

“Ready for a Walk,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on February 21, 2010

Last Sunday, in the late afternoon, my wife and I went to the grocery store to pick up some things for dinner. It was Valentine’s Day, and our daughter had put in a request for something chocolate. As the person in our house with a sweet tooth, I was happy to comply. But when I got to the candy aisle, what was left of the Valentine’s candy had been pushed over to one side, and an employee was there, restocking the shelves, with Easter candy! The particular box of chocolates I was looking for wasn’t there, so when we left the grocery store I ran into the drugstore next door. The situation there was the same--Valentine’s had been already been supplanted by Easter!

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, which in the Christian calendar is the beginning of Lent, the season that leads up to Easter. Lent lasts for forty days (Sundays don’t count), because of the gospel accounts of Jesus spending forty days fasting in the wilderness. That’s where the tradition of giving up something for Lent comes from--it’s seen as a kind of fasting. Last week a friend of mine from seminary, who’s now an Episcopal priest, posted online that she’s giving up Facebook for Lent.

I’ve never been someone who gives up things for Lent, and we don’t really seem to observe Lent in our tradition. But I do believe in seasons, in nature and in the church. They remind me to be in the present season, whatever it is. As the book of Ecclesiastes says, “to everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die... a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecc 3: 1-2,4).

There’s just something wrong that those stores I visited last Sunday, on Valentine’s day, were stocking their Easter candy. They are completely skipping over Lent! Probably because fasting and giving up consuming things is, well, so not about commerce.

No wonder there’s such dislocation and dis-ease in our culture, when stores start promoting Christmas right after Halloween and when Easter candy appears on Valentine’s Day--in the middle of February! Have you noticed how the consumer culture is always trying to get us to live one season ahead, instead of living in the present? It’s crazy. Have you ever tried to buy a pair of shorts in the summer, the time in New England when they would be most useful? “I’m sorry, sir, we’re stocking our fall collection now.”

At the risk of stating the obvious, it’s still February. It’s still winter. But you can tell by the light, how it’s stronger now and the days keep getting longer, that spring is coming. It will be here before you know it. But it’s not here yet. Lent coincides with the period of

time that we have between now and the coming of spring, and it's a good time to be reflective and contemplative. These quiet winter days are good for that; there is a quality to this time of year, in this climate, that invites introspection in a way that the spring and summer do not.

On Ash Wednesday, people go to church and the priest or minister smudges some ashes on their forehead and says, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return." This time of year, when it can be bleak outside, it can also be bleak inside. No wonder people put pictures of beaches in Hawaii on their computer desktops and dream about moving to a warm climate. You might ask, "Why do I need to be reminded of my mortality, and of struggle or suffering? There's plenty of that all around."

We need to be reminded that we are mortal because it is so much in our nature and in our culture to deny that fact. And because the only way out is through. You can't escape the suffering of being human by running away from it or by pretending that it isn't there. The way to live a full life is not to deny your own pain and your own mortality, but to live with the knowledge that life includes suffering, that one day you will die, and let that knowledge give you purpose and meaning and even joy.

Mitch Albom, in his book *Tuesdays With Morrie*, tells of his conversations with his professor who is dying of ALS. One day Morrie gives him this advice: "Live every day as if you've got a bird on your shoulder. When you get up every morning ask your bird, 'Is this the day I'm going to die? Is this my last day on this earth?' And if you keep asking that bird that question you'll live your life differently."

The point of spiritual practice is to help you live your life differently. So if you are someone who is counting the days until spring, who sometimes lives, as we all do, waiting for something better to come along, then please hear me. This is the day you have been given. Right now is all that you really have. What are you doing to help you live in the present, to help you to be mindful of the wonder and mystery of this moment? What are you doing to help you be awake to the boredom and the pain of life too? If you can't think of anything in particular, then maybe you need to find yourself a practice. There is no better time than now, in these days of Lent, days that do lead to spring and to Easter, to face the cold and bitter aspects of life. Because facing them, rather than running away from them, is how you can then be awake to joy when that time comes. The farmer and poet Wendell Berry says, "At night make me one with the darkness, in the morning make me one with the light."

So rather than giving up something for Lent, how about taking something on? This is a perfect time of year to start a practice that will help you to be more mindful, more healthy, more awake and aware. I'm thrilled to hear that so many of you are participating in the yoga classes that Melinda is leading on Saturday mornings here. Yoga is a great practice because it is both physical and spiritual--good for the body and the soul.

This time of year, I find myself drawn to walking. The truth is, I like walking any time of year. But right now, it seems more essential. Some weekend days, around mid-afternoon, I'll say, to no one in particular in our house, "Anyone want to go out for a walk?" I can get a bit of cabin fever, and I know how good it is to be out in the cold air and under the wide sky, and I long for this. My wife and I like to take walks together, but I'm happy to go by myself. There's something healing and restorative and invigorating about walking. It's interesting what can come up when you're walking-- thoughts, feelings seems to rise up from somewhere deep. And I find it easier to hold them gently, and be with them, when I'm walking. I often walk through a big old cemetery, and if I'm paying attention at all, it's hard to walk through there and not think about my own death. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return." Though this is sobering, it's not depressing, not usually. It reminds me of how good it is to be alive, and how lucky I am to be able to walk.

Thich Nhat Hanh said, "People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth." I wonder about Jesus, whose public ministry, which only lasted a year or two, was spent walking around the dry and dusty land of Israel/Palestine. How did all that walking influence who he was?

I chose the reading this morning, from Thoreau's essay "Walking,"¹ because I love how he characterizes the difference between any old walk and sauntering, which is walking with the intention, with the expectation that putting one foot in front of the other can lead you into the holy land. That's what any good spiritual practice can do. Whether it's sitting in meditation or singing with others, reading scripture or feeding the hungry, done with intention and awareness, these acts can transport you to a different plane, to a mindful place where you realize you are standing on holy ground. It starts with intention and attention, and that's what Thoreau knew so many of his peers were lacking. They were so busy with the details of their daily lives that they were imprisoned by them, and missing the little miracles all around. He says that the secret to successful sauntering is "having no particular home, but (being) equally at home everywhere." This sounds like the kind of non-attachment that Buddhists practice and that can be so liberating.

In the lines following what Dan read this morning, Thoreau reflects on how this attachment to what is safe and secure limits us: "It is true," he writes, "we are but faint hearted crusaders, even the walkers, now-a-days, who undertake no persevering never ending enterprises. Our expeditions are but tours and come round again at evening to the old hearth side from which we set out. Half the walk is but retracing our steps. We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return... if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free (person); then you are ready for a walk."

¹ The reading is taken from the second paragraph of Thoreau's essay, available at <http://thoreau.eserver.org/walking1.html>

When I go out to walk, I'm not exactly expecting to walk off into the sunset, never to return. I like coming back home. When he was living in his cabin at Walden Pond, Thoreau still brought his laundry back home to Concord. He is talking metaphorically here. Walking, or any spiritual practice, is designed to change you. It doesn't work if you are too attached to how things are; if you're unwilling to be moved or changed. That's why I go walking--to be open to that Spirit "in which we live and move and have our being."

The truth is, life is not for the faint-hearted. To be ready for life, or ready for a walk, or ready for worship, or for any spiritual practice, we should go forth with a spirit of adventure, willing to be changed, shaken up, blessed.

I am so grateful that I can walk, for how it soothes and restores my soul. For how it helps me to be awake to the little miracles all around. But what if you can't walk? What if you have lost that ability, or if it is too painful, or too much of a struggle to walk? If this is the case for you, then I'm sorry that I'm here extolling the virtues of a practice that is just not possible for you. I don't know, at least not yet, what it's like to be in your shoes. I do know that what I'm talking about in walking--being awake to the fullness of life, its beauty and its pain, cultivating a strong soul and an open heart so you can bear life's sorrows and its joys--you don't have to be able to move your legs in order to do this. There are other ways too. The point is, to find the way that works for you, your own practice, that is sustainable and life-giving.

The poet Mary Oliver lives in Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod. She has a daily practice of walking the harbor beach at low tide. She says, "I have no business here—that is, I have no preconceived idea of what I might discover, and I keep no careful record of what I do find; neither do I think that whatever I find will do the world any special good."

"No," she says, "I go out simply to notice things—everything and anything. I go looking, across these soft and briny levels, for a more serious reason—for *pleasure*. For pleasure is necessary to affirmation, and affirmation is the food of the soul. And I would be strong-souled. The better to honor this world, and my little voyage through it."

That's why we practice--to be strong-souled. To better honor this world, and our little voyages through it. These winter days, when the sun is getting stronger, these days that are leading us toward spring and Easter, this is the perfect time to begin.

Amen.