; it could get a person killed. But as caterpillars seem to know without any conscious knowing and we seem so often to forget, we're going to die anyway, so why not let our going be for gladness, let the way we go about our living be for joy and hope and resurrected courage and conviction, and less fear, more bravery; less fear, more love; less fear... less fear...?

Over this past week we've looked to ancient stories, and rituals and practices thousands of years old. On Friday night at the Seder on the first night of Passover we retold how the people walked toward freedom they themselves had never known, and how the journey lasted forty years in the desert, so that many never even made it in their lifetime, but still they traveled on. Passover asks, what journey are we on right now? What does liberation mean right now, not only for humanity at large, the peoples of the world, but for our own small souls? The night before, on Thursday in the Circle of Laments, in silence and in words, we held each other's fears and sorrows, casting a stronger, more sufficient circle than any one of us inhabits on our own. That circle holds an echo of the Christian rite of Tennebrae, and the tenderness of Holy Thursday, when Jesus turned the tables once again, and sat on the ground with his friends, and took their tired, dirty, dusty, smelly feet in his hands, and washed them one by one. He was showing them, I think, that whatever he'd been teaching about love and justice on a big world stage could be realized also, and must first be tried, in the smallest gestures of intimate kindness and gentleness and day-to-day risky compassion, when we risk our own pride, our status, our silly façade, and just love each other up a little more directly.

Jack read Nichola Torbett's poem, reimagining that scene:

*On that day
when they realized their salvation was at hand,
they gathered together.
Wealthy CEO's knelt before their assembly-line workers
abandoning smart phones for towels,
and white folks took the feet of
Asian immigrants from the nail salon
and cleaning women and childcare workers
tenderly
in their hands, cupping the heels.*

*And we wanted nothing other than to hold one another
and eat good food that we
grew and cooked together.*

*On that day,
people everywhere moved their bodies
for joy
rather than penance, and
all people could dance.
Women ran admiring hands over dimpled flesh
and smiled into the mirror,*

and cosmetic surgeons' offices were shuttered.

*On that day, bodies ceased to be shameful...
or shot down,*

Or incarcerated, neutralized.

*Bodies were revered,
for their many colors,
differing abilities and shapes,
scents-
miracles of incarnation,
the only way we have
on this earth
of knowing one another.*

Anything is possible in this world, almost anything, if we can imagine it. Easter is about the resurrection of imagination. It's about detaching from life as we know it, the old order of things, and re-attaching, like the caterpillar to the twig, to the wonderment and faith that lie dormant deep inside us, like seeds beneath the ground. Unlike Jesus in the story, and unlike monarch butterflies, our chance to rise and shine comes not just once in a lifetime, but every morning, over and over, around and around, the wheel of the year, the hours of a single day. We stumble and get up again; we falter and get strong; we lose our way, we run away, forget what we believe in, abandon what we love, and then we stumble back. We coax each other back. We remember and remind each other what's beautiful and true in this world in this life. We take our teaching from the tender land, lying low and cold and fallow. Like the land, we die a little when despair envelops us, and then one day as if by magic, we green up, born again by grace and with the help of good companions, often when we can't believe or won't believe such miracles are possible. We do this for and with each other. No one rises on their own.

The poet Lucille Clifton spoke it without any doubt:

*the dead shall rise again
whoever say
dust must be dust
don't see the trees
smell rain
remember Africa
everything that goes
can come
stand up
even the dead shall rise*