

A Love Letter to Future Generations

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

November 22, 2020

Rev Paul Beckel

Singing Together #1051 *We Are*

Chalice Lighting

Across the distance, the light from within me shines, sending love to all.

Across the distance, your light is fuel that warms me
and helps to keep my own light burning.

Together, we keep the flame of community burning bright.

—Rev Laura Thompson, Minnesota Valley UU Fellowship

BUF Covenant

Introduction

Thank you for being here today to form a community of mutual support. The form that a community takes-on has to change from generation to generation ... as social, demographic, and technological forces open new opportunities for us to expand the circle of our care.

In generations to come there will be multitudes of forms of community, gathering joyfully, struggling with challenges, looking back to our own age, and looking further back, thousands of years into human history, and further back billions of years: toward glimpses of where we have come from, glimmers of understanding of how we got here. Looking back to detect some patterns of thought and behavior that might help them to prepare the way, with love, for those who will come next.

So I share with you, today, a love letter to future generations. And I invite you, too, to consider what promises you might make, what hard-learned lessons you'd like to pass along to them. And I mean *hard-earned* lessons, not flaccid wishful superstitions.

And consider too the encouragement that you'd like future generations to feel when they look to the strengths that they, like we, have inherited ... gifts bestowed upon us by the natural world, gifts bestowed on us by diverse cultural traditions, civic trial-and-error, and individual generosity.

Children's Focus *Can you do this Old Badger?*

Summary: Little Badger shows Old Badger all that he can do. Old Badger acknowledges that he's not so agile any more, but has some practical things to share with Little Badger, including finding honey and fish. In the end, Little Badger asks, "Will my Little Badgers love me as much as I love you?"

Meditation

We are in some kind of great transformation
Standing within a threshold
Not before a threshold, but within.

I have always thought of a threshold as a narrow strip,
the space between one side of a door and the other side of that door.

Sometimes going thru such a door is no big deal. One side looks very much like the other.
Passing from one room in my house to another...
Passing from Washington into British Columbia. The change – the immediate difference on
either side of the boundary – is pretty subtle.

But sometimes going across a metaphorical threshold *is* a big deal.
It can represent a choice that was difficult to make
It can represent a choice that was made without thinking
It can represent a change over which you had no choice.

Sometimes passing thru a gate, we find that the grass *is* greener on the other side.
Or maybe it's not grass at all, but stones
And maybe those stones are veined in gold.
But we cannot always know.

Besides, the most significant change is always within.

I had always envisioned a threshold as a narrow strip
A line to step over quickly.
For better, or for worse. For a small change, or radical transformation.
But today it feels like we're *within* a threshold. And the other side remains remote.

We've stepped into it, but not through it.
It's not clear whether we are yet in a new world, or a new era.
Whether we have changed yet, or not.

And yet, it seems, somehow, our narrative has been cut off.
The narrative that forms our identity.
Our own story that tells us who we are.
We look back and it's a jumble. It's hard to recall.

We want to be on both sides at once.
Here and there.
Now and then.
But what did we call the life we would wish back?
The old life? The before?
What was it we called the before?
When (like now) we had no name for the after?*

*this stanza adapted from *Threshold*, by Maggie Smith

Let's take a few moments now
To be here, in between
Because this is where we are
To observe, to breathe, to ground ourselves in strength
To ground ourselves in strength to bear what we are called to bear — in this moment
Enveloped in light
Conscious of gratitude
Ready for Now.

Eracism

Jane Ronca-Washburn

Reflections

Dear future generations, whoever you are, *wherever* you are, *whenever* you are, I'll begin by making one thing clear: I love you.

David Viscott wrote this: *To love and to be loved is to feel the sun on both sides.*

To love and to be loved is to feel the sun on both sides. I like feeling the sun on both sides. I like to love and to be loved. So even as I love you, I am grateful to feel your love radiating back through time. Whether that love that you radiate is directed at me, or not, doesn't matter. It is a comfort to me to look into the future and to know that there will be love there. There will be passion and compassion. There will be forward-looking love that you have for future generations. And there will be, among some of you, love and appreciation for the ancestors.

I don't mean to sound whiny when I say "among *some* of you there will be appreciation for the ancestors." I know what it's like to look back upon previous generations. I understand the mixed emotions. During some stages of your life you might remember our virtues, and in other stages of life you may be more tuned-in to our faults. I get that. Here in 2020 we do that too.

And tho *your* love will be strong as well for *your own* future generations, in this, too, you may have mixed emotions. You may have at times a deep sense of dread for what your future generations will face in their lifetimes. Or what will be faced by their children's children. Still, you will hold, at times, a deep sense of hope. Anticipation. Perhaps some regret that you won't be around to see them grow. I sure feel that way. The main reason I don't want to die is that I want to be with you to find out what happens next. I feel this way toward you—my future generations—as individuals, and also toward you as a global community. And I feel this way toward you as the embodiment of consciousness on an amazing evolving planet. I'd love to be with you as you learn what happens next. Because it will probably be frightening at times. And I would say: "See? You can do this!"

I feel so happy for you as I anticipate your experience of wonder, as you expand your minds, and as you experience the tingling sensation of having a body (at least once in your life I hope you take the opportunity to notice something as simple as walking, or even raising your arm and simply being astonished that such a thing can happen. If you can do either of these things without pain, take a moment to be even more astonished!) I want you to experience, too, the soul-stirring sensation of expanding your circle of Beloved Community. The taking-in of ever more and more

who had been at the margins of your consciousness—realizing that you belong in their circle...and that they belong in your circle...and that, really, there is only one circle. The circle of life.

I am already somewhere within that circle of life. Well over half-way around that weird wonderful cycle. So you and I may never know each other in the flesh. But all of us back here know with you what it means to taste something delicious—even if you and yours will find to be delicious some things that we find strange. We know what it means to bleed, and to sing, and to be held.

Oh, there is so much that has changed in my lifetime that sometimes I wonder if anything that we take for granted will even exist for you. Or if they exist, whether or not they will matter to you. But I'll say it anyway: you're really going to like the refreshment of clean cool water, the beauty of sunrise, and the adorableness of baby birds, and turtles, and skunks.

Singing Together

#1053 *How could anyone ever tell you—you were anything less than beautiful?*

Reflections

Dear ones,

Has anyone ever told you the story of the child who looked at a glass of something sweet and fresh, and cried, “Why is the glass half empty?” And her twin who said, “Don’t be silly, it’s half full.” And their pedantic uncle who said, “The glass is twice as big as it needs to be.” And their great grandmother who said, “My, isn’t that a beautiful glass?”

Dear ones, I wish you didn’t have to figure things out all over again. There are, after all, a lot of hints and patterns in human history that you would do well to consider. So when you look to us and wonder whether you should abandon traditional ways, or if you should carry them forward, I can tell you, confidently, that the answer is “yes.” Some of the ways that “things have always been done” are based in timeless wisdom about the human condition. Some traditions were invented surprisingly recently, and only pretend to be timeless. And some traditions are sheer nonsense, created on whimsy, or insufficient evidence, or to help someone maintain power and authority.

In every decision you make, the past should have a vote, maybe several votes, as there have been a lot of us back here. But the past should not get a veto. You ultimately have the freedom and the responsibility to make your own choices.

Cherish the ancient stories, parables, fairy tales, legends, TV shows, and podcasts. Myths are not falsehoods. They are revelations, great stories that have given meaning to life. Evolve with them.

==

Dear ones, I fear for you. Sorry; I don’t want to burden you with my anxieties. But just a heads up: you may feel this way too toward those *you* love. History tells us that things can go very wrong when tectonic plates converge ... when cold fronts meet warm fronts in the sky ... when two groups of people who do not respect one another see the world as winner-take-all.

I fear for your safety and your sanity. I wonder if my generation is as resilient as the ones that came before. There were some bad-ass women who brought us into this world. Men too, of course, and children, yes, children who came through hellacious conditions of poverty and abuse and scratched their way forward, pulling others along with them. Oh, I know that's not just people from the past. There are all too many people here right now who are doing just that. Tired, rejected, neglected, disrespected, and courageous.

I'm so torn regarding what I wish for you. I want you to have happiness and comfort and opportunities to create and bask in beauty. But I don't want you to be complacent. Trials and hardship can make us resilient and wise. And I want you to be resilient and wise. I hope that doesn't make me sound like an old codger complaining about "kids these days." Oh well, who knows what it will be that will make you resilient and wise? All I know is that someday you'll be an old codger too. So I'll try to set a good example.

==

Dear ones, I thank you for what you have already given me. You've given me a sense of hope. I can't expect you to cure cancer, eliminate the stockpiles of nuclear waste and disinformation, or even save the orcas (tho it breaks my heart to say that). I am counting on you, though, to keep up the good work.

And thank you for giving me a sense of purpose. In the words of Annie Dillard: "We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. [To] notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but [to] notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature — so that creation need not play to an empty house." What I'm saying is that I already have a purpose for here and now (to abet creation and witness to it). But knowing that you're coming deepens my awareness that my choices today will have an impact in the years to come.

You also contribute to my sense of wonder. I'm not talking about wondering, and the natural curiosity that children bring into the world, which I greatly appreciate in you ... but simple wonder. You give me the gift of wonder, awe, fascination, reverence. *Wondering* wants an answer. It doesn't *demand* an answer but the object of wondering is to find out. Wonder, on the other hand, asks no questions, and has no need for answers. That's what I am feeling toward you: in addition to wondering and praying and cheering you on, I feel a wonderful wonder that you might even exist! Elation, gravity, gratitude, and love.

==

There were whole sections of this letter that I had to cut out. These included my charge to you, and my advice that you become self-aware, and humbly recognize your limits. And my reassurance to you that you will have what you need to meet the challenges of your time. On the plus side, this meant that I could just scribble out those notes and I didn't have to wordsmith them to death.

You see, I'm trying hard right now to model something for you. I'm trying to demonstrate the merits of incompleteness. Too many times I have tried to compile and consolidate every aspect

of a topic, to seamlessly integrate it and wrap it up with a little bow. Here's a heads up: it can't be done. Being thorough can be a good thing, but trying to capture a completely integrated understanding and expression of truth or goodness or love or my hopes and dreams for you or even something as simple as a grain of sand ... that's just arrogant. Blasphemous. And it's not going to happen. And that's ok.

You will find that you need to leave some things to your own future generations. Unfinished business, wrongs not righted, feelings not expressed, grammar not corrected. You may have the benefit of artificial intelligence. Good luck with that. You will still find that limits are essential to art, and limits are what makes love matter.

Don't try to say "I love you" just once in such a grand, poetic, and comprehensive way that you don't ever have to say it again. It doesn't work that way.

So I'll stop now, grateful to know that I will have chances to wrestle with my love for you again and again.

I'll stop now. Because I'm ready to accept the fact that I'm not going to get the last word.

Interlude

The Farthest Field

Offertory

Singing Together

#1028 *The Fire of Commitment*

Extinguishing the Chalice

Blessed is the path on which you travel.
Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.
Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.
Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.
Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.
Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.
May you go forth in peace.

—Eric Williams