

AFTER YOU'RE GONE, #3 –Will You Still Be Present?

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida - 5/13/18

READINGS (texts below, after sermon)

Invocation *Those Who Live Again*, Mary Ann Evans (aka George Eliot) #719

Reading #1 *Because the Birds So Sweetly Sing*, Isaac Ubil – Dave Coales' great grandfather

Reading #2 *Charity's Ladder to Heaven*, by Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon) (c. 1175 CE)

SERMON

Memorial Day – for many the unofficial beginning of summer, as schools recognize – one of Earth's times of abundance – so many seeds and fruits and new life and hours of sunlight. And have you noticed, it is one of the times when we human beings remember our dead?

Perhaps we feel more aware of their influences in times of abundance, but blame ourselves and our contemporaries in times of lack. Perhaps we sense that the preface of the Ten Commandments is wise – which says in modern terms, *Destruction of life's empowering way curses three to four generations; and Devotion to life's empowering way blesses 1000*. Now all we have to do is figure out life's empowering way.

Two years ago in a remote South African cave, a burial site was found with very early human bones, intentionally arranged perhaps over a million years ago. It is true - your influence can last a long time, if not your name. According to Northern European pagan tradition, the spirits of the dead are welcomed back at harvest time, to be remembered and petitioned. According to the pre-colonial indigenous tradition of the Mexican Day of the Dead/*Dia de Muertos*, the dead live until their names are no longer spoken. We pick up that tradition in Hispanic resistance movements when we call out "*Presente!*" at the mention of a fallen comrade's name – "*Presente! Present! Here, with us!*"

The two hymns that we've sung this morning so far - both by Unitarian ministers - do the same. Rank by rank again we stand with those who have gone before. Or perhaps we freely choose to kneel with those who have gone before. Standing or kneeling, we honor their days and names, their reckoning truth and their beckoning deeds.

So, what is that higher truth that calls to us and causes us to remember our saints and seers? It sounds along the ages, we sing – soul answering to soul, we sing – forever on resounding, we sing – that "one holy word" that prophets and oracles declare, of which eternal chime our laws barely catch the music - yet calls up in us new youth, new stature, new truth, new justice. What is that "one holy word" by which those past are present, turning troubles from hurt to hope to joy? Is it present in us?

In 1965, on March 13 in New Hampshire, I finished the winter semester's final exams and drove overnight with my teammates for an international rugby tournament in Nassau via Miami. Five

or six days later, we sped back to New Hampshire for the start of classes. I was doing the driving around 3:00 a.m. when we were going through a town in Georgia at about 60 miles an hour – in a 30 miles per hour zone. A State Trooper stopped us. “Where you coming from, son?” said the trooper. “Rugby tournament in Nassau, sir.” He paused, trying to remember what elegant violence rugby is supposed to be. “Oh,” he said. “You win?” “Yes, sir.” He nodded. “You all aren’t part of those protesters, are you?” “No, sir.” I had no idea what he was talking about. “Because,” he continued, “we’ve got a bunch of them over in the jail.” “Yes, sir,” I said.

Just then, out of nowhere up to our car came a beautiful golden retriever, sniffing around our front tire where we had inadvertently run over a dead possum. “Beautiful dog,” I said. “Sure is,” said the trooper. “Well,” he said, giving me back my license, “you slow down, now, and drive safely getting back to school.” And off we went.

I wasn’t a Unitarian Universalist then – knew nothing about it. But the week before, just before my finals had ended, the Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. James Reeb had been beaten to death while participating in the Selma, Alabama, protest marches. Then, just after my teammates and I had returned to school, Unitarian Universalist activist Viola Liuzzo was shot and killed by the Ku Klux Klan during those same protests.

Reeb and Liuzzo were the kind of protesters the Georgia police had in jail – *Presente!* None of that penetrated my consciousness in those days. I was not present in my own society.

Will we be present in the future if we are not present in the present? My Hindu/Buddhist voice has long been saying to me, You are never adequately present if you are not present to yourself. If you cling to fantasies about yourself, conditioned by fears and longings and ignorance, you will fall short of your true self and your true potential. Youth has somewhat of an excuse. But as we age?

One thing I believe we humans should all do is practice being truly, wholly present – learn to see what of our fears and longings are rooted in ignorance of our true resourceful productive selves. For such mindfulness practice, I think it would be good to have one holy word to center on, to remind us of who we believe we are at that moment and what we can be. Have you ever done that - decided on one holy word to live by?

Life of course can teach us a lot of lessons as we mature, if we are paying attention – though learning to pay attention is not that easy or automatic. There are calls from one soul to another that can awaken us a bit, if we hear the call and answer. I remember once as a young man coming out of a morning lecture by a professor of comparative religion. She had said, “Sure, we are taught how to love our neighbor – but we aren’t taught how to love ourselves!” I literally staggered with the thought out into the Palo Alto sun: “We have to learn to love ourselves?” And suddenly I experienced a bright current of energy sweep seemingly from the sky through the top of my head to the soles of my feet – and I thought to myself, There’s a lot I don’t know.

That moment wasn't a sudden knowing. It was a sudden unknowing – which, I think, sometimes you need. It didn't make me the best person I could be from that very moment. But something shifted and opened – an experience of the beginning of a very gradual awakening that seems to be lasting a lifetime – and I like that - more seeds of potential still to grow. And only I can offer my increase to the world - and only you can offer the always fulfilling you.

It is that acceptance of the gradualism of growth that I find implicit in Abraham Lincoln's memorial address at Gettysburg four months after the battle and a week before the first declared national holiday of Thanksgiving – the phrase, “the proposition which our forebears have so far nobly advanced...” We do not enlighten ourselves or one another easily. But with devotion to the equality of freedom and opportunity that keeps the spirits of Gettysburg present to us and with devotion to the beauty of Earth that keeps Dave Coales' great grandfather present to us, we can take what they learned and add our own learning to advance further that eternal enlightenment. It is part of our potential.

In this morning's Invocation, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) says, “O, may I join the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence.” Such an aspiration for a continuing presence in the world after death.

But I like even better her aspiration for this life: “to make undying music in the world, breathing a beauteous order that controls with growing sway the growing life of humanity - so to live is heaven.” You can hear the influence of the Unitarian family she lived with, in the faith in the ability and propensity for people to grow if living in a beauteous order of family and society. “May I reach the purest heaven – be to other souls the cup of strength in some great agony... be the sweet presence of a good diffused, and in diffusion ever more intense. So I join the choir invisible, whose music is the gladness of the world.”

This is where Maimonides chimes, “To be present in complete kindness and strengthen others through their great needs, to be a true partner to all souls - that is to have topped the stairway to the purest heaven.” And no doubt he would pray for all of us - but particularly this morning for Nic and Janeya – that they continue to be part of “the choir whose music is the gladness of the world.”

Will you be present after you're gone? What is the one holy word by which your presence shall be felt across time and space? Maimonides might say it is “Here,” as in “Here you are. Here's for you, for your need. Here.” Resistance movements might give us the holy word, “*Presente*.” I myself, in my meditation, bow toward the word “Gracious” – the sharing of the power in all to make life good, better, best. In fact, today I'm wanting to name our church, “For Gracious Sakes Church.”

What is your word? I would consider it a favor if you would share it with us all when time allows. We can't have too many.

READINGS

Invocation *Those Who Live Again* by George Eliot/Mary Anne Evans (Hymnal, #719)

O, may I join the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence; live in pulses stirred to generosity, in deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn of miserable aims that end with self, in thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars, and with their mild persistence urge our search to vaster issues. So to live is heaven, to make undying music in the world, breathing a beauteous order that controls with growing sway the growing life of humanity. That better self shall live till human time fold its eyelids, and the human sky be gathered like a scroll within the tomb. This is life to come, which martyred souls have made more glorious for us, who strive to follow. May I reach that purest heaven – be to other souls the cup of strength in some great agony, enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love, beget the smiles that have no cruelty, be the sweet presence of a good diffused, and in diffusion ever more intense. So shall I join the choir invisible, whose music is the gladness of the world.

Meditation *Presence, Presents, and Impermanence*

Let's take a moment to rediscover the pure bliss that is you beneath all the striving and stressing of life.

Close your eyes if you will and take a deep breath in... and out –
and let your body relax in safety... and straighten in dignity –
and feel what a gift it is to be.

Notice your breath, rising and falling ...

notice your mind, rising and falling ...

Notice the gift of you ... in past memory ... in future hope ... in present gratitude –
floating on the waves of Being....

And when you are ready, open your eyes ..
to the present moment...

and to all those present with you –
each of us a gift, to be opened and shared together with the world.
... Namaste and Shalom.

Reading #1 *Because the Birds So Sweetly Sing* by Isaac Ubil (Dave Coale's great grandfather)

Because the Birds so Sweetly Sung

*BECAUSE the birds so sweetly sung,
Because the flowers so brightly smiled,
Because my heart was light and young,
And I young nature's child,
The bird, the butterfly, the bee,
Companions were and sung with me.
Because the storms so early came
And dashed their tempest o'er my soul;*

*Because I saw their lightning flame
And felt their torrents roll.
With heavier notes my lyre was strung,
More sorrowing songs for one so young,
Because my feet were early trained
To seek for paths which lead above;
Because my loved ones early gained
Those realms of heavenly love,
I, too may watch the polar star,
Those dazzling lights may see afar,
Because in life's young spring I sung,
Ravished by every tree or flower,
I, to the selfsame love have clung.
Solace of many an hour,
Nothing my wayward heart has moved
Still loving what at first I loved
The autumn leaf is still as fair
As the young bud that once was there.*

Delaware City, May, 1887

-Isaac Ubil

Reading #2 *Charity's Ladder to Heaven*, from Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon) (c. 1175 CE)

Level 1 is for those who give reluctantly, but who do give. They have begun.

Level 2 is for those who give graciously, but less than one should.

Level 3 is for those who give what one should, but only after being asked.

Level 4 is for those who give before being asked.

Level 5 is for those giving without knowing to whom, but whom receiver knows.

Level 6 is for those who give anonymously to a known recipient.

Level 7 is for those who give with neither party knowing of the other.

Level 8 is for those who help others become self-supporting by gift, interest-free loan, finding them employment, or partnering in business. They have arrived.