

New Possibilities in an Uncertain World
South Nassau UU Congregation
September 28, 2014
A service by Laurie Stuart

CALL TO WORSHIP

*Once more, the earth has turned toward the sun.
As we are bathed in the light of a new day,
So may we greet the dawning of fresh possibility.*

*Once more, we awaken from our slumber.
As our bodies rise
To meet the challenges and pleasures of living,
So may our hearts and minds open with promise.*

*Once more, we gather for worship.
As we join our voices in word and song,
So may this assembly bring forth wholeness.*

Come, let us worship and be transformed together.
Amy Bowden Freedman, adapted

CHALICE LIGHTING:

*Divine spark from sacred dark
Symbol of our holy intent
Illuminate this hour.*

—Kathy Huff

Meditation:

For a breath or three, be aware of what's generally happening in your mind and body without trying to change it. Find an intimacy with yourself.

Start by relaxing, letting your breathing soften and slow. Disengage from any worried thinking. Let go of any tension. Touch on a sense of strength and recognize protections such as friends nearby. Notice that you're all right, right now. Rest in a growing peace.

Bring to mind one or more things you are grateful for or glad about. Think of something that makes you feel happy. Sense the fullness already present in this moment. Rest in a growing contentment.

Bring to mind one or more people (or a pet) who care about you. Let yourself feel appreciated, liked or loved. Be aware of your own warmth and caring for others.

Rest in a growing love.

Then get a sense of peace, contentment, and love woven together in your mind, three aspects of a single whole experience of ease and homecoming. Rest in the responsive mind. If you like, imagine moving through your day in this responsive way.

Finish up with another breath or two while you sense that peace, contentment, and love are sinking into you.

Rick Hanson, Hardwiring Happiness, page 176

Responsive Reading #670: The Way by Edwin Muir

MINISTER: Friend, I have lost the way.

CONGREGATION: The way leads on.

MINISTER: Is there another way?

CONGREGATION: The way is one.

MINISTER: I must retrace the track.

CONGREGATION: It's lost and gone.

MINISTER: Back, I must travel back!

CONGREGATION: None goes there, none.

MINISTER: Then I'll make here my place.

CONGREGATION: The road runs on.

MINISTER: Stand still and set my face.

CONGREGATION: The road leaps on.

MINISTER: Stay here, forever stay.

CONGREGATION: None stays here, none.

MINISTER: I cannot find the way.

CONGREGATION: The way leads on.

MINISTER: Oh, places I have passed!

CONGREGATION: That journey's done.

MINISTER: And what will come at last?

CONGREGATION: The way leads on.

Sermon: Starting Fresh in the Face of Uncertainty

A year ago August, I arrived in the Pacific Northwest for my internship. My husband Stephen and I had packed up my Toyota Prius with musical instruments and clothes, and made our way some 3600 miles from the Upper Delaware River Valley in New York State where I have been living since graduating from college. I was delighted when we first pulled into Port Townsend, WA. My joy was palatable. Three days later, I put Stephen on an airport shuttle to Seattle where he would fly home and I began my internship at the Quimper UU Fellowship in earnest.

My first sermon was on the Sunday following Yom Kippur. In honor of that Jewish Day of Atonement, I challenged myself and the congregation to begin afresh, as if we truly had made peace with everything that has come before.

My path to ministry has been a long one, with 35 years as a newspaper publisher and during that time 12 years as a consulting minister at a small UU fellowship. Getting away to seminary in 2007 was a challenge and excusing myself for my internship year was nothing short of a miracle.

For a time, I was delighted with every new adventure, every blackberry bush I passed, and all of the possibility that stood before me. But somewhere around 12 weeks in, I got discouraged, fell into some old habits of limited thinking, and began to believe that we really can't change our lives, even when we move ourselves across the country and devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the process.

Dr. Rick Hanson, in his book "Hardwiring Happiness," says that our brains are prone to hang onto negative thoughts rather than positive ones. "If your boss gives you an excellent performance review that contains just one piece of critical feedback, you'll likely focus on that one negative comment. Negative stimuli are perceived more rapidly and easily than positive stimuli." (Hardwiring Happiness, page 21)

Our brains are always on the lookout for potential dangers or losses. It is a survival mechanism. "Our ancestors," he writes, "could make two kinds of mistakes: (1) thinking there was a tiger in the bushes when there wasn't one, and (2) thinking there was no tiger in the bushes when there actually was one. The cost of the first mistake was needless anxiety, while the cost of the second one was death." (page 22)

Consequently, we evolved a negativity bias that not only affects our perception of our reality, but it releases chemicals and thus strengthens and intensifies our sensitivity to negative stimuli.

But, he says, we can do exercises, like our meditation, to savor our positive experience, bring them into our bodies and thus change the neural pathways in our brains to become more responsive to positive stimuli and less reactive to the negative. This, he says, will change our experience. “Our sense of ourselves will be one that is safe, satisfied and connected, instead of unsafe, dissatisfied and disconnected. Our view of the world will be protection, sufficiency, and inclusion rather than danger, scarcity and exclusion. We will cope through asserting, aspiring and caring rather than resisting, grasping and clinging. Our central experience will be peace, contentment and love rather than fear, frustration and heartache.” (Page 51) In short, we’ll become more resilient and recover from stresses that we face in this uncertain world.

Back to my story.

So I entered the congregation with great guns, and not surprisingly, there was a bit of push back. For some, my enthusiasm to just jump in was seen as not respectful of the congregational norms. I didn’t spend enough time getting the lay of the land, some said. Some wondered whether my enthusiasm was genuine.

I took it a bit hard, (of course I did, right, that’s what our brains do) and became discouraged. I would never learn how to be an effective minister. Looking at this through a theological lens, I identified that I was participating in Calvinistic thinking, which is pretty funny for a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. (Universalism was born as an antithesis of Calvinism, which said if you weren’t on God’s list at the beginning, no matter what you did in your life, you were doomed. Such was my thinking.)

At the same time, there were synchronistic, important relationships with great potential happening. Early on, I met a man in the congregation who is a process theologian.

I had learned a bit about process theology in my UU Theology course at Starr King School for the Ministry. While I knew little about the mechanics and the details, I identified that everything is relational and in a process. I felt that I lived that philosophy and that it forms the basis of my call to ministry. Excitingly, this theologian wanted to meet with me because he found my first sermon filled with an embodiment of process theology. Yippee!

We began to meet weekly and I learned more details about the work of Alfred North Whitehead, a mathematician who wrote in 1929 a dense book called “Process and Reality.” In it, he explained his theory of reality as a series of feeling, experiencing and decision making, that coalesce in each moment, become concrete (and finalized in a way) and then inform the next moment in a process of becoming.

Whitehead moves away from the dualistic idea that matter is acted on and posits that all entities are interconnected, each feeling, experiencing, deciding and responding. Of course, in his complex system, words like experiencing need to be stretched. And he is not saying that all entities have consciousness. But he is saying that all entities are momentary events that perish immediately upon coming into being. And what we perceive as matter is the outcome of momentary events.

In every moment, there is a multitude of outcomes and based on these instantaneous decisions on the part of each entity, a basis for future entities is created. That particular “occasion of experiencing,” as Whitehead would call it, becomes concrete, and dies away, while informing the next moment. Everything is relational; everything is dependent on everything else.

This is an important philosophy and one that gives the UU seventh principle of respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, some empirical grounding, if we were to take the principle away from its passive respect and fully acknowledge it as fundamental reality.

Sounds good, right. And so what?

Robert Mesle, a contemporary process philosopher, in his book “Process-Relational Philosophy” writes “there is urgency in coming to see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, so [we understand] that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us. (page 9) “If reality is interconnected, relational and dynamic, then thinking solely in terms of separation and a changeless being is dangerous.” (Process-Relational Philosophy, page 11)

Process thinking “requires us to challenge and reject the prevailing philosophies and theologies that give primacy to Being over Becoming. (Descartes’ philosophy that ‘I think therefore I am’ creates a world of separate beings that are not relational and not in a dynamic process, which makes it possible for us to elevate values, such as profit and power, over relationship and what is good for the whole.) It favors independence over relatedness, things over processes and promotes the idea that the human spirit is fundamentally isolated from the social and natural web in which we clearly all live, move and are becoming. It is fundamentally flawed and dangerous to our survival.”

My own curiosity about process theology came when I read an article by Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian minister, who came slightly after Whitehead, and who had a heavy emphasis on the empirical method and the emergence of values in society. In it, he surmised that Jesus was a catalytic agent who could move people to really connect with one another, to truly walk in each other shoes. And when that happens, a creative transformation can take place.

Here's a passage from his article *The Human Predicament* that I thought was fascinating:

“Something about this man Jesus broke the atomic exclusiveness of those individuals so that they were deeply and freely receptive and responsive each to the other. He split the atom of human egosim, not by psychological tricks, not by intelligent understanding, but simply by being the kind of person he was, combined with the social, psychological, and historical situation of the time and the heritage of Hebrew prophecy.

“... But this was not all; something else followed from it. The thought and feelings, let us say the meanings, thus derived by each from the other, were integrated with what each had preciousy acquired. Thus each was transformed, lifted to a higher level of human fulfillment. Each became more of a mind and a person, with more capacity to understand, to appreciate, to act with power and insight, for this is the way human personality is generated and magnified and life rendered more nobly human.”

(The Human Predicament, Henry Nelson Wieman, Process Theology, basic writings, Newman Press, New York, 1971)

In short, creative transformation emerges when we see ourselves as radically interconnected and relational, and when we understand that everything is in process. (This concept is really important for our work together this year. If it's true that radical connections can form creative transformation; it's kind of a superpower that we can utilize this year!)

So you can imagine my chagrin when I became so discouraged and so sure that I would never be able to learn whatever it is that I think I need to. How could I hold that everything is process and think that I couldn't move forward?

I saw my predicament as a crisis of faith and took myself out to the wooded paths by my home and challenged myself to look for evidence of a “becoming” in the forest. (My theory is that if process theology is actually my belief system, then it has to help me when I am in need of spiritual support.)

On this particular day, my mind was whirling, wound up so tight that in the beginning I was stomping through the woods without actually seeing anything. Mindfully, I sat down and leaned my back against a tree, willing my mind, forcing myself to listen and be with the forest as a whole, and, in particular, to one individual tree.

When I finally quieted down, I found myself aware of a ordinary tree in a small public woods in Port Townsend. This was not some great redwood in Muir Woods that holds the awe of others. And yet, I saw that it was connected, connected to a whole forest system. Modest, alive, growing, doing what it had been created to do. Filtering

sunlight, being a home for bugs and other beings, exchanging carbon dioxide for oxygen. And helping me, in that moment, to understand becoming. Helping me to see that I was in the process of becoming, and that I would figure out how to become an effective minister.

My next thought was that there was no real difference in terms of living, simple living, between being great or being small. And I understood that the outcome of either being great or being small was not based solely on natural abilities, but rather the ability to be present and in tune with the flow of the becoming.

It's simple, and true. When we get clear, we can be in the flow, we can be open to possibilities. We can know that the road leads on and that we can't stay where we are, as in the responsive reading. You can't step into the same river twice; it's a zen koan; it's a process theology thought.

But in the face of inequities growing wider and wider everyday, (or complex congregational dynamics and transitions) how do we stay in that positive frame of mind? How do we maintain a state of responsiveness and not reactivity?

Rick Hanson talks about we can enhance our brains' ability for responsiveness and ultimately happiness by savoring moments when good is happening. He uses the acronym HEAL to explain how we can train and hardwire our brains, or systematically change our experience-dependent neuroplasticity, if you want more precise language. (The basis of neural science and our ability to alter our perceptions comes from the physiological makeup of our brain and its ability to form and reform neural connections, as can happen with stroke victims.)

Step 1, he says, is to "Have the experience." Notice a positive experience that's already present in the foreground or background of your awareness, such as a physical pleasure, a sense of determination, or feeling close to someone. Or create a positive experience for yourself. Think about things for which you're grateful, bring to mind a friend, or recognize a task you've completed.

Step 2 is to enrich it. To do this you need to stay with the positive experience for five to ten second or longer. Open to the feelings in it and try to sense it in your body; let it fill your mind. Enjoy it. Gently encourage the experience to be more intense. Find something fresh or novel about it. Recognize how it's personally relevant, how it could nourish or help you, or make a difference in your life.

Step 3 is to absorb it. To do this he says to intend and sense that the experience is sinking into you as you sink into it. Let it really land in your mind.

Step 4 is to link positive and negative materials. While having a vivid and stable sense of a positive experience in the foreground of awareness, also be aware of something negative in the background. For example, when you feel included and liked, you could sense this experience making contact with feelings of loneliness from your past. But if the negative material hijacks your attention, drop it and focus only on the positive.

These steps, he says, have a proven scientific power to change your brain and your life for the better. Having positive experiences, enhancing them, absorbing them and linking them to help mitigate negative ones is very powerful for a person. Additionally, this practice has implications that move beyond the individual to the wider world.

In the conclusion of his book, Hanson notes that the reactive mode of the brain has worked well for survival for most of the human history. But circumstances are different. “We have armed a Stone Age brain with nuclear weapons. And the fearful, greedy and self-centered reactive setting of the brain promotes a kind of gorging of the earth’s limited resources that is causing deforestation, mass extinctions, and global warming.” (Hardwiring Happiness, page 221)

In order to continue our survival, we need to change our inner beings. The tiger that we need to avoid is our reactive brains.

Process theology, relational philosophy, comes at this same transformation through the outside world. It posits that we need to challenge the underlying premise of human domination, our being in the world and the systems we have created based on these assumptions. Process theologians, like neural scientists, are adamant that this fundamental shift is necessary for the survival of our species. Seeing reality as a connected whole will change the nature of our environmental ethics, religious pluralism and most importantly economics.

Shifting away from our negative biases and reactive minds, supports this transformation.

Sometimes it might seem like we have lost our way, but in my theology and in my experience, there is a connectedness, a creative transformational flow of our lives that leads us onward and is unique and supportive of our becoming and the becoming of all things.

We live in a relational and dynamic universe and we celebrate that connection and transformative power this morning. As we move through our transitional year together, I press upon you to remember that everything is a process. That each moment is created anew. That this idea that our lives are a series of becomings is amazing helpful to “the could haves and should haves” moments in our lives. Yesterday, I wondered if process thinking was like music – that a note sounds and it is done. That it informs the next in a

brand new configuration. When I remember that I am becoming, one moment at a time, I see possibilities. I am not trapped by my history, by my circumstance. And as we truly see the other, walk in each other's shoes we become the best of our human selves. It is a moment of creative transformation. This is the promise in the present moment. This is the actualization of each of our becomings, separate and intimately related.

May it be so.

Closing Words:

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,

And the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:

You are not alone.

Wayne B. Arnason (#698, Singing the Living Tradition)

Chalice Extinguishing:

We extinguish this flame,

but not our sense of connection

or our desire to be positive

in our aching world

These we hold close

And allow them to stir

our hearts, minds and bodies

Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is manuscript version of the service given by Laurie Stuart on September 28, 2014. The spoken service may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

References:

Rick Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness* (Harmony Books, New York, NY, 2013)

C. Robert Mesle. *Process-Relational Philosophy, An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead* (Templeton Press, West Conshohocken, PA, 2008)

Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Human Predicament, Process Theology, basic writings* (Newman Press, New York, 1971)