

AFTER YOU'RE GONE – What Will You Miss?

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 5/6/18

READINGS (texts below, after sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>Discovering</i> , from <u>The Dream of the Earth</u> , by Thomas Berry
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>Krishna to Arjuna on "Devotion"</i> from <u>The Bhagavad Gita</u>
<u>Reading #1</u>	<i>Constantly Present and Lovely</i> by Sufi mystic Bibi Hayati
<u>Reading #2</u>	<i>Facing West from California's Shores</i> by Walt Whitman
<u>Closing</u>	<i>Beauty Before Me</i> from a Navajo prayer, UU Hymnal, #682
<u>Image Inserts</u>	<i>God (or Big Bang Singularity); Gravestone; Inscription; Scorecard</i>

SERMON

If you would, please look in the bulletin at the insert with the pictures (see below). On one side is my vision of God – and yes, it is also my vision of all existence, radiating out from the big bang singularity as the grace of light and life. I call it evolutionary creation or creative evolution. I think it is a good thing to have a clear picture of the big picture – and here are we, out on the life-green tip of here and now.

On the other side of the insert is a gravestone – of a man who lived in my hometown about 250 years ago after buying his own freedom out of slavery. A gravestone is what people generally consider the marker for the end of the road. It's about where we are going, which is also good to be clear about.

I present grace and grave to you as the alpha and omega – the beginning and end – of the trajectory of human development from potential to fulfillment.

Since September a thread weaving through our Sunday services has been the exploration of this trajectory of life – from beginning grace to childhood to adulthood to elderhood to grave and back again to beginning grace. Now in the month of May, we have come to the end of the road. Now let us we imagine we are gone, as many mystics have imagined as part of their practice. We are dead, even as the world lives on. What will you miss?

That depends, you say?

Yes. If there is an afterlife, we know nothing about it except for some idiosyncratic reports. We can note that they are contradictory and unverifiable. But who knows, there may be another road and other chances to realize what you missed and to get it. On the other hand, if being dead means you have permanently lost all consciousness and no longer will have a sense of self, then you won't miss anything because you can't.

Do either of these conditions mean the end of exploration? Not if you are stirred by Walt Whitman's provocative American lament – Where is what I started for so long ago, and why is it

yet unfound. The American population, its first peoples and its subsequent teeming masses yearning to be free, has rounded the globe until we are looking back at where we started. Yet we have not found a destination that answers the questions of our soul or spirit or heart or mind. Something is missing. All the material bounty of the world is ours – yet we are still missing what we are looking for.

Just as Henry David Thoreau feared. And that was why he went to the Walden Pond woods - to find what life had to offer so as not to discover, when he came to die, that he had not lived. He remained two years, two months, and two days – then he left. Why did he leave the woods? Because, as he wrote, he had learned what he could from that phase of life through long reflection – and now, he said, he had other lives to live.

Life has many endings and new beginnings. Each of us has several deaths to die and several lives to live – (and, as meditators observe, each has many moments to live and many moments to die).

After the death of who we are at each stage, we may look back and see what of our potentials we fulfilled and what we missed. If we do so, we develop some degree of wisdom for our next life just arriving.

So how do we reflect on and assess our life even as we move through it? What if we measure our progress by some standard psychological maps of our potentials to be fulfilled as blessings or be missed?

Once again, take the priestess queen of ancient Greece Diotima's list of human potentials as reported in Plato's *Symposium on Love*. From the outset, says Diotima to youthful Socrates, you have the potential to love a person for physical beauty. If you then grow, you can love someone for their inner beauty. If you keep growing, you can love the inner beauty of many beings. If you keep growing further, you can realize that the inner beauty in some is in all, perhaps ready to be made visible by your love. Each step is a fulfillment of potential, Diotima explains to Socrates – and if you continue to the end, you realize that what underlies all existence is beautiful and worthy of your devotion.

So, we can play the role of Diotima to our own selves and ask, Have I grown these capacities for love, for appreciation, for devotion? If not, says our inner priestess, you are missing something and you long for it in dissatisfaction even though you don't yet know its name.

We might note also that Diotima's version of the stages of human potential and fulfillment are the same as those that the divine Lord Krishna urges upon Prince Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita: devotion to the divine substance beginning with one being and extending to all.

Or take the Ten Commandments for example. The ten boil down to three areas of potential in us in relation to self, others, and source – SOS – Self, Others, Source. See if you recognize the Ten Commandments in these three – and consider if you are missing something by these minimalist standards:

One, Is your spirit's relishing and caring for life diminished by having feelings of envy or covetousness? If so, you would be missing the covenantal mark for your own potentials.

Two, Is your spirit diminishing the spirit of others in relishing and caring for their lives, possessions, relationships, or honor? If so, you would be missing the covenantal mark for your own potentials.

And three, Is your spirit diminishing the spirit of the source of all things in its gracious expression of life? If so, you would be missing the covenantal mark for your own potentials.

If you are enhancing the fulfillment of the spirit in each of these beings, you are on the mark. If not, says the Mosaic covenant, that's what your missing – your own potential, your own promise.

Or how about the simple list of potentials found in what is called the Great Covenant: For fulfillment, care for the Being of your own being with all your heart and mind and body and soul, and care likewise for your neighbor and your self.

The potential to care for widening and deepening circles of being – is that not the journey and the destination? How many of us come to the end of the road and realize we have not cared enough – lacked awareness, lacked devotion, fell short of fulfilling the sacred depths of our nature's potentials?

The other day I came across a quote from baseball (and drinking) legend Mickey Mantle – a rather fallen-short hero by his own estimate. It's a quote from when he was dying from alcoholism. His words went something like, "I was given everything, and what did I do with it – pfft."

People do seem to have some sense of the fulfillment they missed – but too often clarity comes too late because they aren't asking themselves along the way, "How am I doing? What am I doing? Why am I doing." Better Robert Frost's way in the northern depths of dark December: Why not just lay down here and forget the world? Because I have promises to keep – my promise, the promise of others, the promise of the owner of the lovely, dark, deep woods.

If I were smart, I would stop here with the lovely woods. But remembering Mickey Mantle made me think about having a scorecard on human potential – so I put one on the insert, under the big bang spiral of life. It has been said, the potentials of our lives can be pictured as staged – from potentials for Learning to Loving to Laboring to Leading – and that each stage is to be fulfilled in relation to one's self, to the other circles of being, and to the Source Being or energy of all being.

Using this assessment chart, I think we'll find we all fall short in some respect – not the least reason being that much of the time we do not think about what we are devoting ourselves to. I'm sure you would be able to identify some people whom you'd say deserved A's for much of

their lives, and many people who live above C level, and a number who get E's for Erroneous, Empty, or Egnorant. Almost universally, I think, those who get the A's belong to some kind of community or movement that helps make the fullness of their growth possible.

The idea about being part of a movement came up recently in one of our Wednesday Discussion groups as we talked about Rev. William Barber's moral movement against division, poverty, and oppression in America. Starting May 14th, a week from tomorrow, this movement is going to undertake several months of weekly protests in Washington DC to make the voices of the poor and oppressed heard in our bountiful nation, that we might fulfill our potential as people and as a nation. There will also be protests at the capitols of more than 30 states, including Tallahassee, Florida - a week from tomorrow.

I put that announcement in our newsletter and immediately heard from the Tuscany area of Italy. It was Dave and Karen Coale, who have been reading Rev. Barber's book as have we, though we don't get to be in Tuscany. They'll be back in time for Dave to go to Tallahassee. And Rev. Karen Day is going. And I'm going. And I'm guessing there'll be more of us.

And that made me realize, our congregation and our tradition are a movement. Ours is a movement devoted to growing a fuller understanding, a fuller concern, a fuller caring in ourselves, in our congregation, and in our world - creatively liberating the potentials in all not only for surviving, but for thriving.

Unitarian Universalism is a movement. WE are a movement. Our goal is for us to help one another get to where we want to be. We are a movement for the spirit of life – to discover what it has to offer, to discover its potential in us and free it and fulfill it so it sings in our hearts, stirs our compassion, moves our hands to shape life toward justice, keeps life close and free. As the inscription on John Jack's gravestone reads, He practiced those virtues without which we are but slaves. If we do that, how could we miss much?

Food for thought, and perhaps for deeds.

READINGS

Gathering *Discovering*, from The Dream of the Earth, by Thomas Berry

We cannot discover ourselves without first discovering the universe, the earth, and the imperatives of our own being.

Meditation *Krishna to Arjuna on "Devotion"* from The Bhagavad Gita

Breath, Death, Fire, Water, Lunar being, Living beings, all Creation –
all from me, the Primal Being, Foundation of All Things, Knower and Known.
My universal form is primordial and endless.

No one can see me in this form by knowledge, or sacred texts, or sacrifices,

or study, generous acts, rituals, or austerity –
but only through devotion alone,
to me, sacred being of all being,
through love of this alone without any other desire,
without ill will toward any creature –
then, knowing, you come to me.

Reading #1 *Constantly Present and Lovely* by Sufi mystic Bibi Hayati

Before there was a trace of this world of men,
I carried the memory of a lock of your hair,
A stray end gathered within me, though unknown.
Inside that invisible realm,
Your face like the sun longed to be seen,
Until each separate object was finally flung into light.

From the moment of Time's first-drawn breath,
Love resides in us,
A treasure locked into the heart's hidden vault;
Before the first seed broke open the rose bed of Being,
An inner lark soared through your meadows,
Heading toward Home.

What can I do but thank you, one hundred times?
Your face illumines the shrine of Hayati's eyes,
Constantly present and lovely.

Reading #2 *Facing West from California's Shores* by Walt Whitman

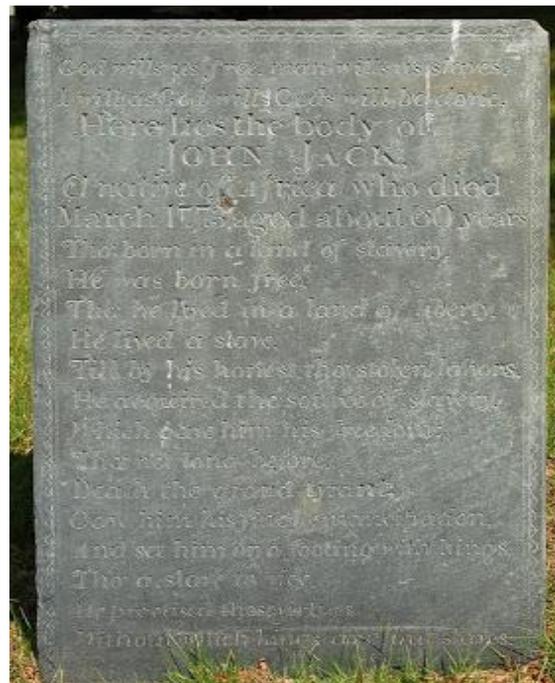
Facing west from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves,
towards the house of maternity, the land of migrations, look far,
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled;
For starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere,
From Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the hero,
From the south, from the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands,
Long having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd,
Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it not yet found?)

Closing *Beauty Before Me* from a Navajo prayer, UU Hymnal, #682

God – or Evolutionary Creation from The Big Bang Singularity



Gravestone of John Jack (from the Old Hill Burial Ground, Concord, Massachusetts)



Gravestone Inscription

God wills us free, man wills us slaves.
I will as God wills; God's will be done.
Here lies the body of
JOHN JACK
A native of Africa who died
March 1773, aged about 60 years.
Tho' born in a land of slavery,
He was born free.
Tho' he lived in a land of liberty,
He lived a slave;
Till by his honest, tho' stolen labors,
He acquired the source of slavery,
Which gave him his freedom;
Tho' not long before
Death the grand tyrant
Gave him his final emancipation,
And set him on a footing with kings.
Tho' a slave to vice,
He practiced those virtues
Without which kings are but slaves.

SCORECARD FOR FULFILLMENT OF POTENTIALS FOR SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN RELATIONSHIPS

	SELF	OTHERS	SOURCE
LEARNING (understanding life & living)			
LOVING (caring in relationship)			
LABORING (productivity sharing)			
LEADING (creative liberating)			

