HOW CAN ONE DEVELOP REVERENCE FOR ALL EXISTENCE?
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg
March 27, 2016
Rev. Jack Donovan

READING (see below)
Rolling Away the Stone, Hymnal Reading #628
William Ellery Channing’s Character by Margaret Fuller
Three Cheers for Susan B. Anthony by Clara Barton
Jesus’ Two Resurrections – from the Gospels: Matthew 15, Mark 16, John 21

SERMON

Alisun and I were on vacation last week in North Carolina – visiting friends, reading, touring restaurants and art galleries – and exploring the Blue Ridge Mountains – almost heaven, the song says – country roads around mountains, down ridges, fading to blue. Though for me, I love even more the coast and gulf - the bombing pelicans, the dancing dolphins, the knifing shark fin, the muzzling manatee, the profligate shells, the beauty on the beach. We can love it all.

Today we come to the end of a seven month sermon series on the dimensions of spiritual being. We conclude by exploring our potential to feel and live with reverence for the interdependent web of existence. Reverence – the fulfillment of the human potential to experience and even abide in a stunning sense of union and communion with Being and all its forms of being. Reverence because the stuff of existence is the stuff of us and the potential of everything – the energy, the matter, the natural evolutionary laws – and everything influences everything as each part seeks its fulfillment, however understood. Almost heaven. Or maybe not just Almost.

But how to fulfill this at least nearly divine potential?

With reverence on my mind while in an art shop in Asheville last week, a telephone memo card on the sales rack caught my eye. Its caption read, “While You Were Out of Body...”. It had a scattering of little carton clouds and little cartoon angels helicoptering around a check list. I thought, This might help with how to develop reverence. It read in full: “While You Were Out of Body: checkbox one -Your Guide Called; checkbox two, The Gods Returned Your Calls; checkbox three, Your Inner Child Stopped By To See You; checkbox four, Please Calleth; checkbox five, Aura You Available???
Our Opening Words this morning can remind us, we each have our own pain, regret, suffering. Our hearts can be in their clutches – holding us down, keeping us entombed away from the fullness of light and life. How do we roll away the stone between our hearts’ energies and all that really is our life? How do we fulfill love for the universe in a way that survives anger, despair, sorrow, even death? How do we come out of our shell and use the gracious power of life to its fullest and to fulfillment?

On this day of Easter Sunday, Earth celebrates the seemingly perennial sprouting of new life; and humankind celebrates the seemingly eternal resurrection of the potentials of the human spirit. There is hope in another chance and then still another chance.

We can look first to the exemplars of that resurrection, who did help build the common good and who did make their own days glad, and many others.

Consider the blessings, and the qualities by which they were given, of William Ellery Channing and no less of Margaret Fuller who wrote about them: “Gentle, simple, harmonious, easy to love, a happiness to know, a creative spirit working everywhere, so true a respect for woman in religious reverence of a soul with an immortal destiny, a check upon evil, a prophet of a better age already dawning, a pure intent, a steadfast patience, a mild wisdom of age, an ingenuous sweetness of youth, a purifying influence.”

Notice in the midst of the list, “reverence of a soul with an immortal destiny”. That is a statement of how to develop reverence for life – yet there is a how beneath that how which we must know if we are to learn. Reverence is our goal. But how do we get there?

One clue is in Channing’s daily prayer: Keep my soul open and give me more light. Keep my soul open and give me more light. To grow, we can adopt a good goal. To grow, we can adapt a good prayer.

Consider the blessings, and the people and qualities by which they were given, of Susan B. Anthony and no less of Clara Barton who wrote about them: “to make their way to the front to reach you in your misery and nurse you back to life, to suffer opposition, obloquy, toil and pain in order to openly claim that women had rights and should have the privilege to exercise them, even the right and the courage to go to the front and drag
the wounded men out of the trench and try to save them for their families and their country, to cool your fevered brows, staunch your bleeding wounds, give food to your famished bodies, water to your parched lips, call back life to your perishing bodies – so unhelped, unprotected, so maligned, yet no one deserves so well.”

This to me is about resurrection on many levels – and it’s about reverence for life. To grow, emulate. To grow, fight like hell for the living. To grow, go.

It’s Easter. Lent and Spring are over. The seed is in the ground; its heart has escaped from its entombing chaff; its spirit is sprouting and aspiring, drawn to the light to begin again. That is resurrection. Grow!

A non-Jew begged Jesus for help. He called her a dog. She claimed even dogs are fed from God’s table and in the instant her faith changed his spirit to include all peoples in his care. He was resurrected from a narrow culture-bound tomb by seeing the light of courage and humility and faith in life’s power where he did not know they shined – and by that light he became a spirit of universal love – and indeed, a Universalist. That was his first resurrection, his first rebirth, if you don’t count his bar mitzvah or his baptism.

To grow, encounter other people’s needs and worth and truth. To grow, push out of the box you now rest in.

And at his second resurrection, the one we remember today, his spirit was resurrected in the souls and spirits of his followers and it sent them, as fitting for spirits of universal love, to all Creation to help everyone realize the presence of life-giving power in all and the nearness of heaven in those who use it as it is freely given.

To grow, remember the best. To grow, realize the power within and let it rise. If the thick-skulled apostles could learn to use the universe’s abundance of grace graciously by simple acts of caring and sharing and encouraging, why not? Why not us? Why not grow?

Perhaps the last step is will power, overcoming the resistance based on our fears in a competitive world. It took the apostles several years of training. Psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo, an authority on meditation advocates using meditation to develop an attitude, an inner posture, a presence as the path to fulfillment. He writes, “This presence or mode of being transforms
whatever it touches:” Movement to dance; stillness to living sculpture; thinking to the highest intuition; sensing to merging with the miracle of being; feeling to love; singing to sacred utterance; speaking to prayer and poetry; ordinary doings to rituals in the name of God or celebrations of existence. In a word, appreciation. Grow appreciative.

Psycho-analysts and meditation teachers alike say it takes intention and practice and time, but all can do it. If it is your duty to wash the dishes, says the teacher, make it your enchanted pleasure to wash the dishes as time and space dissolve in warm water and soapy bubbles. Explore every moment as if for the first time, like a child, with a beginner’s mind.

Here is a final list, building on that memo card from the Blue Ridge Mountains and gleaned from here and there: Watch a child watch sunbeams and kittens being born. Be youth in field, forest, and town. Be mesmerized by the light and sound of brooks and trees dancing in sunlight. Bring consciousness to everything. Invest fully in what is before you.

Be happy at the flourishing of all things, especially of what’s been hurt. Listen for Earth’s call. Have faith in the limitlessness of love. Feel the power of life in you to use to make life good. See the beautiful everywhere and help it be radiant. Be an oasis. Remember that Earth is your mother. Keep your soul open to the light – receive more.

Review your life regularly and make peace with gain and loss, birth and death. Trace the thread of existence from your DNA to your parents to their ancestors to their elements to their atoms to their energy to their Source. Realize, Thou art that. Let yourself feel how you are blessed. Make friends. Give thanks.

Enjoy Easter.
In this reading, the great Transcendentalist Unitarian Margaret Fuller is writing about the Reverend William Ellery Channing, the Boston minister who led the founding of the American Unitarian Church as to its religious purpose, process, and theology, upon his death in 1842:

“His private character was gentle, simple, and perfectly harmonious, though somewhat rigid and restricted in its operations. It was easy to love, and a happiness to know him, though never, I think, a source of the highest social pleasure to be with him. His department was ethics; and as a literary companion, he did not throw himself heartily into the works of creative genius, but looked, wherever he read, for a moral. I have heard it said, that under changed conditions, he might have been a poet. He had, indeed, the poetical sense of a creative spirit working everywhere. Man and nature were living to him; and though he did not yield to sentiment in particulars, he did in universals.

“He was deeply interesting to me as having so true a respect for woman. This feeling in him was not chivalrous; it was not the sentiment of an artist; it was not the affectionateness of the common son of Adam, who knows that only her presence can mitigate his loneliness; but it was a religious reverence. To him she was a soul with an immortal destiny. Nor was there at the bottom of his heart one grain of masculine assumption. He did not wish that Man should protect her, but that God should protect her and teach her the meaning of her lot.

“In his public relations he is to be regarded not only as a check upon the evil tendencies of his era, but yet more as a prophet of a better age already dawning as he leaves us. His morning prayer was, ‘Give me more light;
keep my soul open to the light’; and it was answered. He steered his middle
course with sails spotless and untorn. He was preserved in a wonderful
degree from the prejudices of his own past, the passions of the present, and
the exaggerations of those who look forward to the future. In the writings
where, after long and patient survey, he sums up the evidence on both
sides, and stands umpire, with the judicial authority of a pure intent, a
steadfast patience, and a long experience, the mild wisdom of age is
beautifully tempered by the ingenuous sweetness of youth. These pieces
resemble charges to a jury; they have always been heard with affectionate
defereence, if not with assent, and have exerted a purifying influence.”

Three Cheers for Susan B. Anthony by Clara Barton

In 1876, Clara Barton was lecturing in a town in Iowa. The Civil War
veterans who hosted the lecture advertised that Barton was “not after the
style of Susan B. Anthony and her clique; Miss Barton does not belong to
that class.” Seeing Anthony and other Unitarian workers for womens’ rights
so maligned, Universalist Barton addressed the assembled veterans as
follows:

“That paragraph...does worse than to misrepresent me as a woman: it
maligns my friend. It abuses the highest and bravest work ever done in this
land for either you or me. You glorify the women who made their way to the
front to reach you in your misery, and nurse you back to life. You called us
angels.

“Who opened the way for women to go and made it possible? Who but that
detestd ‘clique’ who through years of opposition, obloquy, toil and pain had
openly claimed that women had rights, should have the privilege to exercise
them. The right to her own property, her own children, her own home, her
just claim before the law, to her freedom of action, to her personal liberty.
Upon this, other women claimed the right and took the courage, if only to go
to an army camp, and drag the wounded men out of the trench, and try to
save them for their families and their country.

“And, soldiers, for every woman’s hand that ever cooled your fevered brows,
staunched your bleeding wounds, gave food to your famished bodies, or
water to your parched lips, and called back life to your perishing bodies, you
should bless God for Susan B. Anthony, Cady Stanton, Frances D. Gage, and
their followers.
No one has stood so unhelped, unprotected, so maligned as Susan B. Anthony, no one deserves as well; and, soldiers, I would have the first monument that is ever erected to any woman in this country reared to her. Boys, three cheers for Susan B. Anthony!"

“And,” Clara Barton recalled later, “the very windows shook in their casements.”

**Jesus’ Two Resurrections**
**from the Gospels, Matthew 15, Mark 16, John 21**

From **Matthew 15**:

“Jesus left Genessaret by the Sea of Galilee and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

From **Mark 16 and John 20**:

“And on the day of the resurrection, his followers heard his spirit: “Peace be with you. Receive the holy spirit. Go forth into all the world and proclaim to the whole creation the good news of boundless grace and the nearness of heaven within.”