

SLOW COMING TO WAKEFUL

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

September 11, 2016

Story for All Ages

Rip Van Winkle

Reading

What Is Your Life's Blueprint?

Six months before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to a group of students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia on October 26, 1967.

I want to ask you a question, and that is: What is your life's blueprint?

Whenever a building is constructed, you usually have an architect who draws a blueprint, and that blueprint serves as the pattern, as the guide, and a building is not well erected without a good, solid blueprint.

Now each of you is in the process of building the structure of your lives, and the question is whether you have a proper, a solid and a sound blueprint.

I want to suggest some of the things that should begin your life's blueprint. Number one in your life's blueprint, should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth and your own somebody-ness. Don't allow anybody to make you feel that you're nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance.

Secondly, in your life's blueprint you must have as the basic principle the determination to achieve excellence in your various fields of endeavor. You're going to be deciding as the days, as the years unfold what you will do in life — what your life's work will be. Set out to do it well.

If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well. If you can't be a pine at the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley. But be the best little shrub on the side of the hill.

Sermon

Slow Coming to Wakeful

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

I was trying to remember the weather that day, September 11th, 15 years ago. It was unremarkable, I think – an early fall day – not quite fall, actually, by the calendar. And then, not very far into that seemingly unremarkable morning, everything changed.

I'm sure you each have memories. You can likely retrieve in your mind's eye where you were and what you were doing when you heard or saw what was happening. You may even remember what you were feeling, largely impacted – of course – by what phase of life you were in at the time. Were you not yet an adult? How did you make sense of what was happening? Were you a young adult, discerning your path and how this event would change it? Were you in the middle years, wondering how – perhaps – to protect your children or your own sense of their future? Were you already an elder, shocked and emotionally displaced by this event?

I have been watching video recordings of newscasts this week, along with a film released around 2012 called "9/11 The Day That Changed the World." In the movie, the then-mayor of New York City, Rudi Giuliani, remembered his reaction: "This is beyond the scope of our experience," he had said. "We don't have a plan for this." Oh, yes – whatever age we were – it was . . . beyond the scope of our experience.

I want to ask Steve to light three candles this morning for the 2,976 lives lost on September 11th in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania: citizens of ours and over 90 countries. May these lights also reflect the impact of those events on all our lives – all that was lost of life, of the feeling of safety, of the sense of security, of life as we thought we had known it.

[Robin Colgrove plays one verse of "Amazing Grace" while candles are lit]

The deputy press secretary for the White House, Gordon Johndroe, commented in the movie that just after the realization that the events that morning were strategically planned acts of terrorism on US soil, "we were in a new era, already."

As soon as we knew, by mid-morning, 15 years ago, we had entered a new era.

It felt like that, didn't it? How could this have happened? Never had our country been attacked within its own borders. Everything changed: our sense of balance, our relationship with the rest of the world.

But here's the rub. I think we Americans had been sleeping. Many of us, at least, had been sleeping. Like Rip Van Winkle, we had taken a draft of the good life that we imagined we deserved or had

earned, as though either of those were possible. We had settled in for a rest. We didn't see or hear what was going on around us, outside the dream state of our own lives and the illusion of our country's security. I don't think a new era happened in the instant of our realization, or even in the tragic events of that one day. The new era had been on its way, coming in on the breath of discontent and increasing disparity around the globe. The tragedy of the planes flying into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon and being bravely taken down by resisters in Pennsylvania in order to avoid more damage in D.C. – those events not-so-simply compelled us to begin to open our eyes, to begin the slow coming to wakeful that so many of us had long been able to avoid.

Our beards were soft and gray, powdered with American illusion. We had found comfortable spots of respite and retreat from the global impacts of our collective choices, from the anger engendered by a rising inequity – both internal and external – that so many of us were asleep to.

I am not suggesting that the attacks of 9/11 were in any way deserved or defensible – IN ANY WAY – but that we have only slowly been waking up to the myriad and complicated reasons behind them.

Our theme this month, as we come together again and as it was last September, is humility. The flip side of hubris. I believe humility in the face of life is, if not our greatest human challenge, then right up there with those at the top of the list – with greed, or self-service, or disinterest. If we are to grow in mind, body and spirit, we must humbly confront and acknowledge what we are often too prideful or preoccupied to recognize.

• • •

There was a boom in church membership that fall, you know. Many people turned to faith communities to connect with, to participate in, to be a part of so that they didn't feel so alone. In those early days of shock and uncertainty, one response was to want a village – for ourselves, and for our young people, so that we might have a place to help us understand or make sense of what was suddenly so confusing and surreal. We were reminded of what a faith community, a church, if you will, can be – what we need them to be.

Did you know that 50 years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr., offered the Ware Lecture at our annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly? It was 1966. His words were prophetic, I think, of the 2001 rekindled needs for communities of faith and sustenance, even if what we thought we were looking for was somewhat different. "Certainly the church has a great responsibility," King said, "because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of society. It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores if necessary."

Is that what we thought we needed in 2001? As we began our “journey to wakeful” 15 years ago, our country joining the rest of the world as places of potential harm, as survivors of an angry and vengeful episode, were we looking for broadened horizons, OR places of solace? Did we need environments to question and break mores, OR to comfort our fears and our disillusionments? Which of those responses would truly feed our spirits?

It begs the same question today, 15 years later when life feels more interdependent and complicated than ever: how do we need our faith communities to serve us? Or – oh, wait! – is even that a question predicated on hubris? How do we need our faith communities to serve US?

A more fitting inquiry, in keeping with our capacity to engage our hearts with truth and wisdom, might be: how do we enter these spaces of discernment, these halls of searching, with hearts in need of opening and souls that beg to be awakened? What willingness do WE bring to be opened to new ways of understanding? It is likely less a question of how a faith community serves US, as it is how willing we are to be made new: to have eyes that see more fully and ears that hear more grace; to have hearts that are willing to be broken and mended again, as best we are able. What do WE bring?

As we have come together over the last 15 years, we are less well-served figuring out how to remake the world into what we thought it had been for us, to reclaim our illusions of security, or how – in more contemporary parlance – to make America great again. Faith communities must not be about going backward. The Rev. William Barber, advocate for a return to a moral ground in our collective lives, reminds us so recently, “not one step back.”

We saw everywhere in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedies posters and paintings and bumper stickers that read, “God Bless America.” Do you remember? It confused me. It so isolated us from the rest of the world when we had, in some respects, just joined them.

Our task, in these homes – these rooms that welcome our fears and pain and anxieties, our hopes and our dreams and our joys – our task must be to awaken ourselves to ALL that the world IS: what it confronts us with, what our part in all of it is, and how we have the capacity to respond. Our faith communities, THIS faith community, must be where we can – together – have the imagination, the courage, the willingness and resilience to see the uncomfortable truths and know that we can carry ourselves and each other forward in love: that love has the power to heal us, sustain us, and carry us through the challenge that is life in all its complexity.

“This,” Giuliani said in 2001 about the attacks, “is beyond the scope of our experience.” I doubt he recognized how prescient those words were. So much of the last 15 years falls into that category, from climate change, which we knew about but turned away from, to the hard realities of social inequality, to the invasive reality of smart phones and social media, so much – except that all of it IS now in the

scope of our experience. Our world is more intimately connected and interdependent than ever. We are a part of the whole in ways we never used to imagine. Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy suggests that we are in “a pivotal moment in history, with possibilities of unraveling, OR of creating a life-sustaining human society.”

King’s question resonates still: “I want to ask you a question and that is, ‘what is your life’s blueprint?’”

Yes, to know that we are each worthy, to know that everyone is worthy, everyone is somebody. Everyone, King reminds us, has somebody-ness. You are somebody amazing, each of you. There is great humility in acknowledging that, in not turning away from your amazing potential.

AND, he is right – we must go about being excellent together. When so much is beyond the scope of our experience, we must make every effort to be excellent together: to be thoughtful and compassionate, but mostly to be awake – to notice, to hold ourselves accountable, to listen, to seek what we need and to offer it to others with open hands and generous spirit.

Poet Moya Cannon reminded us this morning: So much of what we love we stumble upon . . . and more discloses itself to us . . . and more comes to us like full cups of water. But we must be awake, my friends. And we have been slow coming to wakeful.

Stretch your arms – seriously, right now. Stretch like you are just out of bed – shoulders to earlobes and down again, rolling your head from one side to the other – we must wake up more boldly than we have been able or willing. As if God Almighty called us – in whatever way or no way that you imagine that call – at this particular moment, let us be a church awake to our potential to turn the world towards love. That’s why we’re here – let’s figure out together how to do it the way Michelangelo painted and Beethoven composed and Shakespeare wrote – with excellent and wakeful eyes and ears and hands and hearts.

We have had a decade and a half to remind us. Let us honor the memory of that day and all we lost by being a church that is no longer slow coming to wakeful but already awake! Let’s not ask what this church is doing for each of us, but how each somebody can walk in the door ready to serve the greater good – and then I promise, this church will be doing for you what you need it to do!

In peace and thanks, sympathy, hope, compassion and strength – let’s celebrate together who we are and who we are on the path to becoming.