

New Year 2017: What Calls Us Onward?

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
January 1, 2017
Rev. Paul Beckel

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

—Mary Oliver

*Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for
what it intends to do with you.*

—Parker Palmer

*Don't ask kids what they want to be when they grow up but what problems do they want
to solve. This changes the conversation from who do I want to work for, to what do I need
to learn to be able to do that.*

—Jaime Casap

*When the heart weeps for what it's lost, the soul rejoices
for what it's found.*

—Sufi psalm

WELCOME

Happy New Year. As we look with courage to the year ahead, we look within as well. Not to obsess about our limitations, but to examine who and what we care about. For if we know who and what we care about, we can find a focus, and an unwavering source of motivation... as we consider what we want to do and be this coming year.

These questions pertain to each of us as individuals, and to this congregation as a whole: who and what do we care about? And therefore, what shall we do and be in the coming year?

Happily we do not have to figure this all out from scratch. Each of us has an inkling of what a good life—a life of kindness and purpose—what this can mean for ourselves. We also know that, for guidance, we can look to the examples of care and courage from people who have inspired us. And we can look to the principles and the promises that we reaffirm together here on a regular basis.

So as we light the chalice, now, let's remind ourselves of our covenant:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG

For all that is our life

#128

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Jane and the Dragon

Martin Baynton

Summary: Jane is laughed at when she says she wants to be a knight. But she practices in secret, and eventually comes to save the prince and make friends with the dragon who, it turns out, was terrorizing the neighborhood only because that's what everyone expected of him.

CHILDREN'S BLESSING

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

SINGING TOGETHER "This is Clutter"

to the tune of "My Favorite Things," with new words by Carolyn Koehline

*Papers I've piled up for ages and ages. Books I won't read. Some are missing some pages.
Puzzles with pieces I never will find. These are some cluttering things in my mind.*

*All of the yesses I should have said no to. All of the messes I still have to go through.
Tools for the hobbies I never will try. These are some things that are making me sigh.*

*THIS IS CLUTTER. I DON'T NEED IT. I CAN SET IT FREE. AND WHEN IT IS GONE FROM
MY HOME, HEAD AND HEART, I'LL FINALLY HAVE ROOM FOR ME.*

*Gifts I was given that I never wanted. Memorabilia that makes me feel haunted.
Props for the life that's not me anymore. Why I am keeping this I am not sure.*

*All the excuses and all of the blaming. All of the shoulds and what ifs and the shaming.
All of the worries that get in my way. Why not start clearing it all out today?*

*THIS IS CLUTTER. I DON'T NEED IT. I CAN SET IT FREE. AND WHEN IT IS GONE FROM
MY HOME, HEAD AND HEART, I'LL FINALLY HAVE ROOM FOR ME.*

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Thank you Carrie for that lighthearted song with a serious message: that with fewer things, and fewer resentments, our lives can actually be fuller. We have a reading now with a more serious tone, but great heart. You may be familiar with Storycorp interviews from NPR. This one is from an anthology about careers and callings, in which people talk about why they do...what they do...with their lives.

READING

from *Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work*

ed by David Isay, pages 163-5, available at the Bellingham Public Library

Summary: Two women in conversation, a laser tattoo removal specialist, and a client, reflect on the importance of being able to remove from their bodies the names of men who had violently abused them. For one of them, it was a man who had held her down and tattooed his name on her. As awful as these memories were, the two had a deep appreciation for one another. One who was helped, and one who was able to help.

SINGING TOGETHER

Voice Still and Small

#391

READING

“The Woodcarver,” from The Way of Chuang Tzu
edited and translated by Thomas Merton

Khing, the master carver,
made a bell stand
Of precious wood.
When it was finished,
All who saw it were astounded.
They said it must be
The work of spirits.
The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:
“What is your secret?”

Khing replied: “I am only a worker:
I have no secret. There is only this:
When I began to think about the work you
Commanded
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it
On trifles, that were not to the point.
I fasted in order to set
My heart at rest.
After three days fasting, I had forgotten gain and
Success.
After five days
I had forgotten praise or criticism.
After seven days
I had forgotten my body
With all its limbs.

“By this time all thought of your Highness
and of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.

“Then I went to the forest
to see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond Doubt.
All I had to do was to put forth my hand
And begin.

“If I had not met this particular tree
there would have been
no bell stand at all.

“What happened?
My own collected thought
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits.”

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

MESSAGE

On the Friday before Christmas, I heard Diane Rehm sign off on her final show after 37 years on NPR. I was so touched, in that moment, by her generosity of spirit and her modesty. And this generosity of spirit, and modesty, were particularly impressive given the great intellect that she had demonstrated all these years engaging with a wide range of guests and callers. Diane Rehm was a bright light of civil discourse and reasoned exchange of ideas.

When I first heard her on the radio about 20 years ago, she had such a raspy and dignified voice that I assumed she must be very old. Our station in Cleveland broadcast the show, but then we moved away, and it was probably ten years later that the station in my new community picked it up. When I heard her trembling voice again I thought: how can she possibly be still on the air? Then later I learned that the quality of her voice has nothing to do with age; she has spasmodic dysphonia, which causes strained, difficult speech. And yet, she conveyed such warmth and intimacy despite this challenge.

So on this final show, those who called in really had me choked up. One talked about how, as a kid, when she played with her fisher price toy phone she'd say that “the number to dial is 282-885-8850...” And Diane responded that she'd heard from a number of millennials over the years who had grown up hearing the show in the back seat of the car...and begging their parents to change the station...but that later they had become committed listeners. This was so touching for me because it was like that with my kids.

And I say that this is touching, not just funny, because the prospect of hope for the generations to come...hope that they have found some role models in our generations to help them to bridge the communication gaps that are poisoning our democracy...I really need that hope.

Then United States Senator Cory Booker called in, saying that she had had him on the show years ago when he was the mayor of Newark, New Jersey. So I was reminded that, as lives intersect, this can have powerful ripples outward in both time and space.

Well I need to talk today about something other than Diane Rehm, but on the topic of finding meaning and purpose in our lives, I'd like to suggest that she has passed this work on to us, now. Not public broadcasting, but the everyday opportunities we all have: to speak with both candor and humility, to endure irritation and ignorance not as a pushover, but responding by making room for a second, and third opinion, and to follow our curiosity.

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So moving on, kind of: you know how you turn on the radio in the car or at home in the middle of a show and then something interrupts? Well I heard another snippet a week or so ago that seemed so appropriate to our topic today. An interviewer asked Martin Scorsese if movies were his religion. And he responded (I can only paraphrase) he said: 'I suppose in a sense, yes. Because it's what I do. It's how I try to figure out who we are.'

I thought that was such an interesting and honest definition of religion. It's not what I say I believe, it's not what I aspire to do. It's what I actually do. He wasn't implying that this kind of work is superior to anyone else's work, or even that it was important, but this is what he's devoted his life to, it's what he cares about: trying to figure out who we are.

So think about that this year as you try to figure out who you are. Not by professing lofty ideals. Just notice what you do. And see if there's a disconnect between what you think you care about and what you actually do. You've probably noticed that in the order of service today there's a little worksheet that might help you to think about adjustments you could make — not in other people's lives, of course, but in your own. This is for your own private use, but if you'd ever like to talk about growing - in one or more of these ways - give me a call or email and we can get together. Actually we have a whole team of pastoral care ministers here at BUF, so I can also help you find someone to explore an area of interest with you.

And I don't want you to get too distracted by this worksheet now because I have other important things to say...but I just want you to notice that on the top half of the page, the virtues on the left are to some degree opposites of the virtues on the right. Which is just to say that virtue is not a one size fits all garment. Y'know maybe you're already more than enough confident, and humility is a bit of a challenge. Or maybe humility comes naturally to you and you'd like to figure out how to go in the other direction. If nothing else, go home and scribble on this as an exercise in self-awareness.

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In the liberal religious tradition, the point is not to create uniformity among individuals with different experiences, needs, and dreams. The Unitarian tradition grew out of a rejection of dogma in general, but, in particular, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, a rejection of the prevailing notion that human beings are innately wicked and that we can do nothing about this except to cower in fear of a wrathful God.

The Unitarian emphasis, instead, was on our capacity and our responsibility to choose virtue over sin. The language has changed a lot since then, but the point remains that we are moral agents, not just subject to a plan that God or the universe predetermined long before we were born. We have the capacity to choose. And though the conditions in which we find ourselves do tend to perpetuate themselves, we have the capacity to change our conditions.

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I began today saying that if we know who and what we care about, we can find a focus, and a source of motivation that may enable us to learn or grow or do whatever we need to do in order to take care of who or what we value. I'll close with another Storycorp story about Rich Barham, who says about finding his calling as a suicide hotline operator.

He says: After Vietnam, I had survivor guilt, I never understood why I survived. Being with the hotline has really given me the answer: I was meant to be here to do this, so other veterans could survive.

...Once a vet called me when he was in the middle of a flashback; he had boarded himself inside his living room. He believed at that moment that he was in Iraq. He had three young children sleeping upstairs. I heard something click in the background. I asked if he had a weapon, he said he did. I talked with him, he was anxious and incoherent, and then I lost the phone call.

So I called back and got the answering machine. And the voice I heard on the machine was totally different from the voice that I had just been talking with on the phone. So I'm thinking: here's what this guy sounds like when he's not having a flashback. I know that he can be ok if I can get him back to this place. And fortunately we were able to get him some help, and make sure he and his children were safe. Some of this guy's experiences were similar to mine, and I remember after that phone call being a little jerky and nervous, going outside, smoking a couple of cigarettes, and then coming back in and doing my job again.

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Now based on the experience of my own imperfections...and the sluggishness of my own learning curve, I'm not going to suggest that you're all transformed now and that tomorrow you'll be eradicating poverty, ignorance, and illness. There is a time for all things under heaven so it can be tricky balancing time for resting, thinking, and doing.

So remember the woodcarver from our reading earlier. He had to prepare himself in order to recognize the tree he would come to carve. He had to take the time to focus, to let go of praise and criticism and what everyone else was expecting... He had to take the time to focus, to let go of praise and criticism and what everyone else was expecting... and then: all that was left was for him to put forth his hand, and begin.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

Landslide

written by Stevie Nicks

SENDING SONG

Life calls us on

Kendall Gibbons and Jason Shelton

BENEDICTION

#419

Look to this day! For it is life, the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence: The bliss of growth, the glory of action, the splendor of beauty. For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision; but today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day. [Kalidasa – 5th century Indian poet]

CIRCLE 'ROUND