

“Your Mission (Should You Choose to Accept It)”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on June 20, 2010

It's the last Sunday of our church year. Next Sunday we'll move into the Murray Room, where the ventilation is better, which is a good thing as we enter these warmer days. I'm somebody who likes to go to church on a summer morning, and glad for the opportunity to show up here, or somewhere else, and be part of the congregation. I am preaching next Sunday here, and I'm grateful to the people who are leading our services here for the rest of the summer, who are allowing us to offer what we try to do here every Sunday, the opportunity to connect with others, to share your joys and sorrows, and the opportunity to touch what is holy and what is real.

Of course, church is not the only place to do this. But it is a good place. And when I say church, I'm not talking primarily about the building. I'm talking about you, the gathered community. Those of you who are here this morning, as well as those who aren't. The body of folks who, in one way or another, make up this community. Like Ruth Marr, who celebrates her 93rd birthday tomorrow. And Liam and Tristan Rand, the newborn sons of Katherine and Nicholas Rand, who were born on June 1 and are still in the hospital, but doing well and coming home soon. Young and old, newcomers and old-timers, we are all part of this beautiful body that we call church. It's good for us to be here together in this place. But we don't stop being a community when we are apart; those bonds don't go away.

If I'm in some other church on a Sunday this summer, you, and this place, will still be in my heart. When I'm standing in a trout stream in Montana or Wyoming on a Sunday morning, as I will be in early August, you and this place will be in my heart then too. I'll wonder about what's happening here and what I'm missing. And then I'll turn my attention back to that trout that's rising, or that stretch of river up ahead. I'm going to be out in Yellowstone National Park, and one of the guide books I have says that fishing in Yellowstone is like fishing in a church. I'm going to love that...

That's what I'm looking for this summer--time to be in a place that feels like church, whether it's at home, in the backyard or on our porch, in a trout stream or an actual church. I know this is what I need--time to listen for the longings of my own heart, and for the voice of God. I'm fortunate that our church schedule and my agreement with you provides me the time and space to do just that.

What about you? How are you going to spend these summer days? When I was a kid, when school let out the summer seemed to stretch endlessly to the horizon. I imagined September would never come. But you know, don't you, that these days are fleeting. We don't have all the time in the world. But I trust that we do have enough time. We

have this day, and God willing, tomorrow, and the day after that. What do you intend to do, the poet asks, with your one wild and precious life?¹

That's my question for you this morning. What are you going to do with this life you have been given? The summer provides an opportunity to slow down and take stock and even to venture where you have not gone before. My daughter has been making a list of books she wants to read this summer. This is something I'm going to do too. My goal is to spend this summer attentive and absorbed. Whether in a book, or around the dinner table, or in a trout stream, to be present to that very moment.

Of course, this is a central to my work--paying attention is what a minister is supposed to do. And I hope and pray that I do that pretty well. But my family would tell you I don't do it well all the time. I can be distracted and distractible. Maybe that comes with the territory--needing to be really attentive at times causes me to be spacey and absent at others. My goal this summer is to spend less time with those things that distract me--glowing screens of any kind, multitasking, moving too quickly through the world. Whether I'm fishing or reading or walking or in conversation, I want to be there, in that moment. That's what I think reverence is--paying attention.

I want to challenge you to commit to your own summer work. What is it that your heart and soul is longing for right now? What is it that you have been meaning to attend to and putting off, maybe because you are too busy or maybe because it's something that may challenge or change you? Is there a relationship that needs your attention? Is there someone you feel called to reach out to, even though you know that won't be easy? Might it be you that need to tend the relationship with your own soul, or your relationship with God? Could this summer be the time to start those long conversations?

Your summer work could begin with something as simple as reading one book that's been calling to you. Or it could be a larger project--making some significant change in your life, or taking up a spiritual practice, or committing or recommitting to a relationship. The point is, I hope you will use the time you have this summer to step back and look at the big picture, to ask yourself deep questions, to think long thoughts. To make time and space to listen to your own heart and soul.

This is what we ask our youth to do when they participate in Coming of Age--to look inside themselves and to wrestle with the big religious questions. Questions about the nature of God, and of good and evil, about death and dying and how you practice your faith. When I worked with the Coming of Age program over in North Andover the adult mentors would often say to me, "I wish I had started considering these questions when I was their age." It's never too late to start. One of those mentors suggested that what we needed was a Coming of Middle Age Program--a chance for adults to engage with these big questions. One of the youth pointed out that the acronym for Coming of

¹ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day."

Middle Age is COMA. Hmmm.... Whatever we call it, I want us to develop a program for adults here that will function like a little seminary--offering opportunities to learn and go deeper, to engage with those big questions and be more fully formed as people of faith. So we will be awake and alive and engaged, not sleepwalking or uncommitted or comatose!

This sermon could be summed up in these words from Howard Thurman, great African-American clergyman and activist. He said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

The old TV show "Mission: Impossible" would always begin with the star getting an assignment from his spy agency, often delivered in dramatic way. The recorded voice would say, "Your mission, should you choose to accept it..." Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to do what makes you come alive. And come back here in the fall, prepared to tell us about it, and prepared to put your passions to use here in this church community.

This is not an impossible mission. It's what we are called to do, both as humans and as people of faith. Unlike on the TV show, this message will not self destruct in five seconds. Your call, if it is an authentic one, will not go away. If you're not quite ready to hear it, don't worry, it will persist, it will come back. But why wait? You know that time is fleeting. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to find one way to be more fully alive. I can't tell you exactly what that way is. But I trust that if you give yourself the time and space, if you do your own work, you will find it for yourself.

This summer, which officially begins tomorrow at 7:28 am, is a good time to start. May we be people with hearts big enough to hold both life's joys and its sorrows; may we be a community with a living vision, with ears to hear and eyes to see; may we be a people blessed with wisdom and with courage for the living of these days.

Amen.