

Please note, this is an interactive service and there are two moments where you will be asked to pause the video to allow conversation among the participants.

Please read the poem before the start of the video.

A Ritual to Read to Each Other BY WILLIAM E. STAFFORD

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
 or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
 the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
 should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

The Signals We Give

William E. Stafford was born in Kansas in 1914. Though very talented, he was a late bloomer. From 1942 to 1946 he lived with other conscientious objectors in work camps in Arkansas and California. He published first book of poetry at the age of 48.

The reviewer Gerald Burns wrote that Stafford's poems about humanity detail "what relation is possible between us and the frightening land buried under all that asphalt, and how such a peculiar people as ourselves can live together with something like dignity."

How countercultural, to write about the challenge of human contact, communication, and dignity for all. I love Stafford's poems because they are disconcerting and seem to point towards a moral compass I forgot to remember. He does not offer quick solutions or easy answers. Every poem, every time, I need to sit. What does it mean? What does it mean to me now? What about it makes me uneasy? (because there is often something in his poems to make me uneasy). And I go further to ask, "What is my place in this world?"

In a world of speed, urgency, high speed this and that, social media, and multiple platforms everything goes so fast. I can't be the only person in this room who remembers a day without cell phones. I miss those days. I was the last minister I knew not to get a cell phone. I waited so long that I outlasted pagers. I never had one of those either. I did not want to be found while driving, while walking, during dinner. I wanted and still want to, do one thing at one time. When I take too much in, I become a facile, careless processor. I disregard who I am and follow I am not always sure what or where.

Nowadays I feel like I blur and slide through the world, from one event, call, post, email, and picture to another. I struggle to sometimes lead rather than merely follow, and wonder what patterns I repeat, which gods I follow, and if there are small betrayals in my mind.

I think of this especially in an election year, as Americans divide farther into their camps. In a recent episode from the science podcast, Hidden Brain, host Shankar Vedantam interviews Kurt Gray, University of North Carolina social psychologist, researcher, and teacher. Gray researches how the human mind works when it feels under attack, particularly during political polarization.

As much as I think my political opinions have been rigorously tested and remain well-formed, I had doubts after this segment, and instead began to

wonder what I have assumed, what I have missed, and what else might not be true.

According to Gray humans think their “side” is smart and wants policy to help themselves and others. Moreover, we think our opponents are stupid and don’t appreciate what is best for self or country. Vedantam listened to Gray speak and noted that we think others are “sheepeople,” stupid, simple, ignorant, easily misled, and wrong.

I ask you to consider if any part of any opinion you hold includes the belief that others who do not agree with you are “sheepeople.” I was embarrassed at the times I have thought, in general, that people who disagree with me are ignorant. Our brains truly are deceiving us.

According to Gray we overestimate how much our “opponents” dislike us by 50 – 300% - and the more partisan we are, the more we inflate ideas about hatred from the other side. In addition, when we think people will hate us, we are more apt to cloak ourselves as “victims” and the other side as “villains.” Apparently, our brains like this model because it is cognitively simple, and our brains yearn for this kind of order. If we stretch this out, the consequences are spectacular. Please let your mind take a stroll through the personal, family, work, local, national, and world conflicts of our choosing and consider the impact if what even a portion of what Gray says is true. What would that mean?

I do think some things in this world are a fight for survival. I do think lives and livelihoods are at risk, and my guess is that even those of us here today, with our shared UU values, would not always agree about what those are. Moreover, some of us with more privilege, such as myself, a white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle aged woman with a college education, have more power and privileges so attempting this change is less risky. Those of us with more power, privilege and/or emotional energy should risk these changes first.

Gray notes that compromise means we need to talk with one another, and it is hard to listen or talk when it feels like a fight for survival. For years now I have been interested in what people who do not think like me actually believe. The older I get, the more I know I don't know. And so, I love the writing of William Stafford because he often writes about complicated moral issues without religious or political trappings. For me his words are a relief as I slide through a blur of work and images, following too easily in line after others.

Read Stafford's poem again, this time with another voice, or other voices. Pause the recording so you can listen.

Please read the poem again here.

(DISPLAY TEXT)

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

BY WILLIAM E. STAFFORD

If you don't know the kind of person I am

and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

Turn to a neighbor and share:

1. What words stand out for you in this poem.
2. What about this poem makes you uneasy?
3. What is your favorite part and why?

It is of course, fine to not participate with a partner in this exercise for any reason without having to explain yourself. You could choose to write or silently reflect. If you are in person and need someplace to hear better, please feel free to move outside the sanctuary. If you are from a historically marginalized identity and would like to speak with someone who might share some of your identities, search for those people. If you are online, and are interested you move into a break out room, or comment in the chat. Pause the recording to listen, and it helps to display the text on a screen.

Would anyone like to share an “aha” they had? I will pause again so you can listen to one another.

Andrea Gibson is a poet, writer, activist, performer, and the current poet laureate for the State of Colorado. They were born in Maine in 1975 and are a survivor of chronic Lyme Disease and ovarian cancer. The cancer returned in 2023.

Gibson is the only poet I regularly read, and they write about living deeper, and more honestly and joyfully than almost anyone I can remember. Their

gift shop has sweatshirts that read “Awkward is Awesome” and “Crying is my superpower”

Gibson writes, "I don't necessarily identify within a gender binary. I've never in my life really felt like a woman and I've certainly never felt like a man. I look at gender on a spectrum and I feel somewhere on that spectrum that's not landing on either side of that."

This morning you are either going to watch a video by Gibson from their Instagram channel, or listen to a reading. It is entitled “The Land of I Don’t Know.” (DISPLAY VIDEO)

(TEXT OF VIDEO)

Years ago, my therapist and I were talking about something that I had done that I really regretted.

And she said you know I think that most people are doing the best they can just about all the time. And I said, “Well then, most people’s best is terrible.” And she said, “Right, but that doesn’t mean they are not doing their best.” And for many years I had nothing but resistance to this idea. I feared that it would lead to a lack of accountability. I feared that if I believed people were doing their best, I would have more compassion for folks doing harm than for those who were impacted by that harm.

And then a couple of months ago while on a podcast I was asked How I defined a good person – and my answer surprised me. I did not say someone who is kind. I said someone who is trying to be kind.

And I want to pose a question for you today, “If you were to believe that people in general were doing the best they can, just about all the time, how would that impact your beliefs about the most effective ways to create a more just, compassionate, loving, and peaceful world.”

That question it stretches my mind so much it is a like a yoga class for my psyche and in turn my spirit. It transports me from the land of I know to the land of I don’t know. Which is for me, the most fertile land in existence.

Please turn towards a new neighbor and share your thoughts about the questions below. It will help if the text of the video is displayed.

1. What words or phrases stand out for you?
2. “If you were to believe that people in general were doing the best they can, just about all the time, how would that impact your beliefs about the most effective ways to create a more just, compassionate, loving, and peaceful world.”

And when you answer that second question, please do the work of imagining the first part is true so you can be challenged by the second part. Again, feel free to look for a partner who might share more of your identities, leave the room if you need to hear better, comment in chat,

move into breakout space, or choose to silently write or think on your own without explanation to. Pause the recording to listen

Any “aha’s” someone would like to share? Pause the recording to listen.

The first time I reflected on the question “If you were to believe that people in general were doing the best they can, just about all the time, how would that impact your beliefs about the most effective ways to create a more just, compassionate, loving, and peaceful world?” I stopped short. I could not take it in. I thought to myself, there is no way that (insert politician name, or country, or political party) is doing their best. Then I did what I asked you to do and imagined that the first part is true. Over time I proceeded to come up with things that surprised me.

I would have to slow down. I would have to listen longer and deeper in hopes that I could understand the core values of people who don’t agree with me. I would have to seek out more spaces with people unlike me and spend time in them and with the people I found there. I would need to creatively look for areas where I did share “ground” with people who do not agree with me. I would have to stop saying to myself and out loud that people who don’t agree with me are stupid or evil or don’t care about democracy. I would have to treat people who don’t agree with me with dignity. I would have to separate the totality of all political party views from individuals who are members of that party, because just like people who go to church, people who belong to a political party do not agree with all

parts of the party. I would have to practice more wonder and I would have to act in hope.

Somewhere I read that the morning William Stafford died he had written a poem containing the lines, "'You don't have to / prove anything,' my mother said. 'Just be ready / for what God sends.'"

At the rate of communication and information today, I don't think that I or anyone else have made much space for what God, if we believe in God, or the universe, sends. It is more likely that hurtling through space, with our noses lowered to a paper, book, or platform we have missed multiple stars. But, what is out there if we think deeper? What is out there if we stop following and pause to look around. Who would we find on the way and what would we learn? Who are we when we hold multiple truths, some irreconcilable, and rest with the dissonance? What happens when we listen to our neighbors, particularly the ones with different opinions? Could we be pencils in need of erasers? For those of us, like myself, with more privilege and power, we should go first. Others must be more cautious for their safety and well-being.

Please note that if we partake in this work, I did not say we need to compromise our values and agree with other people. We just need to respectfully listen. Nor did I suggest we place ourselves in situations where we will be ridiculed or harmed. I just suggested we find spaces to consider the respectful thoughts of other people, particularly the ones with whom we disagree. And just because we can't think of one space where

that might be in this moment, it doesn't mean it would not be worth the try. You don't have to prove anything. Just be ready. Just be ready.

Benediction

Go out into the world in peace

Have Courage

Hold on to what is good

Return to no person evil for evil

Strengthen the fainthearted

Support the weak

Help the suffering

Honor all persons

Recommended Hymns:

#1023 Building Bridges

#1017 Building a New Way