



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Quiet Time,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on December 29, 2013

When I was a child and we went to the beach on vacation, my mom would get this crazy idea about how we should spend that time. “After lunch,” she would announce, “we’re all going to have some quiet time.” Which meant we had to go to our rooms, and lie down, and do nothing. We could read, or try to sleep, but it was torture! Back then I wanted nothing to do with “quiet time.” I wanted to go, go, go!

Over time, things change. I love this week between Christmas and New Year’s because it’s quiet. The invitation of these days, as the year draws to a close, is to adopt a different pace and take the time to reflect on these mysteries Christmas invites us into. To ask, “What is being born in me? How might I bring love and light into the world?”

After all the busyness that leads up to Christmas, isn’t this time a gift? Aren’t these days particularly good ones to touch that “point of rest in the center of our being” that Dag Hammarskjöld speaks of in today’s reading?¹

Do you know what he’s talking about? If you have cultivated an inner life, if you are someone who is comfortable with silence, in a culture that clearly is not, then I suspect Hammarskjöld’s words ring true for you. And if they don’t, if you have not found that point of rest at the center of your being, then I suggest you might want to start looking for it. Because it is so easy to be pulled and tugged by the many voices in our lives. If you can’t hear the voice that is your own, and if you can’t hear that other voice, that says to you, as it did to Jesus, “You are my beloved,” then I worry about you. That you might not have what you need to keep living a good, openhearted, hopeful, joyful, courageous life. Because I don’t know how you do this, if you aren’t in touch with the depths of your own soul. And I don’t know how you do this, if you don’t make time for quiet.

Cultivating quiet isn’t always easy. It makes some people nervous. “What might come up, if I slowed down? Perhaps some things I’d rather not deal with. I might find myself bored, or sad, or angry.” Yes, and I’d say, and it’s better to face those things head on, rather than pretending they aren’t there.

A couple of weeks ago, on that Sunday when it snowed and we had to cancel church, I went out early to do some shoveling, then came back into a quiet house and sat in silence for a while. This is my morning practice--to begin the day with some time for quiet meditation and prayer; doing

¹ That reading, from Dag Hammarskjöld’s journal, later published as *Markings*, is found later in the text of this sermon.

this grounds and sustains me. That snowy morning, those words from Dag Hammarskjöld's journal came to mind. I want to share them with you again, as a brief meditation.

To have humility is to experience reality, not in relation to ourselves,
but in its sacred independence.
It is to see, judge, and act
from the point of rest in ourselves.
Then, how much disappears,
and all that remains falls into place.

In the point of rest at the center of our being,
we encounter a world
where all things are at rest in the same way.
Then a tree becomes a mystery,
a cloud a revelation,
each person a cosmos
of whose riches we can only catch glimpses.
The life of simplicity is simple,
but it opens to us a book
in which we never get beyond the first syllable.

These words are printed on the back of the order of service today. You might want to take them with you, and put them somewhere you'll see them, as a reminder and an invitation to tend your own inner life.

If you are someone who says, "I don't have time to rest--there's so much to do," then I gently suggest that you are one who really needs this kind of quiet time. Yes, it takes time. Yes, it takes commitment and practice. But I've found that it also causes a shift in time--it helps me to be more clear about what is important, and what isn't. "How much disappears, and all that remains falls into place."

The great minister Howard Thurman wrote words that will be familiar to many of you, that are perfect for this time of the year.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoners,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

When the busyness and celebrating is over, the essence of Christmas remains. What Thurman called “the work of Christmas.” To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoners. Doesn’t this begin with finding those lost parts of our own selves? With healing our broken places, so that we can be of use to others? If you are going to rebuild the nations, as Dag Hammarskjöld, who was Secretary-General of the United Nations, certainly did, then you need to know who you are and whose you are. Hammarskjöld did this by cultivating an inner life, and by writing in that journal that was only discovered upon his death.

If you are inclined to be a person of action, then good--we need you, and our world needs you! But if you think this talk of silence and sitting is a big waste of time, then hear these words Hammarskjöld wrote in that journal: “In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.” He was no navel gazer. He just knew that his action needed to be grounded in something larger than his own ego, in something deeper than the noise of this world.

Howard Thurman is saying something similar, that Christmas has meaning to the extent it makes a difference in our lives, and in the lives of others. We celebrate Christmas by taking upon ourselves the work of helping and healing, of bringing peace and making music. Isn’t that why we are here--in this church and on this earth--to share the love and blessings we have known?

As you know, in a few days I’m going on sabbatical. Though I will be away from you for four months, though I may be doing a little fishing for part of the time, I hope you know this sabbatical is not a time for me to check out or space out or hide from the cares of this world. No, it’s a time to set aside my daily obligations so I can more deeply explore these matters of the heart and mind and soul. It’s an opportunity to slow down, to be quiet, to reflect. So that I can more fully live out my vocation; can more deeply do this work I have been called to do.

While I’m away, you will keep doing what you do. I expect you will discover, in new ways, how much you are the church, and how well you can get along without me. I know that you aren’t getting a sabbatical--you are staying here, continuing to go to work, continuing to do the work of this loving and justice-seeking community--but I hope knowing that I’m on sabbatical might inspire you to make some time in your own lives for quiet and reflection too. And to try this as a community too.

I expect this time away will change me, in ways I don’t know anything about yet. And I expect this time will also change you. When we are back together in May, we’ll have stories to tell one another, and it will be the start of a new chapter in our shared ministry together.

I want you to know two things. First, I am coming back. Several of you have told me that you worry my sabbatical is going to cause me to want to go somewhere else, or do something else. I feel so blessed to be your minister, to serve in this particular place. I hope and expect to be here, if you want me, for a good long time. Second, I already know that I’m going to miss you. I’ll miss these weekly conversations we have, where I get to do most of the talking. I’ll miss those other conversations, when you do the talking and I listen, and I’ll miss being here and seeing your faces.

Though I am laying down the daily responsibilities of parish ministry for four months, I won't stop being your minister. While I'm away, I will continue to hold you in my heart and in my prayers. I expect these four months will go by pretty quickly, and when May comes, I will be glad to be back here with you.

I see my sabbatical as a time to go deeper. I encourage you to find ways to do this too. To focus on what really matters. To look after one another. To be especially attentive to those in need, and to new folks in your midst. To tend your own spiritual lives.

On Christmas Eve, we sang the carol, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,"² written by the Unitarian minister Edmund Hamilton Sears in the middle of the 19th century. It's not one of the most rousing carols--there are no hallelujahs or fa-la-la-la-la's. It tells the truth that, too often, we humans have made a mess of things. What I love about this carol is its prophetic call to do the work of Christmas: to be quiet enough to hear the angels sing, to do our part to bring peace on earth and justice for all.

When the busyness of Christmas is behind us, the invitation is cultivate the spirit of Christmas, all the year round. To hold in our hearts a living vision of what could be, and what should be, and to practice it in our lives, so we will leave this world better than we found it.

This is what prophets have always called for--that we do our part, while we're here, to bring closer that time, when peace and justice will reign. That through our action, and our contemplation, through times of work and time for quiet, we will help heal and bless our world. So that one day, we will give back that song, which now the angels sing.

Amen.

² Hymn #244 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.