

Sermon: “A Long Loving Look at the Real , by Bill Graves

Reading: *Messenger* by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird –
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

It says in the order of service that I’m doing a “homily”. I generally think of a homily as a short sermon. However, yesterday I checked in the dictionary and one definition for “homily” is “a tedious, moralizing lecture.” And I thought: Whoa, better stop using that word.

So, let me start this short sermon by savoring Mary Oliver’s wonderful poem a little longer:

My work is loving the world.
My work...is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.

Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,
which is gratitude, to be given...
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy....

A couple of weeks ago I rubbed up against a very different concept of work. As many of you know I am doing an internship this year as a hospital chaplain at Island Hospital in Anacortes. On one of our more delicious April mornings I walked into Jake's hospital room. I had been told by the head nurse that Jake (not his real name), a 44 year old white male, had been brought to the hospital the prior day by a 911 aid vehicle. He had suffered a major heart attack and also was afflicted by hypertension and "situational difficulties". So here's Jake, barrel-chested, thick-necked, sporting a prominent handlebar mustache and, generally appearing older than 44. His burley arms were covered with tattoos. After getting past common attitudes, particularly among males, that I'm OK, I'm cool, don't need any support, I asked him to tell me what was on his mind yesterday while they were bringing him to the hospital in an ambulance.

"Hell man", [sez Jake], "I was wondering if I would see another sunrise. It got my attention! Today I'm just worried about my job. I'm the foreman of a construction crew. I gotta get out of here. I gotta be on the job or I'll be replaced!"

"Wow, [sez I] your work must be pretty important to you."

Replied Jake: "I'm damned good at my job but I know I work too much; its always 12 hours a day 6-7 days a week."

You know, Jake and I ended up hitting it off really well even though there were gulfs between us. He told me he had formerly been in a motorcycle gang. They did some bad stuff and he would be dead long ago had he not found Jesus in a Pentecostal church in Texas, But in recent years he hadn't really had time for Jesus, church, anything except his job.

So here are juxtaposed two pretty radical versions of "work." Mary Oliver's work is loving the world. Jake's work is a breathless, frantic life of making and producing things that leaves him no time or energy to pay attention to the world, let alone love it, or to consider the meaning of his existence before it is over, as it almost was, at age 44 no less. Frankly, I was incensed by Jake's story, partly because the cruel irony of his fear of losing a job that would stress him into a severe heart attack and then replace him as he recovered. And the story also touched me deeply partly because I identify with Jake: I've been there myself, calendars full to the minute, busyness, producing results, money, changes, control, nowadays even homilies that will keep you awake, hopefully. It's the church of perpetual activity. Our creed: "Only useful activity is valuable, meaningful, moral. Activity that is not clearly, concretely useful to oneself or to others is worthless, meaningless, immoral." [Walter Kerr] So, do I have any other brothers or sisters of the church of perpetual activity here today?

And then we run into a Jake or see Jake in ourselves. And that is why brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and only one lover, out there, that is why we do this utterly unproductive, (some might see as banal, silly, trite) this flower communion. On this day that ancient wisdom (the 4th Commandment no less) calls us to set aside as the Sabbath Day, we stop and we contemplate the miracle of a flower, and the giving and receiving of it from the miracle of another being, a child of this congregation, and our hearts offer gratitude for these miracles, and we thus honor the sacred: “Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—equal seekers of sweetness.” The long and the short of it is that we are coming into balance; balancing our necessary busyness with the life of the spirit. And, I owe Parker Palmer for the best description of the heart of the spiritual life: It is “to know the rapture of being alive, and to allow that knowledge to transform us into celebrants, advocates, defenders of life wherever we find it.” (repeat)

And it requires above all taking the time to pay attention, or we might call it “taking a long loving look at the real”. I had an assignment in one of my classes last Spring to do just that—take a long loving look at the real. I was sent outside to find something to take a long loving look at—in this case an entire 15 minutes just studying my chosen subject and another 5 minutes to sketch it or write about it. I had to overcome predispositions telling me

things like “frivolous”, “Mickey Mouse”, “unproductive”. I, nevertheless, chose a fiddlehead fern frond on the Seattle U campus just poking up out of the ground about 6 inches. I revisited the same fern for another 15 minutes each week for 5 consecutive weeks. That fern and I became intimate and I learned to appreciate it, its complexity and beauty as I would otherwise never have been able to. Perhaps, I learned more than any 15 minutes of erudite lecture I can recall.

A long loving look at the real—each word is crucial; real ...look ...long...loving. The real, reality, not some remote, intangible God-in-the-sky. Reality is living, pulsing people, reality is the sun rising this morning over the Cascade Mountains, Beethoven’s Sonata Pathetique, “the quickening yeast..., the phoebe, the delphinium.” In contemplation the real is looked at without analyzing or arguing at it; just exactly as lovers exchange joy in the meeting of their eyes. And the look at the real is a long look. Not in terms of measured time but gloriously unhurried, “...standing still and learning to be astonished” (as Mary Oliver describes is). And it is loving because such contemplation of the real calls forth love, oneness with the other. “My work is loving the world.”

My whole point here is just this: From long loving looks at the real comes communion. I think the essence of communion is the discovery of

the Holy in deep encounters—with creation, with one’s God, or whatever one chooses to call the sources outside and inside you are connecting with and hold sacred.

About a month ago Tom Buxton asked me during coffee hour if I could describe what a Unitarian Universalist faith is. The question was timely because I had just perused an article in the latest UU World (which is our denomination’s magazine), an article I greatly admired, titled “The Heart of Our Faith”, by a UU Minister named Galen Guengerich. Traditionally, the orthodox description of a UU faith is something like: “Freedom to believe whatever we want.” Two problems with this: First, it hasn’t gotten us very far if our denominational growth stats mean anything. Second, it doesn’t even describe a religion, it only refers to an intellectual process (what in theology school is called an epistemological process). Guengerich suggests a change--that we ground our faith on the word “Gratitude” and that, I think, is exactly what Mary Oliver is doing. A faith discipline of gratitude starts with a certain humility, a willingness to go outside the confines of the self, and it moves to a sense of awe. The feeling of awe emerges from our experience of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine. We cannot help but experience gratitude as we are reminded of how utterly dependent we are on the people and the world around us for everything, *everything* that

matters. And now we have a *religion* because the experience of gratitude leads to an ethic of obligation, a duty to the larger life that we share. Our sense of gratitude demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return. We are in a way united with the spirit that keeps the flowers blooming.

Let me leave you with this thought. We, of course, need to be aware of all we are doing wrong to other humans and to our environment. Yet we don't celebrate life, we can't know the rapture of being alive, if we only live in fatalism, pessimism, despair, guilt, or in constant concern with changing our lives to something else. Our UU faith and the flower communion invite an alternative, an alternative in which our sense of obligation to protect and promote life on our planet flows from a sense of awe and gratitude for the life we have been given.

As it says in Reading 441 in our hymnal;

To worship is to stand in awe
Under a heaven of stars,
Before a flower, a leaf in sunlight,
Or a grain of sand.

To worship is to work with
Dedication and with skill;
it is to pause from work and
Listen to a strain of music.

Amen, May we take a moment for silent reflection.

