

“Living by Heart,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill  
on January 31, 2010

When my children were little, we read to them almost every night. I have to confess that some nights I'd be tired, or a story would seem particularly long, and I'd try to skip ahead. But if you've ever tried this, you know that even children who don't know how to read somehow know when you have left out part of a favorite story, and will bust you for it.

Sometimes we would read poetry too. The great thing about poems is that, with some repetition, you remember them. They seem to take up residence inside you, and can speak them and share them. This is true about songs too, which, if you think about it, is poetry put to music. After we'd turn out the lights, sometimes I would sing hymns to my kids, and of course this required that I know the words. You can't sing in the dark if you don't know the words by heart. Sometimes I got them wrong, or I didn't know every verse, but that was okay. Over time, with practice, I learned them and realized that I knew some of our favorite hymns by heart--hymns like “Amazing Grace,” “For All the Saints,” “My Life Flows on in Endless Song,” and “We'll Build a Land,” which I think my kids also chose because it has four long verses.

My wife, who sings in a women's chorus, would sing the pieces her group was working on, sometimes gospels or spirituals, sometimes folk music from the Balkans or freedom songs from South Africa. One night she was singing that one we just sang, “Hold my hand, while I run this race, for I don't want run thing race in vain.” And our son Will, who was little then, said, “Mommy, what's a raisin vane?”

A couple of weeks ago, in my sermon, I said that you can tell something about a church by how people sing--do they sing out, or hold back, are they enthusiastic, or tentative? Several of you have spoken to me about this, and you reminded me that it's hard to sing out on a song you don't really know. You're right, and so Claudia have started a list of “hymns we want to sing well” and we'll use this list, we'll sing these hymns enough so we get to know them. But it's important that these be hymns that you like to sing, so please write down on paper or e-mail us the hymns you want to put on our “greatest hits” or “top 40” list. You young people can do this too, ok?

There is so much power in singing. I don't understand how it works, but I know that singing, especially singing with others, changes us. If you doubt this, look at liberation struggles--the civil right movement or the struggle against apartheid in South Africa--and the way music helped carry people through hard times. I don't want us to be a great singing congregation because I want to impress people. I'm not fantasizing that we are going to go out on tour or anything. No, I want us to be a congregation of strong singers because I want you to be touched and be changed by the power of

music, which is one way to touch the power of the spirit and sense the presence of God. The black national anthem exhorts us to “Lift every voice and sing.” “That’s what I’m talking about--lifting every voice and feeling the power of joining your voice with others.

The way to learn a song is to sing it. The way to learn a poem or a prayer by heart is to say it or pray it. There is both power and blessing in knowing things by heart. When I say the words of the 23rd psalm at a funeral, I’m often struck by how people just join in. It’s a prayer really, and one that speaks to the moment: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4).

Harry Scholefield was a UU minister who developed a spiritual discipline he called “Living by Heart.” The idea is that you commit to memory some poems, prayers, or pieces of scripture. You repeat them in an intentional way, in a mindful, meditative way, so that you haven’t simply memorized them, but they live deep in your being.

If you want to get better at playing a musical instrument, you practice. If you want to be a better ball player or golfer or flyfisherperson, you get out there and practice. As that shoe company puts it, you just do it. The way to go deeper in the spiritual life is to practice.

When you know something by heart, you are liberated from the text. If you’re singing, you can clap, or hold hands they way with did with our friends from Calvary when we sang “We Shall Overcome” at the MLK breakfast. If you don’t need to have your eyes glued to the book, you can look around at the others who are singing and make eye contact and feel more connected, more in community, with others. You can take that song with you wherever you go--you can sing it in the care or walking down the street. Maybe that’s why people love singing in the shower, where nobody takes a book, because in there you’re singing by heart.

In our reading this morning, Barbara Brown Taylor says that what we are longing for is often right under our feet, if we will only look there. We don’t need to go to the ends of the earth or get special training, we just need to be willing, she says, “to imagine that we already have everything we need.”<sup>1</sup>

Can you do this? Can you trust that you already have what you need? If not, then I suggest you start getting in touch with what you know by heart. Put down the how-to manual, stop listening to the experts and listen to your own life and your own longings. Be in touch with what you find there. Practice singing without the hymn book and see what happens. Learn a prayer or a poem that moves you and say it at night before you go to bed. Learn a chant and sing it over and over in the car. Because doing any of these things will help you to look more deeply into your own heart. It will help give you the confidence you need to trust that you have enough, that you are enough. Ask

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<sup>1</sup> From the Introduction to *An Altar in the World*, by Barbara Brown Taylor.

yourself that question that Barbara Brown Taylor got asked, “What is saving your life now?” Live with that question and pay attention to what comes up; the answers that come from your own soul. And then, for God’s sake, make time for those things that are saving your life, okay?

What is saving my right now is having this church to come to on Sunday mornings, and you, this lovely community, to worship with. And the occasional Sunday to not be here, like last week, when I got to go out to breakfast with my daughter, that is saving me, as is any kind of family time. As is having some time for quiet, remembering that it is not all up to me; that there is a power at work in the world, on the side of love and justice, that is certainly saving me. And having songs and prayers in my heart, that rise up when I need them, that is saving me too.

I want to tell you a story. It’s a true story, told by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a French aviator and author, who wrote *The Little Prince*. He was a pioneer of international postal flight in the early 1900s, flying in Africa on a route which took him over the Sahara desert. He tells this story in his memoir *Wind, Sand and Stars*.

It begins with him saying there are times pilots find they have “slipped beyond the confines of this world.” He describes a foggy night, flying over North Africa, when he lost his bearings. “All that night,” he writes, “the radio messages sent from the ports in the Sahara concerning our position had been inaccurate, and my radio operator, Néri, and I had been drawn [off] course.... It was ... impossible for us to say how long we had been flying towards the high seas. Nor were we certain of making the coast, for our fuel was probably low. And even so, once we had reached it, we would still have to make port--after the moon had set.”

“We had no means of angular orientation,” he continues, “were already deafened, and were bit by bit growing blind. The moon, like a pallid ember, began to go out in the banks of fog. Overhead, the sky was filling with clouds, and we flew ... between cloud and fog in a world voided of all substance and light. The ports that signaled us had given up trying to tell us where we were. “No bearings, no bearings,” was all their message, for our voice reached them from everywhere and nowhere. With sinking hearts, Néri and I leaned out [of the plane], he on his side and I on mine, to see if anything, anything at all, was distinguishable in this void. Already our tired eyes were seeing things--errant signs, delusive flashes, phantoms.”

But they were able to see the occasional star near the horizon, between the fog and the clouds, and they steered toward it until it set, when they would seek another star to guide them.

“And with that,” he says, “we knew ourselves to be lost in interplanetary space among a thousand inaccessible planets, we who sought only the one veritable planet: our own, that planet on which alone we should find our familiar countryside, the houses of our friends, our treasures... Néri... prayed to the stars.”

Saint-Exupéry says, “It was by the purest chance that we were saved. I had given up all thought of making Cisneros (where they could refuel) and had set my course at right angles to the coast-line in the hope that thus we might avoid coming down at sea when our fuel ran out. Meanwhile however I was in the belly of a dense fog so that even with land below it was not going to be easy to set the ship down.”

But then they received a message from the tower at Cisneros, which gave them have a vague idea of where they actually were. The problem was, they didn’t think they had enough fuel to get there. Saint-Exupéry writes, “The airports one by one had been waking each other up. Into our (cockpit) broke the voices of Agadir, Casablanca, Dakar... Bit by bit they were gathering round us as round a sick-bed... And suddenly into this conclave burst Toulouse, the headquarters ... three thousand miles away, worried with the rest. Toulouse broke in without a word of greeting, simply to say sharply, “Your reserve tanks bigger than standard. You have two hours' fuel left. Proceed to Cisneros.”<sup>2</sup>

Your reserve tank is bigger than you think. That’s the message I want you to hear, loud and clear, the message I want you to remember. You have within yourself more than you know. If you have trouble believing that right now, please hear me, and trust me, when I tell you it is true. Can you live this day with that faith--that your capacity is larger than know; that you have what you need?

You already have a song in your heart. Even if you don’t know all the words yet, even if you haven’t mastered the tune, that song is in there, and it is meant to be sung. Have faith in yourself, and make time to practice.

My prayer is that you will sing your heart’s own song, and that we will join our voices together; that we will know the power and the glory of sharing those songs and singing them together; so that the music we make will save us, but not just us--it will heal and bless our world.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Antoine de St. Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, pp. 15-19