

SERMON for October 21, 2018

CAN YOU GET OUTSIDE THE BOX OF YOUR MIND?

Influencing Your Culture's Influence on Your Soul and Spirit

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READINGS

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>An Original Relation to the Universe</i> from “Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>The Only Questioners</i> from <u>The Sacred Depths of Nature</u> by Ursula Goodenough
<u>For All Ages</u>	<i>Sanctuary Through the Village</i>
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>Centered/Distracted, Clear/Biased, Selfish/Selfless</i> drawn from Buddhist teachings
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SERMON

As Halloween draws near, I remember a Thursday night in late October, the fourteenth year of my life, experiencing the first anxieties of high school and very young adulthood. I was heading home from Catholic Christian Doctrine class, following the same shortcut I always took, through Concord's Old Hill Burial Ground. That night the priest, without irony for the season, urged upon us the necessity of constant moral purity, because the demons of the underworld were always waiting for the unguarded soul, even reaching out of cemetery graves to drag us screaming into their ravenous maws.

I climbed the hill up through the lilac bushes to Puritan John Smythe's 1636 gravestone and the 1770 slate of John Jack, an African who had had to buy his freedom from one of the American Sons of Liberty. There I turned up toward the hilltop shrouded with trees that walled me from my house - past three centuries of slate and limestone slabs engraved with the virtue and heroism of ages. I was at eye-level with the clock on the First Parish Church bell-tower when suddenly, over the 1776 sepulcher of Unitarian minister Rev. William Emerson, two red eyes appeared and glowed from the darkness, fading fire in and out – and a voice said, “Hello, Jack.” And then it said, “It's us - Ray and Buddy. Wanna smoke?”

Ray and Buddy - Ray Phalen and Buddy Delory – two older boys from the other side of the hill - sitting on Rev. Emerson's tomb for a cigarette after Christian Doctrine class. My spirit was coursing with the chemistry of fright and flight and fight. Oh, I had imagined quite a different smoke, and now all I wanted was to breathe cool fresh air! Two months hence, on Christmas Eve, I would stand in that same place in the bright whiteness of winter night, looking down at the carolers on the snow-covered green, with all Main Street decorated along to the public library and on to Nashawtuc Hill alight with Christmas parties and tobogganing down to the river where ice-skaters raced and danced.

But that night, with the priest's demonology and with Halloween a day or two away, with the smell of burning leaves reminding me more of spiders and death than cider and hearths, I bid my neighborhood boys good night and hurried through the woods, past the McGrath's cornfield, up our front steps, slammed the door, then breathed hello to parents and brother

watching Red Skelton on TV, and on upstairs to do – was it to read my biology assignment or The Scarlet Letter for English class - I forget which.

Einstein said “Knowledge is nothing; imagination is everything. Perhaps he did not know of the Puritan and Inquisition part of American culture in the imagination of a 14 year old American Catholic boy.

From what I understand now, every person of every generation of every time and place has potentials for surviving and thriving, for growing in understanding and caring and belonging. Everyone has potential to learn and love and work, to will and contribute and teach and care. Everyone has potential to bless and be blest. And in every human being those potentials are carried through the same life trajectory: beginning, infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, elderhood, conclusion.

Where life differs most for each, I would say, is in the influences that the varied forces and powers of their cultures bring to bear and how well they learn to respond.

My town, beyond ancestral spirits and new-come priests, still had small farms where the local farmers hired my friends and me to pick summer’s strawberries before our afternoons of baseball, swimming and milkshakes. The town also had Harvard professors and corporate CEOs and U.S. Senators in large homes on the Concord River. It had the graves of the founders and foundations of American public education – Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott. But when I was still in high school, our teachers couldn’t afford housing in the town – though the town spent more on our public school education than almost any town in the country. And more, I’ve heard at recent reunions that the working class kids feel now that they got the short end of the distribution of benefits. What influence did that have on us? How could we have learned about that? What could we have done if we had known?

For current young generations, I think the split is more immediately obvious, felt, and resented by some – though they don’t know who to blame – perhaps themselves, though they can’t imagine why, other than either innate personal unworthiness or unconscious or helpless submission to societal oppression.

Politically, as a kid, I told my dad that I liked Ike – and he gently said he and my mom really preferred Adlai – which I didn’t understand coming from people who had served in the war. Most important to them was advancing the influence of FDR’s four freedoms and stopping the influence of Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn and the Senate UnAmerican Activities Committee. What influences on our potentials did those struggles have, and how could we influence them in return?

And I ended up within a few years working in Boston’s anti-poverty program, often with kids afraid to leave their neighborhood and with adults with no place to go if they did leave. They were pushed around by the housing authority. But the Nixon administration banned the anti-poverty agency from doing tenant organizing.

I bought a house back in Concord when I began earning more money as a consultant and I served on the housing authority in Concord where we turned my old junior high school into

subsidized housing for seniors. Then I was appointed to the town's newly State-mandated Comprehensive Planning Committee, only to discover that developers were intent on turning small farming Concord into a big expensive town, with no concern for preservation of green spaces – even the woods around Walden Pond. And yet always, I felt in the town the spirit of the Minutemen who loved the land for its fertility and who loved the people for their communal resistance to oppression. “We the people” is a phrase, according to political philosopher Mortimer Adler, that came from a Massachusetts farming community, building on language in the constitution of the Commonwealth of Virginia. It had influence – and now how could we influence it?

Years ago, for a church autumn auction, I offered to do a sermon on a theme chosen by the highest bidder. Wouldn't you know, the winner was a PhD former English professor who had been at Kent State. She had gone off to become a civil rights-oriented lawyer after the National Guard shot the student protestor beside whom she had been standing in peaceful protest moments before. Now she was teaching at the University of Florida School of Law. And she was partnered with a fine man who suffered severe post-traumatic stress from military service in Vietnam. This is the kind of intimidating background you can find occasionally in a UU congregation.

The theme she gave me was to address a famous feminist essay by Sally Kempton entitled, “It's hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head” which Kempton had written, as I recall, out of her struggles with an intellectually towering and seemingly dominating father and husband.

Frankly, I was at a loss. Then, again in late October, in a Halloween display I saw a gigantic blow-up figure of Frankenstein's monster, with its iconic electric posts sticking from its head - outposts in its head through which its creator had given it life..

I got the novel and fell under the spell of Mary Shelley's exploration of what happens when, out of some obsessive drive, you create life and then refuse to care for it or allow it friendship or love. And because you refuse it human identity - because you have posted self-hatred in its head - its greatest potentials are turned upon itself in bitterness, rage, and violence – and it has no way to escape other than destruction of itself and those it encounters on its pathetic way.

So there, I think, is our human dilemma. I once heard a lecture by a Stanford professor of comparative religion – which she concluded by saying, “So the scriptures tell us to love our neighbors as ourselves. But they don't tell us how to love ourselves – often quite the contrary - and that's a big problem.”

The good news for now is that Halloween offers a different spirit. Halloween is not to pay tribute to death but to conjure continuing spiritual life. The contributions of the ancestors of culture and family are remembered for what they created and how well we've lived that creation – and the old hearth fire is cleared away and a new fire is lit with sun-sustaining bonfire embers, and the new flames are interpreted to prophesy how the future may be lived as blessing.

When Jesus says, “I came to bring not peace, but division,” he was not articulating a doctrine of “if you don’t believe in me, there’ll be hell to pay.” Rather, I believe he means “If you care for others beyond boundaries of family and tribe, the family and tribe will find that hard to accept – at least until they see it makes things better. And when the signs of the times are heated and stormy, you needn’t just pretend its not influential. You can pay attention and decide for yourself what’s the right way to make it better and go and do it.” And if that’s too hard to do immediately, do like Jesus and Buddha and go to some wilderness and wrestle against the temptations of wealth and power that distract you and see clearly what is worth your time and life -- learn to let go of distractions, let go of conditioned bias, let go of self-only concern – become centered, clear, compassionate – blessing and blest.

How do we influence culture to nurture our seeds of potential that we well may call our soul? How can we influence culture to nurture the sprouts from those seeds that we well may call our spirit? The great teachers have been in agreement: one way or another come to know thyself – thyself within thyself and thyself within your culture. Know other people and know other cultures. Study your options for surviving and thriving. Know yourself in context of the history, economics, politics, sociology, and ecology of the times. Consider your potentials from beginning to end. Are your potentials growing in you? Are they thriving in you? Is the influence of your fulfilling potentials helpful to others?

Take what you think of as the best of American culture and work to reinforce it and develop it. For me, it is our sense that freedom is inseparable from equal rights to the means for safety and happiness. For me, America’s soul is all its people – the depository of all of America’s potentials. And America’s spirit is how we fulfill those potentials in freedom and equality of rights.

And also, take what you think of as the worst of American culture and work to disempower it and disassemble it. For me it our sense that we are self-made people, owing nothing to either neighbors or strangers in achieving their safety and happiness. This, I think, is what poisons and may kill America’s soul and make weak and ephemeral its spirit.

I would say, let there be no dominating and exploitative winners over losers, no soul-crushing extremes of wealth and poverty, no powerful few over the powerless many. Let there be freedom and equality of rights - dependent on a community of concern and will and drive for the spiritual fulfillment of every soul and its every potential. I would say, may we take as true that if the potentials of Earth or country or neighbors or one’s self aren’t growing, they’re dying.

READINGS

Gathering *An Original Relation to the Universe* from “Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

“The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us and not the history of theirs?” from “Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Invocation *The Only Questioners* from *The Sacred Depths of Nature* by Ursula Goodenough

All ye gathered here today, do you know

that we humans may be the only questioners in the universe?

Yes, maybe the only ones to understand the astonishing cosmic evolution.

And that we are also, whether we like it or not, the dominant species on Earth?

Yes, or else the caretakers of this planet.

Ah, then, can we figure out how to share Earth with all Earthkind?

Can we learn to revere how things are,

to express gratitude for our existence,

to work to restore Earth’s elegance and grace,

to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter and hope?

Time For All Ages *Sanctuary Through the Village*

Now if the children will join me here. Are you looking forward to any special holiday right now? All around the world, this kind of festival: Halloween, All Souls Day, Day of the Dead, Samhain. All of them take time to think about our connection to those who lived on the earth before we did and who influenced how we live now. Why? (Because we don’t want to forget important lessons about how to live and about how NOT to live.) I have a story about that. I’m not sure it really happened exactly this way – but I know it’s true:

Once upon a time, just before Halloween in a village on a hillside by a river – in a very rainy year - the river had flooded and people whose farms and gardens were by the river lost all their food before they could harvest it. And the people wondered if the people who had built the village many lives ago had managed to leave something behind or could still bring something from another world that could save the people who had lost all the food they had that was to have gotten them through winter all the way to next spring and summer – through darkness and cold and snow.

When the children were getting ready to dress up for Halloween and pretend to be the people who had built the village many lives ago, those children whose houses were higher on the hill where the farms were safe from floods and had grown extra amounts because of the plentiful rain, they said to each other, What if the people who built the village many lives ago do not return on Halloween with enough food for our neighbors? So they worked out a plan with their parents and brought everything extra from the great harvest that had been two or three times bigger than usual, and they brought along some milking cows, too, because their

herds had grown a lot because their pastures had grown so much in the rain – and for fun they dressed the cows up as goblins, and they left all the extra from their harvests and herds at the houses of the people whose food had all been flooded away.

And that winter and all through the spring, everyone in the village had enough to eat – and no one knew whether it was because the children brought so much extra food or because the spirits of the people who had built the village many lives ago had somehow managed to bring extra food. You couldn't tell – because the children's costumes made them look just like the people who had built the village many lives ago.

But what they did learn was that the next year, when there was a terrible drought, and only the families with farms near the river had enough water to grow plentiful crops and cows, somehow after all the children dressed as the people who had built the village many lives ago had gone out trick or treating on Halloween, all the families whose crops had died from the drought had plenty of food to last till the summer.

What would you call a village that takes care of all its people? One name might be home. Another word might be sanctuary, like this place we share.

Meditation *Centered/Distracted, Clear/Biased, Selfish/Selfless* drawn from Buddhist teachings

Now for an interlude of quiet inward looking:

Where within is that state of mind where you are renewed and free and full?

It can take some practice, learning to look inward and mind your mind,

so you can center on what's important, so you can be clear of bias, so you can grow to a greater self.

So just breathe and notice your breathing – in and out, in and out, in and out.

And when your mind loses focus on breathing, just notice that and start again.

And start again. And start again.

And when you've got that rhythm down – of focus, and wandering, and return – start to notice your judgments of what comes to your mind

– good, bad, want, don't want.

- and for now, step away from the judgments, and just be mindful of the stream.

And finally, realizing every person's life is troubled to some extent by distraction and bias, just like yours, let your being fill with kindness and care for us all, yourself and every one.

Reading *The Signs of the Times*, from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 12

And Jesus said to the gathering, "Do you think that I came to bring peace to the earth? I'll tell you: No – I came to bring division. From now on, five in a household will be divided three against two and two against three – father against son, son against father; mother against daughter, daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. When you see clouds in the west you predict, Rain is coming, and you've got it right. And when you feel the south wind blowing, you predict, Scorching heat is coming, and you've got it right. So, you hypocrites - if you can understand the signs of earth and sky, can you not understand the signs of the times - and can you not decide for yourself what is right?"

