

**INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD #1:
What's to be Realized in Your Life?**

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<u>Gathering</u>	<i>Interpretation of Psalm 1, after Stephen Mitchell</i>
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SERMON

One of my favorite stories is a children's book titled, simply, Miss Rumphius. A girl named Alice Rumphius lives in a seaport town on a bay in Maine and daily visits her grandfather, a sea captain retired to the arts of sculpting mastheads and painting sea scenes, with which she helps. One day after listening to some of her grandfather's stories about his seafaring days, she says to him, "When I grow up, I want to be just like you – I want to travel the world and then come home and live by the sea." "Yes, Alice," says her grandfather. "But there is one other thing you must do." "What is that, Grandfather?" asks Alice. "You must do something," he says, "to make the world more beautiful." And as author Barbara Cooney goes on to describe, that is what Alice Rumphius proceeded to do.

Many of us learn or decide what we are going to be and do by observing our parents and close relatives, the people we think are most like us. Many also learn or decide based on their close kin's stories of life's adventures. Others of us learn from storybooks like Barbara Cooney's. Still others infer our possibilities from everyday habitual cultural expectations and myth narratives. Others are exposed to many options by accident or by seeking them out by intentional investigation.

Some examples to ponder:

If Jesus grew up hearing family and cultural stories of expected messiahs and enchanted shepherds and Persian magi and mystic prophets, all told as particularly relevant to him, what influence would that have had on his realization of his potential and his calling?

If Margaret Fuller's United States Senator father educated her so she was reading Greek and Latin by age five, and so on thereafter, so that even Transcendentalist leaders like Ralph Waldo Emerson agreed she had the finest mind in America, what influence would that upbringing have had on her realization of her potential and her calling?

If, as a boy, P.T. Barnum, lived as a child in abandoned poverty, but was loved and admired and believed in from childhood by his wealthy soulmate and true love, what influence would that have had on his realization of his potential and his calling?

If the poet William Butler Yeats, permeated by Celtic mythology and Irish Revolutionary ardor, sat alone and empty in a cafe along a busy Dublin street and suddenly was filled and felt that all existence belonged to him and he belonged to all, what influence would that have had on his realization of his potential and his calling?

If Tina Fey mistook compassion for admiration and came to seek it expectantly, what influence would that have had on her realization of her potential and her calling?

If Ta-Nahesi Coates grew up yearning that his mind could live free of fear for his Black body, but saw that his fear could propel and guide him in examining reality and truth at their core, what influence would that have had on his realization of his potential and his calling?

For all of these heroic people, was it the combination of being persistent, being cherished, and being lucky that let them realize what was innately potential and possible in them and perhaps in everyone? Or more?

Psalm One from Jewish scripture points out an additional resource for realization. And I like the way the poet Stephen Mitchell translated Psalm One from Hebrew layering on a Buddhist interpretation to the ancient Jewish description of the path to fulfillment. Meditating day and night seeking actively to realize what is right and what is a skillful implementation of the right, one transcends greed and hate and illusion, and learns to turn all action to the good of life.

There seem to be two kinds of realizations that are being talked about here. The first kind of realization is of coming to sense or recognize what one's most rewarding potentials are – speaking in Alice Rumphius's terms, realizing you have a need and the power to travel the world and learn from its many ways and to then identify what place will become your home and how you will live there.

The second kind of realization is the fulfillment of these potentials – in Alice's grandfather's terms, living in the world and actually making it more beautiful, right where you are, wherever you are.

From what we know about humankind, it has long learned and tried to communicate to its peoples the two kinds of realization - the realization of potential and the realization of

fulfillment. To do this it has used fairy tale and myth, personal projection and cultural philosophy, and established power structures and status quos.

More recently – over the last four hundred years, we have been turning gradually to science, learning about reality by measuring its surface and its depths. And still more recently, at least as the West has learned from the East, we have turned to a more scientific inward life of patient non-judging observation.

And the two together, meditative mindfulness along with the sciences of psychology and neurology are producing epiphany-like realizations of what we are capable of and how we can best fulfill those capabilities.

Psychologists and neurologists have been telling us for a few decades now that we are like a plant, with potential to absorb water and nutrients, to sprout toward the light, to unfold under good conditions, and to bear fruit and seed for subsequent life. We have our own human path of growth or development.

Once upon a time, the explanation we had was as simple as the sequence in the ancient Hindu teaching about the stages of life. First, your need and potential will be as student and learner. Second, in time, your potential (and, for most, your need) will be as a producer of family and of sustenance for family and community.

Third, again, after a while (perhaps 15-20 years per stage), your potential and perhaps need are ready for fulfillment as a manager and teacher of new producers.

Then, fourth and last, your potential will call you to seek in private reflection the final fulfillment of realizing your oneness, in being and in doing, with the source of life and with all its beings, and thereupon to return to community to share a deeper understanding about the growth of the soul (the seed of life with which you began) into a flourishing fruitful spirit.

Today the human life-sequence of potentials has been explored scientifically and described in developmental terms, with dominant influence now coming from neurological investigators. Their sequence seems similar to the ancient Hindu sequence. Merging the different scientific developmental understandings, I think of the sequence as follows:

First, we exercise our self-preserving potentials (like crying, cooing, waving);
Second, we may start exercising our group-preserving potentials and skills;
Third emerge our group-benefitting potentials and skills;
Fourth come our life-benefitting (empowering) potentials and skills;
Fifth come the life-revering potentials and skills;
And Sixth come the life-communion potentials and skills.

Each potential has evolved in human beings from our ancestors thousands and millions (and even billions) of years ago. Maintained, or perhaps ungirding, all this evolution there has been the simultaneous impulse to survive and to thrive. Now, for humankind, our greatest obstacle to heaven on earth, I would say, is that the speedy reactivity of our potentials and skills necessary for surviving often short circuit the need for pause and reflection in order to activate our potentials and skills for thriving. We can survive to some extent separate or together. But only together can we thrive.

I believe our greatest challenge remains the problem of realization. Will we realize fast enough our potentials to control reactivity and the technologies they produce? We have long seen that we can fulfill what some call a Biblical mandate, to dominate and control Nature. But can we fulfill what we well might call the Science Fiction mandate - to dominate and control our reactivity and our Nature-destroying Machines?

Perhaps what I take to be Ta-Nehisi Coates' special epiphany in Between the World and Me will prove ironically world-saving. He wrote, "(In my often-conflicted education at Howard University), I began to see discord, argument, chaos, perhaps even fear, as a kind of power – not an alarm, but a beacon." This profound insight is part of the scientific process, taught to Coates by his mother and applied by him to the wounded human spirit – Where there is discomfort, even pain, that is where study is needed to learn, not ultimately who to blame, but how things can be made to work for the good.

Both science and meditation can be abused, as myth, ideologized philosophy, and power structures have so often been. But science and meditation practices like mindfulness have a built-in safety-net or corrective. Because of their own fundamental methods of investigation and cross-examination and double-checking, science and meditation are far less subject to going astray. They may fall short of ultimacy because there is so much to learn. For example, nobody yet knows what light is? But they have a truth-testing process that Reality itself maintains and which allows us to approach closer to that Reality without being burned. And even if in our science and meditation we may fall short of ultimacy, they move us closer and closer to a reverent knowing intimacy.

I would say that science and meditation practices indicate that our potentials have their own outward thrust into the light. They do nudge us toward personal epiphanies that give deep insight into what it is all about for us and perhaps others – sitting in a crowded shop alone, open as a book, empty as a cup, an autopsied life on a marble table-top – and suddenly there is a once-or-twice-in-a-lifetime bliss that sets you free and simultaneously calls you ever thereafter to be servant to the world.

To feel, with every fibre of your being ablaze, that you are blessed and can bless – that is perhaps the peak realization that psychologist Maslow has studied. It is the fulfillment of

potential that cannot be forgotten, that validates you and all life. It is the fulfillment that for all your days keeps open the seed of your soul to the reality of what I think we might reasonably term the divine flow of grace. It is what inspires you to the final realization – to express your energy and potentials and skills as a blessing for the world.

It seems we can come back to Ms. Rumphius's life-story and realizations. First, you realize you can make the world more beautiful. Second, you turn your realization into reality. Realization in thought, then realization in deed – justification and sanctification, to use old obscure religious language. Those are some ways I would describe what is to be realized in our being and our living. We do have the power. And it is especially effective when it works in confluence with others.

My prayer for all of us, whatever stage of life's possibilities and powers we are at, is that we may have the realization of goodness and the encouragement of community to take the next step to a richer and better reality.

READINGS

Thoughts for Gathering

Interpretation of Psalm 1, after Stephen Mitchell

*“Blessed are they who have grown beyond their greed
and have put an end to their hatred and no longer nourish illusions.
They delight in the highest ways of being & keep their hearts open day & night.
They are like trees planted near flowing rivers, which bear fruit in its season.
Their leaves do not fall or wither. That to which they lend their hand prospers.”*

Memoirs, Margaret Fuller

“Very early I realized that the only object in life is to grow.”

Invocation *The Work of Christmas*, by Howard Thurman, Hymnal #615

Meditation *Vacillation IV*, by William Butler Yeats

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.

Readings Before Sermon

#1 - The Magi and the Prophets, from Gospels of Luke and Matthew, chapters 2

After Jesus was born, Persian magi came asking, “Where is the child born king of the Jews, so we may pay homage.” King Herod, frightened by the news, & all Jerusalem with him, sent the magi to Bethlehem, the prophesied birthplace of the messiah. “Bring word when you find him,” said Herod, “so I may also go pay homage.”

The magi saw the child's star above a house and found the child and mother. Overwhelmed with joy, they knelt and paid homage, offering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

After eight days, the child was circumcised and named Jesus as the angel instructed. After forty days, his parents took him up to Jerusalem to be dedicated, according to the Law, as holy to God. In the temple, a righteous and devout man named Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Now my eyes have seen Israel's salvation and a light of revelation to the nations.' And an aged prophet named Anna began to praise God and speak about the child to all those looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi headed home by another road. Herod, learning this and fearing the rise of a Persian-allied Jewish king in Israel, sent soldiers to kill all the children in & around Bethlehem two years old or younger. But Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the gracious power of God.

#2 - I Shall Keep These Golden Globes, Every Last One, Tina Fey in Bossy Pants

During the spring of kindergarten, I was slashed in the face by a stranger in the alley behind my house. I only bring it up to explain why I'm not going to talk about it. I've always been able to tell a lot about people by whether they ask me about my scar. (In childhood) my scar was a miniature form of celebrity. Kids knew who I was because of it. Adults were kind to me because of it. I was made to feel special. What should have shut me down and made me feel "less than" ended up giving me an inflated sense of self. It wasn't until years later that I realized people weren't making a fuss over me because I was some incredible beauty or genius. I accepted all the attention at face value and proceeded through life as if I really were extraordinary. I guess what I'm saying is, this has all been a wonderful misunderstanding. And I shall keep these Golden Globes, every last one!