



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Pay Attention,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 18, 2014

The last two Saturdays, we’ve had memorial services here. Yesterday for Cindy Armstrong, a week ago for Irma Pasquale. This is something we do pretty well here--holding open a space to mourn one who has died, remembering and celebrating the gift that was their life. People tell me they love coming to our beautiful old building for these services; that it feels good here. Our Ladies Circle has outdone themselves putting on lovely receptions after each service, and I’m so grateful for the care they bring to this ministry of hospitality.

Thinking of these dear ones we have recently lost makes you mindful of your own mortality, doesn’t it? With that in mind, hear these words from Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day”:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

We live on this beautiful planet earth. Our little part of it is in the midst of a slowly unfolding spring. There’s beauty all around: a hundred shades of green, punctuated with yellow dandelions and blue periwinkle and purple lilacs and any number of other gifts.

And you know, don’t you, this is not going to last. These flowers, too soon, will fade and die. “And the seasons, they go round and round,” Joni Mitchell sings. And we are mortal too. Being alive also means having to die, and none of us know how long we have on this earth.

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? I plan to pay attention.

I am still learning how to do this, still practicing, and probably always will be. Maybe you’re never noticed, but I’m one who’s easily distracted. It’s good that this vocation of pastor is always calling me to be present and attentive. But quite imperfectly, as my family certainly knows. A couple of days ago, when I told my daughter today’s sermon title, she laughed! It’s true what they say, that preachers preach the sermons they themselves need to hear.

Some years ago I picked up a book about this affliction, you may have heard of it, called attention deficit disorder. Doesn't it seem that ADD is at epidemic proportions these days? What's that about? Don't we need to find ways to get our attention back? That book I bought, *Driven to Distraction*, I started reading it, but guess what? I got distracted, and never finished it. Hmmm.

It seems, somehow, part of the human condition, especially in modern times, for us to be restless, on the go, searching for something. Last week I talked about this longing, and said the way to address it is by following your own heart's desire. And how do you do this? By paying attention.

Last week I shared with you this confession by Wendell Berry:

To the sky, to the wind, then,
and to the faithful trees, I confess
my sins: that I have not been happy
enough, considering my good luck,
have listened to too much noise,
have been inattentive to wonders,
have lusted after praise.

Listening to too much noise means you're paying attention to the wrong things. Being inattentive to wonders means you're not paying attention at all, not noticing what's amazing right under your own feet.

Poets and mystics, and preachers too, make a business of pointing out what it would be easy to miss, reminding people to pay attention to what's around them and to listen for that still, small voice inside. When was the last time you heard a poet or visionary encourage folks to be inattentive, spaced out, or careless?

We need to be reminded to pay attention. And the ways poets tend to do this, lyrical, invitational ways, are usually easy to hear, aren't they? They gently remind us to open our hearts to another way. Listen again to Mary Oliver telling about her daily practice of walking the beach:

"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, 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."

It's obvious, isn't it, that this practice of paying attention, of going out and noticing things, is essential to Mary Oliver's life-affirming poetry. She shows us what gifts can be found, all around, when you take the time to notice them.

You can do this too! And you don't have to go anywhere--just paying attention to the ordinary things of your life can open you up to some amazing insights. Listen to this poem, called "The Patience of Ordinary Things," by Pat Schneider:

It is a kind of love, is it not?
How the cup holds the tea,
How the chair stands sturdy and foursquare,
How the floor receives the bottoms of shoes
Or toes. How soles of feet know
Where they're supposed to be.
I've been thinking about the patience
Of ordinary things, how clothes
Wait respectfully in closets
And soap dries quietly in the dish,
And towels drink the wet
From the skin of the back.
And the lovely repetition of stairs.
And what is more generous than a window?

It does take a kind of patience to notice such things. What else should we be doing? Racing through life, inattentive, not fully aware of the impact we're having?

Sometimes that's the way we humans act. We lose track of what matters, our perception of reality is clouded by any number of things, and we miss what is important right in front of our eyes.

Have you read the novel *The Great Gatsby*, that great American story of hope and longing? Near the end, the narrator offers a description of two characters in that story, Tom and Daisy Buchanan. The way they live is exactly not what I am proposing to you today. Here these words from Scott Fitzgerald:

"They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

Who wants to be described that way? Who among us want to live that way--careless and inattentive? But let's tell the truth, there are times, aren't there, when each of us is inattentive or careless or self-obsessed. It's a good thing we have friends, and family, and community, to call us to account, to remind us to do better. There are times when a poetic invitation to pay attention is what's needed. And there are times when we need a more dramatic wake up call.

When I was in divinity school, and always had tons of work to do, my son, who was nine or ten at the time, caught me up short one day. We were playing with something, probably Legos, and he was talking to me as we played, and I was trying to be present, but at the same time I was thinking about all the work I had to do, all the books I needed to read. And he noticed I was distracted, and he got mad at me, and said, "You never pay attention to me!"

As much as I would like, I can't get those years back. "And the seasons, they go round and round." That was a hard truth my son told me, and one that I needed to hear. It got my attention, and I vowed to be better.

Studies have shown that almost no one listens to an entire sermon. At some point or another, you mind wanders, and takes you off in another direction. But what if, when you notice this, you pay attention to where your mind wanders, to what images or memories or feelings come up? Don't worry about me--I'll plough ahead--and you might touch into something deeper than anything I've got!

Sometimes paying attention means being hyper-focused. Something good to do when you're operating heavy machinery. And sometimes it's more subtle than that, tuning out some of the noise so you can hear a quieter tune. You can pay attention to what's outside you--what you see and hear, touch and smell and taste. And you can pay attention to what wells up inside--to your thoughts and feelings.

The other night, we had a worship committee meeting here. Members of the committee talked about what they noticed in our worship services: what works, and what does not. How we sometimes treat the spoken candles time with care, and how sometimes we do not. They talked about our building, and what they saw when they took a walk around--what is beautiful and what could be better taken care of; what changes could make our space more welcoming and more conducive to worship and connection. I left that meeting hopeful and happy. They are paying attention--and putting their faith into action in ways that make a difference.

What about you? This is a good place to practice. If you've been here for a while, do you ever stop and try to imagine this church through a newcomer's eyes? Do you make an effort to notice what needs attention around here? Do you look for ways you can help make us a more welcoming and more vibrant church? Have you turned in your pledge card?

One of my spiritual heroes, Frederick Buechner, says, "If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."

We have been given this great gift of another day. We have been given these lives, and these bodies, our families and friends and this community. We have been given this beautiful spring--so much green and growing, with flowers blooming and birds singing; so much beauty, so much potential.

All of it calls out to us: pay attention. See this moment for the miracle that it is. Wake up to these gifts that are all around. This is my prayer, and I hope it is yours: pay attention.

Amen.