

Sermon: A LIFETIME ISN'T LONG ENOUGH
Rev. Mary J. Harrington - June 26, 2009

Tell me, the poet insists, what will engage you?
What does it take to get your attention?

The mystics of all time have understood that there is something in our nature that can pull us toward dull routine and habit, leading to numbness, forgetfulness, zoning out. The Bible frequently refers to us as sheep, and having personally raised sheep, I assure you this is not a compliment. We can easily become so caught up with busyness – jobs, homework, errands, meetings - that we tune out what really matters in our lives. For centuries religious leaders, poets and musicians - artists of every stripe - have been doing handsprings to get our attention and help us reawake to life at its heights and its depths.

The Sufis in particular will do almost anything to help people wake up. They believe some of the greatest sins are sloth and spiritual lethargy. Sufism is of course the mystical branch of Islam, but it can also be understood more widely. Sufis believe that we need special teachers to call us back to our true selves, and that these teachers can appear in any culture, in any time, and in any religious tradition.

The Sufi poet Rumi is anything but subtle:

*Come, take a pickaxe
And break apart
your stony self...
Batter down the door...
Unstop the wine jar...
Smash the jug
and come to the river!*

Sometimes I think it would take a pickaxe to get my attention. Whenever I don't spend enough time outside, in the woods or at a beach, I become distracted and scattered. And what would life be without music, and friends to share it with? How could you forget music? But when I'm on automatic pilot, just going through the motions, I can forget a lot of wonderful and important things, even things that bring me joy.

I know I am not alone in this, small comfort though that may be. People seem more wound up or more run down these days, more spiritually and emotionally disconnected either way. There are all the worries in our personal lives, and so much in our world that is going wrong – so much that cries out for our clear seeing, our justice-seeking, our deep attention.

Yet as poet, activist and Trappist monk Thomas Merton warns, *There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence, and that is activism and overwork...To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects...is to succumb to violence.*

The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace because it kills the root of the inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

I'm not saying we have to choose, because we can't choose, between having a rich inner life and a fierce commitment to justice- to be meaningful, each must be grounded in the strength of the other. But I think we UU's sometimes equate taking time for rest and reflection with the sin of self-indulgence.

Not long ago a gifted, passionate colleague asked me to meet with him because he felt completely overwhelmed by all he had on his plate. He just didn't know where to start or how to find even five minutes of down time to relax, let alone meditate or pray. It took me almost an hour to get through. Through his anxiety over so many things on his "to do" list. Through his despair that there could be any relief. Through the resistance and "yes-but's" to every small suggestion. I wish I had had a pickaxe!

What he had forgotten, what I sometimes forget, is that having an inner life is not a luxury, it is not a recreational option, it is a necessity. It is in fact a moral and spiritual imperative. No matter how many compelling family, school or work responsibilities we may have, this is in fact our greatest responsibility: to be awake to the reality Mary Oliver reminds us of, that even "a lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world". You are part of the beauty of this world, full of rubies - exquisite jewels without price - which no one will ever enjoy, not even you, if they stay locked inside. There is a communal responsibility to share your treasure with others. It is a pressing responsibility of the greatest magnitude. It is holy work.

To risk the obvious, if you take the word "responsibility" apart, it literally means "the ability to respond" – response ability. What are we spiritually responsible for? Like the poet's mother, we often carry our lives, our inner riches, like they were heavier than iron, lugging them from room to room, as if they were burdens rather than our unique and extraordinary selves.

Yet what happens when we smash the jug and come to the river? What happens when we consider all the creation is calling us to? For me poetry is often a kind of spiritual pickaxe that breaks me open - shakes me up and rearranges my priorities. So in honor of the poets like my son Sam and other great teachers, I'd like to suggest seven kinds of being responsible.

One is to remember that we have a body and that it is good. It is so good, in fact, that even the spirit, says Mary Oliver, likes to dress up like us, "ten fingers, ten toes, shoulders and all the rest". We have all of these ways to touch and connect and experience the world. Even an ant knows that. Its tongue is perfectly designed to draw in and taste all that sweetness. We were given at least five senses so we too can taste, and see and listen and dance, make love and sing.

I was diagnosed with a very serious illness, with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, three years ago. As you can imagine, finding out I had this illness was devastating. Almost overnight

I lost my sense of having a future and also a lot of my identity, the ways I knew myself as an independent person; self-sufficient, healthy and in charge of myself. I was in a complete state of shock - disoriented, terrified and heartbroken, especially for my husband and my children.

I have found it takes vigilance, focusing on living in the moment and what I care about and love most, to keep this illness from defeating my spirit, from taking me over, including my truest, deepest self. To keep realizing as colleague Mark Belletini reminds me, “Mary, you are not your diagnosis.”

It’s still hard to talk about. But this is what I know for sure.

We are so lucky. Somehow we got here, each of us sitting here tonight; somehow we got a body, got to have a life. Got to have a human life, be alive. How amazing, that we are here, right now, that there is a “here”. As Meister Eckhart, the 13th century Christian mystic, wrote: “If the only prayer you say in your entire life is ‘Thank you’, that would suffice.”

Feeling and expressing gratitude is a second spiritual responsibility. It would even, Eckhart says, be enough. In his cosmology, that’s all it would take to make God happy. But when the water in our jug is low and brackish, we do not have even the trim or feistiness of a moth to offer this prayer of gratitude in a meaningful way. We are not capable of fulfilling that responsibility.

Thank You.

Then, there are those hummingbirds. There are those squirrels raiding the birdfeeder. There are those egrets in the ditch. We are supposed to notice these things! *Stare hard*, the poet insists. This is an enormous, glorious responsibility.

I don’t regret any of those times I was late because I found a bird or small animal that was injured and drove it to the wild animal rescue. I don’t regret my ruined panty hose and shoes from chasing a hobbling blue jay through a field of nettles until I got it into a shoebox. Until I literally couldn’t do it any more, this was one of my most cherished, self-chosen responsibilities. At one time we had baby bottles for every size of creature from a little bunny to a pushy lamb. Birds are especially fragile and often didn’t make it, but every once in a while there was the thrill of holding that tiny heartbeat between my hands and then watching it fly away.

Fourth, we have the capacity for perspective – to see all around us that nothing lasts. We are able to be aware of our mortality and fragility, in ways that we humans imagine no other creatures can. We can perceive how all beings are interrelated, how we are part of everything.

Marty and I have gone to Maine in the summer for eleven years now, and until recently I would set out in our red canoe very late at night, drifting in Seal Cove. The water was completely still. So still I hardly needed a paddle. The air was still too, and warm and

heavy with the scent of the sea. It was very, very dark and you could hear the fish jumping and the seals barking and splashing. High above the entire night sky was so blanketed with stars there was almost no room for the sky part. It was an experience of timelessness and peace that completely enveloped me. And reflected in the water all around me were those same millions of stars, sparkling on the surface. I felt so small, absolutely alone and solitary, and yet part of something ancient and immense.

You can't stay in those wild places forever, but you can go to them when you have the chance, and you can salt your mind and heart with their memory so that when you need to focus on something beautiful and strong, those times will come to you and be a mercy and a balm.

Another responsibility we have is to acknowledge the past, find healing for our spirits, and then walk away. Refuse to be complicit with those forces that hold us back, keep on hurting us through memory and grievance. Sweep the floor clean, then close the door. Don't take that iron thing with you. This is your life. You are responsible. There is too much beauty for even a lifetime of noticing and wonderment. All of these riches have been entrusted to your senses, for the little time you will be among us.

I know it's not easy to let go and move on. Relationships with other people are the hardest part of living, and I don't think after 57 years that it's gotten any easier. We are all hopelessly eccentric - quirky, distinctive, particular. You can't really figure someone else out, no matter how hard you try. And just when you think you've gotten it right, things change. When I am over the top with frustration, fury or despair, I ask myself this one question, when I can remember: *What is the most loving thing I can do right now?*

It's difficult to think to do this. It's sometimes infuriating to contemplate. The answers don't always come right away or even make sense. But when I have remembered, and when I have acted on love in the present moment no matter what, I have never been sorry.

Another charge we have as loving souls is to claim and experience our own grief, the losses of our lives. To lean into them rather than push them away, to be their kith and kin, like a sister or brother. For losses will surely come and their impact will surely remain, and they belong to us. We are responsible to make a home for them inside ourselves, not give over the whole house, but as poet Denise Levertov puts it, to invite our grief in like a dog that has been hanging around the back porch. Give this faithful, lingering dog of your grief a mat on the kitchen floor and her own water dish – his rightful place in your life's story.

It's also vitally important to care for our own people, and to bury our own dead. To sit with and comfort and companion someone who is very ill. To kiss them goodbye at the end. To wash and dress their body. To speak or sing at their memorial service, if you can. To run your fingers through their ashes, to pick up a lump of earth and crumble it gingerly into their grave. This used to happen all the time, you know. We had no choice, we humans. Now everything can be handled by others, by professionals, and sometimes this is either unavoidable or desirable. But never will I forget lowering a handful of my

mother's ashes into the blue green waters of Lake Michigan, our common spiritual home, and watching as they turned silver and luminous and swelled into a cloud of such breathtaking beauty I knew we had given her back to life, where she came from, forever.

The seventh responsibility - solitude, rest and Sabbath time - these are what make it possible to be responsible at all, for anything that matters. Whatever brings us alive, nourishes us – art, beauty, poetry, music, good cooking, watching beetles, feeling the wind - we don't just *get* to take time for these things, they are essential.

We're fortunate as Unitarian Universalists that there are more and more opportunities for us to develop our own unique spiritual practices. One of these is a retreat center in upstate New York, where I went five or six years ago. I arrived on the opening night feeling wrung out and ready for a change of scene. On that first morning when I woke up in the old farmhouse where we were staying, I gathered my things and headed for the shower. It was a chilly morning and the hot water streaming down my back felt stinging good. I stayed in there a long time warming up. I have some of my best thoughts in the shower, epiphanies even.

This particular time I was keenly aware of missing my beloved friend Elizabeth who had died not long before. I thought how much she would have enjoyed this particular retreat because she was a poet and so was one of our leaders. Then I just felt so sad, thinking about how she would never be going to another retreat of *any* kind, or feeling hot water on her skin, or waking up in a farmhouse.

When I stepped out of the shower, I saw the huge fluffy towel, folded so neatly, and my favorite robe draped over a chair, waiting for me. For some reason, seeing these made me unspeakably happy. I thought how some day I won't be here either; a time will come when I will never take another shower, but I could so vividly picture my beautiful daughter Julia putting on her favorite robe, and then maybe my granddaughter, and hopefully, a long line of others after that. And at that very moment I thought: *It's just life.*

It's just life. Inside that little temple I felt so clearly less myself than part of everything.

My whole life I've been part of the liberal church; to put it in terms of plants, or cars, I'm a fifth generation UU hybrid. Everyone here will have their own religious understandings and spiritual practices, those jewels you carry in your mind and heart. The faith I was raised with came to me from people like you: you who are ministers, my beloved colleagues, and also those of you who are Sunday school teachers and youth advisors - older, wiser friends - and from my childhood and youth group friends growing up. Thank you with all my heart. This is the essence of what I internalized, from my religious upbringing:

Everything and everyone is connected; we are responsible to each other.

It's very important to be a good person; it's not always possible but that should never stop us from trying.

Curiosity, courage, kindness and humility create a life of both integrity and joy.

Suffering and grief can happen to anyone and are not deserved.

Healing is always possible.

There are countless ways to experience the Holy and the Sacred.

Life on earth is astounding, beautiful and enough.

We are in good hands; Love underlies everything.

When all is said and done, it's a vast and endless Mystery.

As a minister I have learned that someone's faith is tested most when faced with trauma or tragedy. I can speak only for myself but as I have struggled with this illness, and as I have tried to see clearly injustice in our world, and bear witness and take action together with people like you, this faith has held. Held up. Held me. Held together. It has been enough, and as Buddhists like to say, enough is a feast. I pray this is so for you too.

When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields.

Live with the beetle and the wind.

This is an enormous, glorious responsibility.

This is persistent, holy, transforming work.

Amen.