

Reading

Our reading this morning is by the Rev. Lynn Ungar, a Unitarian Universalist Minister who lives in California and writes for QUEST, a monthly newsletter distributed by the Church of the Larger Fellowship. She calls this reading, "Boundaries."

The universe does not
revolve around you.
The stars and planets spinning
through the ballroom of space
dance with one another
quite outside of your small life.
You cannot hold gravity
or seasons; even air and water
inevitably evade your grasp.
Why not, then, let go?

You could move through time
like a shark through water,
neither restless or ceasing,
absorbed in and absorbing
the native element.
Why pretend you can do otherwise?
The world comes in at every pore,
mixes in your blood before
breath releases you into
the world again. Did you think
the fragile boundary of your skin
could build a wall?

Listen. Every molecule is humming
its particular pitch.
Of course you are a symphony.
Whose tune do you think
the planets are singing
as they dance?

Sermon

There is Only the Whole

Rev. Sara Huisjen

David Bumbaugh's words live in me still. David is a Unitarian Universalist minister. He's retired now. He's written a very readable book about UU history, a narrative history to be precise. David served our congregation in Summit, NJ for years with his wife, Beverly, who's also a minister. He was the one & only preaching professor I took a class with in seminary. He was wise, and curmudgeonly—yes, those traits do sometimes go together—and he was absolutely clear about what he thought mattered most when it came to being a minister with integrity.

The class was Intro to Ministry. It was in my first semester in Chicago, the fall of 2002. Like all of my classmates, I was excited to be there. I was eager to learn whatever I needed to know. I was determined to be “good” at this chosen profession. Pen in hand & paper out on the table, I was ready to write it all down, and this is the long & short of what I remember him saying: “It does not matter what kind of ministry you choose or chooses you, wherever you are, people will be after you. They’ll want and need you to do things for them. They’ll be hungry to be seen and understood, and companioned and challenged. They’ll look to you for ideas & answers, and they’ll hope you’ll do & see things their way most of the time. They’ll want you to fix things at church whenever they go wrong, and they will go wrong—and and all of this is fine, and good, and expected, and you must remember this,” he said: “Your job, at any given moment, your faithful calling, is to know what it is that you aspire to serve; to know it, and act accordingly, and to be called back to it, whenever, and wherever you feel yourself stray.”

“Know what it is that you wish to serve.” It was good advice then. And it’s still relevant, good advice today.

In the life of this congregation, at this very juncture in time, I’m aware that there’s you, and there’s me, and there’s us together. And there’s the people who haven’t yet arrived, and the many who came before us. There’s everything else that goes on here— the meetings & classes, the worship, the visiting & planning & dreaming about what we’ll do and who, together we ought most to be; all of it, good stuff & important stuff; all of it, wanting, and demanding, and needing our attention, and then there’s that question David asked me those many years ago; a questions that’s lingering, still, in the back of my mind: What do I aspire to serve by being a part of this congregation and faith? What do we, together, aspire to serve?

What, I wonder, is the “thing” at the center of it all that we might more intentionally serve? The thing that’s not really or merely a thing at all, but rather some intrinsic sense of worthiness; some hidden wholeness, some felt-sense of holiness; the some thing that’s nothing more or less than the spark of life deeply rooted within each of us, and all of life unfolding.

In my own, still evolving theology, my tendency nowadays is to call this ‘thing’ I speak of & seek to serve as Love with a capital “L,” and wholeness, and god with a lower case “g.” I call it the invisible, yet very real, felt-sense threads of connection that wake us up and weave us together; the thing I wish to serve, though it doesn’t always look like that, is the living and vital energy that animates & sustain us, that reminds each and all of us, from birth unto death, that we are ever & always a part of the whole of life, dependent on each other, on love & on trust.

I’ve begun my sermon this morning, this way, a sermon about humility, by telling this particular story, and sharing my own making sense of these things, because, in my mind, my professor’s instructions say something important what authentic humility is, and how & why we might go about trying to make more room in our selves, in our hearts, for more of it to rise up in us.

There is so much more to life, than seeking primarily or only our own narrow interests and needs; there is this inclination of the spirit to want to nurture & live more readily, more often out a felt-sense connection to all living things, to that hidden wholeness found & felt in each, and in all.

And, of course, there are any number of different ways to understand what humility is...Its Latin root, *humilitas*, means humble, or grounded, ‘from the earth.’ A more contemporary definition of humility,

found in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, is "that quality or state of not thinking you are better than other people."

When asked, several of you offered your own ideas about what humility is: Humility is "being honest and realistic about one's role in the universe," one of you said. Humility is "the ability to be 'right-sized,' neither too big for one's boots, nor so small one can't be seen." Humility is "being willing and able to learn, and not being handicapped by the false belief that we know or have all the answers."

"Humility" another of you said, "is what most compels you to acknowledge mistakes and be accountable for them; to seek to learn what you need to learn, and to make amends where necessary."

Across the centuries & in different cultures & spiritual or religious traditions, humility has been proclaimed as a virtue & character trait, a certain generous way of holding or conducting oneself that creates space for others and allows them to breathe. Humility is a way of moving lightly through the world, and walking softly upon the earth. It is an inviting and hospitable way of engaging others.

Richard Wagamese is an Ojibway storyteller & writer who's written about humility and what it means in his native tradition & spirituality: "The old ones," he writes, "say humility is the foundation of everything, [that] Nothing can exist without it. Humility is the ability to see yourself as an essential part of something larger... Without the spirit of humility there can be no unity, only discord. Humility [is what] lets us work together to achieve equality. It teaches us there are no greater or lesser beings or things. There is only the whole..."

"Humility for me," writes another among you, "is about our awareness and honoring of the thread connecting each to all. Being humble is recognizing the Divine in every living thing. It is deep equality. [It is Knowing] we are [not just human but are] all living our lives and pooling back to Oneness. [Humility is knowing that our] journeys will be different, and in the end, by science and by Spirit, [recognizing] we are all the same. Humility is that experience of being humbled and awed by the intricate web in and about us, [and] knowing we are just a small part of big magic."

Surely, each of us has known moments when the self seems to dissolve, when ego suddenly lies dormant. In such moments, we are likely to find it is easier to remember what matters most; to more readily call to mind & be guided by our highest values and deepest commitments. In these kinds of moments, we tend to be more ready & willing to let go and trust that we're being led in a good direction; to relinquish & relax the more pushy aspects of our selves, and in doing so, to make room for something new, more generous and inclusive to arise.

All of this is true, and this morning, I need also to acknowledge that there's some trickiness about what humility is; some dis-ease I recognize in myself with how this word is and has been used and understood at times. Humility, as an esteemed & espoused virtue, is some times abused and exploited by those in power, with power over others. Be humble, stay weak, they (we?) say said. Remain subservient & satisfied with the status quo; with the way things are which do NOT honor or revere your dignity and worth.

A fundamentalist, narrow view of Christianity was used in this way to try and keep slaves humble; to have control over them; to convince them that their just reward would come in their next life, so long as they submitted to the wretched conditions of their life circumstance. We must always seek to be wise & discerning about what true humility is and where and how it is operative & active in our lives, and to what end.

My experience tells me, too, that whenever we try to be humble—when humility is our explicit goal—we typically fail. The more humble we aspire to be in some determined, ‘get it done’ kind of way, the further away the spirit & vitality of it gets from us. No one can simply resolve to wake up in the morning and be humble in all things. It doesn’t work that way. There’s something else that needs to happen for real & lasting humility to be possible, for it to rise up in us. Some thing, some experience that calls us out of our selves—or perhaps deeper into our selves. Some moment (or moments) that stop us in our tracks; that take our breath away; some thing experienced that makes us pause, and stand still, and be silent a time, allowing enough space & room within us, for a felt-sense of humility to arise. Humility experienced this way, more readily becomes an orientation of the heart; some generous capacity we intentionally cultivate & nurture; some sincere regard for our relatedness with all beings, and with this living earth as a whole. Humility, as such, is something that grows & wells up in us, and is expressed through actions which communicate our deep regard for all that is; for the blessing we know of simply being alive.

There’s a Hasidic midrash—a Jewish teaching practice—I’ve read about, that also gets at what humility is and isn’t. To be fully human in the best sense of the word the teaching suggests is to walk around with two pockets. In each pocket have one slip of paper. Have one of the slips read: “For your sake this whole magnificent, amazing universe was created.” In the other pocket, have the other slip of paper say, “You are but dust and ashes.”

Here, we remember together that we are everything and we are nothing. We are important, brilliant, valuable in and of ourselves, and we are part of the important, brilliant whole; dependent on each other, and related to all living things, and ours is the faithful responsibility & joy to live out of that awareness; within the tension of it, to choose more of the time to value whole of life.

“The universe does not revolve around you,” we’ve been reminded today.

“The stars and planets spinning
through the ballroom of space
dance with one another
quite outside of your small life.
You cannot hold gravity
or seasons; even air and water
inevitably evade your grasp.”

“Why not, then, let go?”

Why not then allow yourself to be & feel a part of the whole?

Being humble & cultivating humility will look like different things in our lives, at different times. More often than not, we will recognize & know it when we see it; our instinct will be to admire it in others, and to experience feeling loved & seen in their presence. And it’s true, too, that when & where we strive too pointedly, too much toward being humble, we will miss its mark entirely.

Humility is the seat of reverence. To spurn humility is to be in a kind of denial about the scale of our existence and our understanding of it. Though some are inclined to associate humility with shame or lack of self-worth, this, I believe, is a false dichotomy. We can have magnificent worth, and still see there is something bigger or more important; we can love ourselves, and love all humanity, all of life, and the sum total of all that is, even more.

“Know what it is you aspire to serve?” my professor said, those many years ago, eager & anxious, and longing to be good, as we were. “Name it out loud,” he suggested, “the thing, this vitality, the High Resolve you wish most to serve. Begin each day,” he suggested, “by reminding your self of it.

Make the effort—when & where you need to—to call your self back to it; especially when chaos sets in, or busyness takes over, or doubts and neediness, your own or others, begin to rattle your cage and unsettle you; to cast you adrift & away from it, from that vital presence, you say you wish most to serve.

Humility, as such, is the foundation of our relatedness. It is the stuff of our connectedness to others, of our acceptance of ourselves, as neither as too big, nor too small. Humility is what we might hope will call us to reverent care for the goods of the earth. It is our most trustworthy commitment to walk through this world with less arrogance and self-centeredness.

Humility, when & where it’s expressed in our lives, is seen and experienced as our profound reverence for every person & all living beings. It is a quality of presence we might each embody, a generous view that enables others to see themselves as respected & loved.

May this be so, in your life & in mine.