

Water for the Tree of Forgiveness

September 16, 2018

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

OPENING WORDS Rev. John Hanley Morgan, *Hands of Friends*

You are welcome here, come in.

Drop your pebble of light
Upon these waters of life,
Watch its circle-ripple widen,
Widen, widen
Touching other rings,
All our insights.

Come ripple with us the waters of life.
Come be thoughtful,
Be home.

You are welcome here.

MEDITATION

This morning our meditation is one of silence and one of song. I invite you to sit for a time, together in the quiet of this sanctuary, to a stillness that is within you, even as sounds are around you, the creaks and disruptions that ask us to find our centers, even in the midst of the chaos that is life. This is our practice.

[SILENCE]

Here, here is our troubled world, full of moments rife with regret. We have hurt our earth. We have hurt each other. We are witness to both pain and disappointment. Injuries, disagreements, losses of all kinds, and yes – even death. And yet, and yet ... our hearts reach out for healing, for forgiveness, and for love. Always we are reaching out for love, and so – we pray. In the quiet of our loneliness, in the joy of our being together, in celebration of this life that we share, we pray – a simple longing to be made whole.

Meditation Music “We Pray” (Nick Page)

READING

Unblinking Witness

Meg Barnhouse, *Waking Up the Karma Fairy*

On the carport side of my house are two blue spots. The rest of the house is deep purple-gray. The spots mark the place where my ladder rested while I was doing the last bit of painting. I told myself I would let the paint dry and then take care of the spots. It has been a year and a half. I know the paint is dry by now, but I have some resistance to finishing. I want to figure out why this is.

Finishing would be depressing. I would then have to start on scraping, sanding, and painting the trim. When one job is finished, it is time for the next job. Maybe not finishing is a way of resting. That's part of it. I have no resistance to finishing writing jobs. I finish sermons and songs with ease. Cleaning jobs, now those I don't like to finish. I like leaving one dish still in the sink or out on the counter. It feels like a lie to pretend to finish a job like that. We all know dishwashing, cleaning, painting, any kind of maintenance is *never* finished.

Why not just make peace with the fact that I am fighting chaos constantly? Why do people pretend that they finish things like that? Why not leave a little chaos on purpose so I can let the Universe know I get the joke? That way I can feel I have some control in the unfinished nature of the situation. Yeah, that's it.

I remember looking at myself in the mirror, brushing my teeth. I must have been 12 or 13. It struck me that I was going to have to brush my teeth at least once a day until I died. Thousands of times. I was outraged.

The two spots of blue on my house feel like a rebellion. They say, "I know this job isn't finished, and it's never going to be. Raking leaves, brushing teeth, washing dishes, they have to be done over and over. Finishing is an illusion, and I know it. You haven't fooled me into acting as if I'm through, even for a minute."

Maybe I have to learn my steps in the dance of ongoing process. I talk a good game about letting go of control, acknowledging that the journey is the teacher, not the goal. But the two blue spots on the side of my house are a mute and unblinking witness to the fact that I still fight.

SERMON

Water for the Tree of Forgiveness

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

This past spring, I learned about a friend having been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and sadly and too soon, he has since passed away. During the visits we shared between his diagnosis and his dying,

the topic of forgiveness came up repeatedly. It's not surprising, is it? There is something about finite time that causes us to think back on our lives – what we've done well, and what we haven't. What we want to feel clear about at the end of the proverbial day.

This day is fragile; soon it will end. And once it has vanished it will not come again. [lyrics to this morning's offertory, *This Day*, Point of Grace]

What a gift, these days we are given ... and often it feels – even in the most challenging times – that there are too few of them. What is that joke about the two guys talking about a restaurant: the food here is terrible. Yeah, and the portions are so small!

Our lives – filled with days of great joy, filled with days of despair ... and too few. We are all aware they are not infinite, of course – though some of us are or are made to be more aware of that than others.

Writer and activist Audre Lorde writes of the deep reflection she experienced when faced with surgery to remove a possibly malignant tumor. *"In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my own mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for in my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light"*

Why is it, I wonder, we are so cavalier when we think we have forever? That the light we shine on our days, and ourselves, to be honest, is so much softer when we think they stretch out in a long line in front of us? Does age teach us the impact of our actions? Does it also remind us that arguing with life is like tilting at windmills?

You may know Don Quixote ...

"Fortune is guiding our affairs better than we ourselves could have wished," Don Quixote says to Sancho Panza. "Do you see over yonder ... thirty or forty hulking giants? I intend to do battle with them and slay them. With their spoils we shall begin to be rich, for this is a righteous war and the removal of so foul a brood from off the face of the earth is a service God will bless."

"Take care, sir," cried Sancho. "Those over there are not giants but windmills."

We tilt and tilt at what is not slayable ... not even, as it turns out, a giant!

I think that's why I loved Meg Barnhouse's essay, from her book *Waking Up the Karma Fairy*, with the two blue spots her sign of resistance. As long as they are there – those stark blue dots in a sea of purple – her work is not done. And maybe the image of unfinished tasks is more relatable than slaying windmills!

The dots are her illusion of control. They are her protection against the merciless light that requires our assessment. Don't be asking me about forgiveness. Don't you see my blue dots? I'm not done. It's so typical of us.

Meg speaks with a gentle southern accent. That, and her humor, effect a sort of snarky stubbornness. When I read her words, I hear her intention, "the two blue spots on the side of my house are a mute and unblinking witness that I still fight." Bless my heart, she might say.

But life is not infinite and even though we are not blameless, there is a bigger tree of forgiveness that needs our constant and repetitive tending, just like our teeth.

Sometimes I think it is our biggest task to forgive life itself for its rampant imperfections, even in the midst of great beauty. To refuse that, to ignore the chance to forgive, is both hubris and arrogance, as though our existence is somehow earned or deserved. This is all gift, my friends – borrowed for a time. Can we cut it some slack? It? Life? God?

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I mentioned last week that Sunday evening was the beginning of Rosh Hashanah – the Jewish New Year, which begins the 10 days of awe, during which the book of life is said to be open. God is said to be considering your next year, so it's best to be making amends for your wrongdoings: apologizing to those you have offended or shortchanged or hurt. The holiday culminates, of course, in Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, when the book is closed, the fate of another year determined.

I've always thought there was something refreshingly direct about this idea – that one takes the time to reflect, and to make right what was not right – a kind of annual reset button that requires an honest self-assessment and an effort to make amends directly. It also requires a willingness to forgive those in need.

Sometimes I wonder if it isn't easier to ask for forgiveness for ourselves than it is to forgive others.

There is a Buddhist story about two ex-prisoners of war who meet after many years. When the first one asks, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" the second man answers, "No, never." "Well then," the first man replies, "they still have you in prison."

If it's hard to forgive each other, and often difficult to forgive ourselves, it's certainly no less difficult to forgive life.

In any case, I am reminded that this tradition falls short around the practice of forgiveness in general. We don't have the rituals of creedal faiths.

Our Jewish friends have the high holy days; our Christian friends the regular practice of confession, either personal or general, and the offering of God's grace.

I think for us the practice of forgiveness is framed in our effort to see the world as it is, warts and all; to recognize that we are co-creators of the imperfection, and to work towards improving what we can. There is forgiveness implicit in knowing we cannot make it perfect, the proverbial one starfish at a time.

We have lost things: homes to fires or finance; jobs, lovers, children, health. This week alone: storms, flooding, gas explosions, shark attacks. We get angry or mourn, and sometimes rail against the realities; BUT we do not turn away from it. I see you, life – and sometimes I don't like you – but I forgive what you are plaguing me with, and – by the way – I love you, every gift of day of you.

And in this seeing, this knowing, is the first and always path to redemption for ourselves – that as we are willing to see the truth and accept it, and our inclusion in all of it – AND as we work to change what we can, we are watering the great tree of forgiveness.

Our Bartholomew story was about the first part – I'm sorry – which isn't always easy to say. Sometimes we almost choke on that, right (?), even when we truly feel the regret. [Story for All Ages: *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, by Dr. Seuss]

But as we are forgiven, we have to forgive this world – it is not passive acceptance, but tilting at what is real and can be changed while knowing that is not everything . . .

Let us not be held prisoner to our own expectations but receive life with open eyes and feisty resolve – our own “unblinking witness.”

This day is fragile; soon it will end. And once it has vanished it will not come again. So let us love, with a love pure and strong, before this day is gone.

CLOSING WORDS John Hanley Morgan, *Hands of Friends*

Go well into life now,
What days, what months, what years may be.

Go well into life,
The joy and hurt of all its moods.

Go well into life now.

And when you need us, always know that, here,
You will find the hands of friends.