"A Shrine by the Road,"
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 24, 2012

A few weeks ago, when I put my name on our summer worship calendar for today, I wondered what this day would bring. As the first of our summer services, I wanted it to be something that was right for this season. At the same time, I'd be just back from our UU General Assembly in Phoenix, which this year was organized around social justice issues, so I wondered if I would share with you what happened there.

And then, things changed. I got a call that a beloved member of our church, Kevin Backman, had died. It didn't take long to know I wouldn't be going to Phoenix this week--I wanted and needed to be here.

Kevin has been close in my heart this week. I've felt a sadness, an ache, over the loss his death brings. We had a lovely vespers service here on Wednesday night to remember him, to say prayers and light candles and share stories. I've had conversations with some of you in which you shared your memories of Kevin, and what a generous and caring and complicated person he was. Many of you have had these conversations among yourselves too, and it's good.

One of the things I cherish about being a minister is that I get to be with people around the time of death. In my experience, death clarifies things--the insignificant things tend to fall away and you see what really matters. It's a privilege to be with people who are facing death, and those who are grieving and trying to make meaning from the loss.

In the first few minutes of that vespers service on Wednesday night, at 7:09 pm, came the summer solstice--the moment our northern end of the earth was tilted closest toward the sun, and summer began. And we were here to mark a life that ended too soon. Light and shadow, beginning and ending. How do we hold it all?

In one of her poems, Mary Oliver says

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.[1]

This week, feeling the sadness of Kevin's death, a part of me wanted to jump into action--to make plans and do things and be of use. I did some of that. But another part knew that what was needed was some time to feel that sadness. So I gave myself some time for that. Our Vespers on Wednesday night was good for that too.

I know what Mary Oliver says, about holding on and letting go, is true. But right now I would put it differently. I'd say, to live in this world you have to be able to hold both joy and sorrow. You have to develop a heart and soul big enough and flexible enough to be able to apprehend beauty, and know grief; to experience joy and feel despair. To be able to take in what is beautiful and to face what is difficult and uncomfortable, and not turn away.

It's easy to check out on the pain of life, and understandable. Why wouldn't we want to reach for an antidote, of one kind of another? But I'm convinced that to the extent we deaden ourselves to pain and discomfort, we also deaden ourselves to joy. We need ways to be open, tools and practices that help us to grow big and flexible hearts.

A tool I want to share with you today is poetry. One of my colleagues says that when he became a parish minister he had no idea how important poetry would be to his spiritual life and to the worship life of the congregation. I love that in our tradition we are not limited to scripture from just one book. Much of the Bible is poetry, and ought to be read that way. Contemporary poetry can be sacred scripture too.

Listen to what David Whyte has to say about a poet's work, and how his words have a religious quality to them:

"The poet lives and writes at the frontier between deep internal experience and the revelations of the outer world. There is no going back for the poet once this frontier has been reached; a new territory is visible and what has been said cannot be unsaid. The discipline of poetry is in overhearing yourself say difficult truths from which it is impossible to retreat. Poetry is a break for freedom."

Reading and saying poetry is like sitting at the feet of a prophet or spiritual guide; it can be like church or a pilgrimage to a holy site.

William Stafford has a poem about this, entitled, of course, "Poetry."

Its door opens near. It's a shrine
by the road, it's a flower in the parking lot
of The Pentagon, it says,"Look around,
listen. Feel the air." It interrupts

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[1] Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods."

international telephone lines with a tune.
When traffic lines jam, it gets out
and dances on the bridge. If great people
get distracted by fame they forget
this essential kind of breathing and they die inside their gold shell.
When caravans cross deserts
it is the secret treasure hidden under the jewels.

Any of us can get distracted, if not by fame, then by busyness, by any number of things We need ways to be in touch with the secret treasure that's hidden just out of sight. The job of the poet is to know what we can forget, and remind us, so that we will tend the garden of our own souls. So that we can ponder the events of our lives and make meaning from them, and turn them into something good and useful.

We live in a world that seems to be forgetting how to do this basic alchemy. I don't have anything against social media, it has its place, but the connections it fosters are pretty shallow. Early this week, when we had to share the news of Kevin's death, I encouraged people to pass the word directly as much as possible. Because people need someone to talk to when they hear such sad news.

We live in an era where people are hungry for a human connection, hungry for what is true and real.

"This is not the age of information," David Whyte says.

This is not
the age of information.
Forget the news,
and the radio,
and the blurred screen.
This is the time
of loaves
and fishes.
People are hungry
and one good word is bread
for a thousand.[2]

There's an ancient spiritual practice called lectio divina, that's Latin for "holy reading." It's simple really. You gather with a small group of people. It helps to light a candle, and begin with a few minutes of silence. Someone reads the selected passage aloud. Silence follows the reading, during which time people meditate on what they have heard. When they're ready, each person says aloud a word from the reading that spoke to them. After some more silence, the passage is read a second time. Then participants give voice to a feeling the passage evoked in them. Then

[2] David Whyte, "Loaves and Fishes."

it's read a third and final time. After some moments for contemplation, participants share what the reading brought up for them.

This repetition of words may sound boring, but it's not. Participants in lectio divina often say they notice things in the reading they've never heard before. It's uncanny how the passage can relate to what is going on in each person's life. There's something about the repetition that helps you to go more deeply into the text and into yourself. Lectio is something that works well in a group, but it can also be practiced on your own. These warm days, when it's good to slow down anyway, could be a good time to try it. You could do it with a poem, or a few lines of scripture, a favorite psalm, perhaps. This fall we'll offer lectio divina once a month, in the hour before Sunday worship.

William Stafford says that poetry is a shrine by the road. Many of us are zooming down the highway, careening from one experience to another. Maybe we're speeding because we're in a hurry to get somewhere. Maybe we're running away from something. The invitation is to slow down, to make and find those shrines by the side of the road. Not to pass them all by. To have places--physical places like this one, and moments in time--when we are open to our joy and to our sorrow.

"How we spend our days," Annie Dillard observed, "is, of course, how we spend our lives." How are you spending your days? Are there shrines you are visiting, places and practices that feed and restore your soul? If not, what are you waiting for?

David Whyte says

I want to know if you belong or feel
abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others...
If you know
how to melt into that fierce heat of living
falling toward
the center of your longing.[3]

We are called to be poets too--to be the poets of our lives. To take what we are given, our joys and our sorrows, life's pain and its beauty, and gather it all up, and hold it as best we can. To chew on it and make meaning from it, to make of it something beautiful and real. To build shrines that nourish and sustain us, and that others can visit too.

We are called to bring as much love we can into the struggles of life, so that at the end, when the shadows fall, we will, as our Unitarian forebear Vivian Pomeroy said, "have hearts unembittered by all we have suffered and uncorrupted by all we have enjoyed, and be at last remembered as those who have loved greatly."

Amen.

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[3] David Whyte, "Self Portrait."