

'Tis not too Late to Seek a Newer World

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ buf.org

Rev Paul Beckel

January 12, 2020

Today's title is taken from the poem "Ulysses" by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

All music marked * is composed or arranged by Rev Andy Backus from various texts

Today's piano accompaniment by Melanie Rieck

PRELUDE

*Somewhere over the Rainbow / *Two Hymns on Black Keys

CALL to WORSHIP

*The Call, words by Kahlil Gibran

sung by Phoenix Ensemble, directed by Kevin Allen-Schmid

Lizz Roberts, soloist

WELCOME

Our theme this month is "possibility." Last Sunday, I asked you to take on the challenge of not only recognizing possibilities within your life, but to consider how to choose from among them. That is: among all of the possible things to do this coming week, or this coming year, what will be most worthy of your unique gifts, and your limited resources?

Because we can't do it all. We can spend our lives dreaming about how we might enjoy life to the hilt. And how we might change the world for the better. Both of these pursuits are worthy; both are possible. It's even possible, of course, to enjoy *and* to assist—at the same time.

As long as we *still have* time...

We come together as beloved community to call attention to that which is worthy. Beauty is worthy of our attention. As is pain. Hope and sorrow, memories and aspirations. So many possibilities. We speak of these things directly, and through metaphor and art. And through movement, and awareness of our bodies. Through contact with each other: making physical connections, emotional connections, and through the resonance we feel among us—through the experiences and values we share.

For example, today Jan Cavitt is going to share with us her original story that conveys both imagination and determination. And we'll hear music written by Rev Andy Backus—each song a vehicle for the conveyance of great ideas and imagery, building upon the poetic genius of previous generations to comfort and to challenge our own, and future, generations.

Over the years we've enjoyed music that Andy has played for us, and that which he's written. But I

feel a particular urgency to seize *this day*, as Andy is facing a serious illness. So he says:

Wow, what an honor. I am humbled that you would sit in church and listen to some of my music being performed. Thank you to everyone for allowing me this indulgence. And thank you to Paul and Kevin for fostering it – and to those actually bringing it to life by way of your incredible talents.

Most composers, I think, are somehow driven, compelled to write their music – whether it ends up performed or not. That makes hearing one’s music performed (when it is) a very special and enduring treat. It certainly is for me.

Some call Unitarian Universalism a religion of the Word. I think that is an apt description. Yet it does not preclude our being a religion of music, too. Over the last decades I think it is fair to say that we are earning that characterization – especially in churches like our own. Who said you can’t have cake and eat it, too?

GATHERING SONGS

There is more Love Somewhere #95 / Amazing Grace #206 / Lift ev’ry Voice and Sing #149

CHALICE LIGHTING

by May Sarton, selected and read by Andy

*We are gardeners of the spirit, who know that without darkness
nothing comes to birth; who know that without light nothing flowers.*

Paul: The words and songs we share today contain both humor and reverence. Both humor and reverence are sacred, so it can be hard to know how to respond to their expression. For a composer or performer, what does it mean to be honored in a worship setting?

I believe the best response is reflected in the words of Kahlil Gibran: “Make me, oh Lord, food for the burning flame.” That is: if you’re experiencing a rollicking amen-shouting clap along, then keep it flowing, *be as food* for *that* burning flame.

And if you’re experiencing a moment of introspection, wonder, and grace, then allow that feeling to hang in the air, in the quiet, when the song ends. *Be as food* for *that* burning flame. Resist the convention of taking yourself out of the moment with obligatory applause. Close your eyes, perhaps. Sit on your hands if necessary to allow gratitude to radiate through the holy emptiness. In the worship setting, what composers and performers share is their gift to us, not a request for recognition, but a heartfelt invitation for us to feel what they have felt at the peak of their creative imagination.

Of course sometimes seriousness and humor and reverence are inseparable from one another. Such as in the following song of Andy’s that is goofy, and, at the same time, reflects the larger message of his ministry and his life: Let’s live while we’re alive. Refuse to let the future unduly interfere with the present. Cuz you’re not dead yet.

SOLO sung by Al Heezen

*I’m Not Dead Yet, words by Andy Backus

STORY by Jan Cavitt

Can Frogs Fly, Mama?

SOLO sung by Kevin Allen-Schmidt

*To Risk, anonymous

MESSAGE by Rev Paul Beckel

There are so many images contained in the lyrics of today's songs. There are three images that I find particularly compelling from the lyrics of Andy's songs (printed in the order of service). First, there's this one, referring to the potential for artistry in each of our lives:

"The materials are precious and perishable." [from Each of Us is an Artist, by Arthur Graham]

The materials with which we weave our lives, sculpt, compose, choreograph our lives, plant, prune, forge, and assemble our lives ... these materials include the unearned gifts that we are born with, and the skills we develop, and the experiences that inhabit the depth of our souls.

Of course these materials of the artistry of our lives are precious. I don't always remember, though, that they are perishable. We don't know what the next moments will bring. More gifts with which to compose our lives. Surprises, losses, collaborations, and, if we're attentive, more learning from these experiences.

As our lives unfold, and new opportunities arrive in each moment, opportunities not chosen pass into the emptiness of never. As I mentioned last week, that's OK. We can't seize every possibility present in every moment. We can actively choose, or we can go with the flow, or some of each. Still the past slips away. And yet: 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

How can that be when so often I feel depleted...tapped out? Consider a second image within today's lyrics: *"...all experience is an arch / wherethrough gleams the untraveled world / whose margin fades forever and forever when I move."* [from Ulysses, by Alfred Lord Tennyson]

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world, perhaps, because although our experience has shaped us profoundly, it has not determined our future. "I am part of all that I have met" [from the same stanza]. And all that I have met is a part of me. All *who* I have met are a part of me. But that's not all; I'm not dead yet. Our experience—our past—is an arch through which we gaze into untraveled worlds. Into horizons that fade to endless new horizons.

Shooting *through* the arch of experience into untraveled worlds—this makes me think of the phrase, "following through." When we say that we will follow through on something, we mean that we're going to do what we say we're going to do, *including whatever is necessary that we don't yet know will be necessary.*

The images that come to my mind with that expression, "follow through," are images of my body in motion as I was taught by numerous athletic coaches. In tennis: swing the racquet through the ball. Don't stop when you hit the ball. Follow through. It's not just a mechanical thing that a body in motion stays in motion. It's not something you have to do to appear graceful. Following through is an expression of good faith. A sprinter runs through the finish line, not stopping when she gets there. In basketball, we release the ball, but continue the motion. It's the same kicking a field goal or, in golf, tapping in the gentlest of putts. In darts, the target is not the target; what we aim for is through

and beyond the target.

Which brings me to the third and final line I'd like to pull from today's poetry: "*To love is to risk not being loved in return.*" [from *To Risk*, anonymous]

I think about you here, and throughout our larger community with Arab, Persian, and Kurdish heritage and ancestry. And so many others who love this country without any guarantee that they will be loved in return. "To love is to risk not being loved in return."

I think of Michele Obama's mantra. "When they go low, we go high." This was so inspiring when I first heard it; it's been hard to hold onto. I need to be reminded: When they go low, we go high.

I think of the anonymous person who noticed last weekend that our trash enclosure had accumulated every variety of ick and disarray. Monday morning it was pristine. I love you—whoever you are. "To love is to risk not being loved in return."

It has been my privilege to know people who have taken this attitude into their last days. Vulnerable, of course, but not defensive. Even in the end: not withholding their generosity of spirit, their radiant goodwill.

How might you love, risking not being loved in return? What might you do without recognition? What vibe do you give off to the stranger sitting next to you on the bus? Will you limit your carbon footprint for the benefit of future generations? Why? What did the future generations ever do for you? What if they don't appreciate the artistry of your life, the fullness of your love?

George Bernard Shaw wrote: *My life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatsoever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.*

Shaw's is a statement of good faith. A determination to follow through on his values, to love not just to be loved, and to live even in light of our perishability. To laugh, to weep, to seek. Today. 'Tis not too late.

SOLO sung by Melanie Rieck

*Until I Die, words by Tennyson

SHARING OUR GIFTS

*selections from Five Preludes for Piano

SENDING SONG

*No Longer Forward nor Behind (Andy's arrangement has been pasted into the back of our grey hymnal)

SOLO sung by Jayme Curley

*Each of us is an Artist, words by Arthur Graham

CIRCLE 'ROUND