



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Shared World,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 3, 2015

We just sang about putting our hearts in a holy place, being blessed with love and amazing grace. And who among us doesn't need more of that? More peace, more contentment, more connection to that which feeds us, which helps keep us happy and whole.

But how do we get there, when there is so much trouble, in our hearts and in our land? Our hearts are troubled, aren't they, when there's so much suffering and injustice in our world. The earthquake in Nepal and the death of another black man at the hands of police, this time in Baltimore, are two recent examples of the suffering in our world. Those of us who just returned from Nicaragua, we are now acutely aware of the disparity in wealth between our country and so much of the world, where many people struggle to get by on the equivalent of a couple of dollars a day.

I have to confess that I traveled to Nicaragua with some amount of trepidation. I was worried about the poverty we would see, and wondered how we, from the United States, would be received there. This is one of the costs of privilege—it separates you from people you could be connected to. When you have a lot to lose, you worry that others are going to resent you for it, or take it from you. Have you ever found yourself, when driving through a poor part of town, or in a city you're unfamiliar with, locking your car doors? Did you do that in response to a threat, because someone was actually trying to get into your car, or just because you felt uncomfortable? My point is, we're taught to fear what is different; we're taught to project that fear out onto others, rather than look inside and ask ourselves, “What am I afraid of? And is it a reasonable fear, or is it a prejudice I've been taught?”

We live in a culture where there is a growing divide between the rich and the poor, where now it's acceptable to blame and even vilify the poor rather than help them, where politicians continue to sell the American dream that anyone can make it, can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, no matter what obstacles stand in their way. Including systemic issues like racism, failing inner city schools, and unequal justice under the law. You know, don't you, that what you look like, and where you live and who you know, these things matter when you apply for a job, or get arrested. Maybe even when you walk into a church for the first time.

Unfettered capitalism has become our national religion, and anyone who suggests there should be constraints on executive pay, or that the minimum wage should be increased, or that there's something wrong with a system that pays millions to entertainers and sports stars while teachers

struggle to get by—if you say these things you run the risk of being called a socialist or communist. Didn't we used to have a social contract, some sense that we are our sister's and our brother's keeper? Now it's every person for him or herself; we celebrate heroic individualism and seem to have forgotten about cooperation and community.

That's the bad news. The good news is that we humans are incredibly resilient and resourceful. We are capable of change. Human history is full of examples of people have overcoming adversity to find a better way. In the black church they talk about God helps us to make a way out of no way. In our Unitarian tradition we remember what Theodore Parker said about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice. Helen Keller put it this way: she said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."

Before we traveled to Nicaragua, I worried about how we would be received. But the people there were wonderful—friendly and kind, gracious and welcoming. I began to see that my fears were my own projection; those were my expectations, that they would resent me, or shake me down for money. They were grateful and happy that we had come. One day we had a conversation with a man named Cesar, who had began fighting in the revolution when he was a teenager. One day, on the way home from school, he earned that his name was on a government list. He wasn't safe, so he didn't go home, but sent word to his parents and headed to the mountains to fight with the Sandinistas. Cesar saw firsthand the atrocities committed by the Somoza regime, and later by the Contras, which were both supported by our government. He had friends who were killed, and he pulled no punches telling us about the terrible things that had been done to the people of Nicaragua by our leaders and those they supported. But he had no malice toward us. He said, "Please go back home and tell your people that they have friends in Nicaragua, waiting to welcome them."

Our worship theme this month is transcendence. At first I wasn't sure about this—it seemed like an invitation to escape, to withdraw from the cares and concerns of the world. Lord knows we don't need more people doing that. But I've come to see transcendence differently—as a gift and blessing, as an opening to new depth and understanding. As something essential to our health and happiness and usefulness. Oliver Saks said, "To live on a day-to-day basis is insufficient for human beings; we need to transcend, transport, escape; we need meaning, understanding, and explanation; we need to see over-all patterns in our lives. We need hope, the sense of a future. And we need freedom... to get beyond ourselves..."

It's almost like we have been programmed—by our parents and teachers, by the expectations that surround us—and we need ways to break out of the patterns we've established, the habits that no longer serve us. If we are sleepwalking through life, we need experiences of transcendence to wake us up and shake us up, so we can look clearly at how things are, and start imagining how they could be.

I'm aware that, when it comes to change and growth, the church doesn't have the best reputation. Have you heard the one that goes, "How many church folks does it take to change a lightbulb?" The answer is, "Change? Change? My grandmother paid for that light bulb!"

I hope that coming to church, and being part of this community, helps you open up to a wider, longer view. Helps you to get in touch with who you were born to be, lifts up a vision of what our community, nation and world could look like, reminds you of what it feels like to be free. I hope it opens you up to that Spirit, whatever you call it, that is always calling us to stand on the side of love and justice, always longing for us to be free.

Sometimes moments of transcendence come as unexpected gifts; they sneak up on us and catch us by surprise. But I'm convinced you can increase your receptivity to these holy moments. Reading poetry is one way, studying theology or the mystics is another. Traveling to somewhere you've never been, especially with the spirit of a pilgrim, is bound to help you see things differently, and have experiences of transcendence.

But they can happen anywhere, as the poet Naomi Shihab Nye reminds us. Even in an airport. Even in these fearful times when people in our country seem inclined to mistrust those who dress differently or who speak differently or live on the wrong side of town. Hear again what happened at that airport, when Nye was waiting for a plane that had been delayed, when and reached out to comfort and companion a Palestinian woman who had been upset and afraid, until someone who spoke her in her own language:

"She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost."¹

This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Where the scales fall from our eyes and we see one another as sisters and brothers, as kindred souls on this fragile planet, here to care for one another, here to learn from and bless one another. Where we have more faith than fear, where we are open to mystery and wonder and moments of transcendence. Where we are willing to be led by the Spirit to places we did not plan to go.

Mother Teresa said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to one another."

My prayer is that we will remember that we do belong to one another, and that our world is meant to be shared among all her people. That where our hearts have been hardened, they will be

¹ Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4," the reading, is available online at http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/nye_gate.htm

softened so we be will open to opportunities for transcendence. That the next time you find yourself in a place where you could be fearful or apprehensive, a place that needs your loving presence, your faith and courage, you will remember that another way is possible.

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Amen.