



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“In the Middle of Everything,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 29, 2014

Two weeks ago, I named the obvious--the truth that life is hard. I said we need to accept this fact,, and even learn to love what is hard; that we can do this--we can do hard--and trusting this, and practicing it, will transform us, will free us to more fully live these lives we have been given.¹

I hope you didn't hear this in any “nose to the grindstone” kind of way. We don't need ways to make our lives harder. That's not what I was suggesting. Just that we tell the truth that life is hard; that we practice facing what is hard and dealing with it. This will make us healthier and happier, in the long run.

To do this, you have to have ways that nourish and ground and sustain you. I wonder--do you ever feel worn down by the daily grind, by the sadness and the struggle that is simply part of living? Do you feel tired and discouraged from all the bad news, the trouble you hear about and that know about first hand? Of course you do!

The question is, what do you with this? How do you deal with hardship? A car needs gas in its tank in order to run. We aren't that different. Running on empty is not something anyone can do for very long. My mom still asks me, “Are you getting enough sleep?” She cares about me. And I care about you. Are you getting enough sleep? Are you taking good care of yourself? If not, why not? You need ways to refresh and restore yourself, ways to find strength and energy and courage, if you are going to do what's hard.

This is what I want to talk about today--the need for rest in our lives. And not just sleep, I want to stress the importance of sabbath time. When I was a child, growing up in North Carolina, Sunday morning was sacred. If you weren't in church, and most people were, then you weren't out flaunting it. There was no reason to--the stores were closed, and no one ever fired up their lawnmower before noon on Sunday!

That world is gone. Most of us are on the go, in one way or another, every day. Stores are open all the time, to say nothing of the internet, which never takes a day off. Most of us get too little of what sabbath offers--time for rest and renewal, for savoring the simple gifts of the present moment.

¹ That sermon, “The Way Less Traveled,” is available online at http://www.uuhaverhill.org/sites/default/files/sermons/LessTraveled_0.pdf

Sabbath time is available. You just have to take it. Isn't that why you're here, this morning? To have an hour when you don't have to do anything? An hour to just be, in the company of others, in the presence of what is holy and life-affirming?

This winter I had the gift of a four month sabbatical. It was certainly a time to refill my tank. But not so I could just run it down again! No, one thing I remembered on sabbatical is how much better I function when I am rested and not so busy. It was a reminder that we are not meant to just go, go, go.

One of the gifts of my trip to Patagonia was the experience of siesta. Sometimes after lunch, in the heat of the day, we'd take a break from the hard work of fishing, lie under a tree and nap for a while. It was practical, because the fishing slows down when the sun is high in the sky. And it was restorative, to lie on the ground, under big willow trees, and doze off for a while. In town, almost all the businesses closed for the afternoon. People seemed less harried there. They seemed happy. Can we learn from them?

One Sunday this winter my friend and colleague in Newburyport, Rev. Harold Babcock, was preaching a sermon called, "In Praise of Doing Nothing." I went to hear him preach what was good sermon for someone on sabbatical. Because even then, there was pressure, mostly internal, to do stuff and be productive. During those four months, people would ask me, "What are you doing on your sabbatical?" I started to say, "As little as possible."

That's what I commend to you today. That in these summer months, you try doing nothing for a change. That's what sabbath time is. A time to just be. To just stop doing. It's good for you. You need it, don't you? But are you getting enough of this in your life?

Summer is made for this: for stopping and savoring, for breathing in the warm air, for smelling the blooming flowers, for lying on your back in the grass at night, waiting to see a falling star.

For most of us, at least as far as in our work lives, and in our home lives, summer isn't that different from the rest of the year. We may take some vacation, and what a great time of year this is to take a break, but most of us, most of the time, pretty much keep to the same schedule we have during the rest of the year. We get up and go to work, we get days or weekends off, we live our lives by this daily round.

But summer is different. Unless you are a really early riser, the sun is up, this time of year, before you are. And if you come home from work at five or six o'clock, there are hours of daylight left--time to work in the garden or take a walk or sit outside and read--time to do all kinds of things that you can't do around here, at that hour, in the winter months. The warm weather invites us to slow down, to feel the blessing of putting our hands in dirt or our bodies in water. To sit in the shade. To take off our shoes and feel the grass under our feet. To know that where we are is holy ground.

You don't have to go anywhere for this. It may help to turn off your telephone or your computer. It may help to set aside some time: to say, "for one hour, or for one morning, I am going to be quiet

and still. I'm going to just be, and stop doing for a while. I might even take a nap! To restore myself. To return to myself. Just to see what happens."

Solitary sabbath time is a blessing. And sabbath time with others can be even more powerful. Those of you who participate in the Monday night mindful meditation practice, or Sunday morning lectio divina have experienced this, haven't you? I often feel the most moving part of our Sunday service is when you come and light candles silently. The rest of us sit still, and it is good for us. These community practices nourish and support us. At Friday night Shabat services at Temple Emanu-El, the rabbi says these words: "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel."

This is what our culture has lost, I'm afraid: any kind of tradition or practice that keeps us grounded, that helps us return to who we are and whose we are. When it comes to finding Sabbath time, more than previous generations, we are on our own. Coming here on Sunday morning is certainly one way. I hope, in these summer months, this time and space is an oasis for you in your lives. I hope you'll think about bringing a friend.

You know, don't you, that faith communities like this one are increasingly countercultural? Because we say there's a different way to live; you don't have to be in such a hurry, and so busy, all the time. It's not good for you. For every thing there is a season. A time to work and a time to rest. But we forget this.

If our culture has lost the institutional practice of Sabbath, we now better understand that there are, as Rumi said, a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground. Any place, with attention and care, becomes, we discover, holy ground.

There's a prayer from the church of my childhood, that puts it this way: O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we will be saved, in quietness and confidence will be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God.

Some of you may need to do some translating, but the point is, we find our strength not in activity but in quietness. We are restored, saved even, in acts of return and rest, in the depths we touch when we are still. It's what Mary Oliver finds when she is among the trees:

they give off such hints of gladness,
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.²

What I'm trying to say today is that, in the middle of our lives, in the middle of our driven to distraction culture, in the middle of the city, in the middle of everything, there is always the opportunity to stop and breathe and be present. There is always the invitation to be like those trees the psalmist wrote about, "planted near the river, with roots that go deep and wide, that thrive, bear fruit in season, and weather drought without wilting."³

² Mary Oliver, "When I Am Among the Trees."

³ Christine Robinson, an improvisation on Psalm 1, available online at <http://doubterpsalms.blogspot.com/>

That's how I want to be--grounded, deeply rooted, in touch with what waters my soul. Don't you? And that is what summer invites us to--an understanding that we are meant to have a good and abundant life.

The Quaker writer and educator Parker Palmer says "Summer's keynote is abundance. The forests fill with undergrowth, the trees with fruit, the meadows with wild flowers and grasses, the fields with wheat and corn, the gardens with zucchini, and the yards with weeds. In contrast to the the sensationalism of spring, summer is a steady state of plenty, a green and amber muchness that feeds us on more levels than we know."⁴

But, Parker Palmer says, we humans tend to overlook nature's abundance. We seem more inclined to believe in scarcity. And acting like there's not enough, we create that reality. The antidote, he says, is community, where we give and receive, where we share.

Palmer says, "Summer is a reminder that our faith is not nearly as strong as the things we profess to have faith in." In trees, I'd say, in this green and growing earth and the starry sky overhead, in the Spirit overseeing all. I put his words at the top of the order of service, in case you want to take them with you. "Summer is a reminder that for this single season, at least, we might cease our anxious machinations and give ourselves to the abiding and abundant grace of our common life."

That's the invitation of these days. In the middle of our lives, in the middle of everything, to stop and notice. To trust there is enough time, and not be in such a hurry. To breathe in and breathe out, and see this moment as sacred. To be grateful and glad.

This is my summer prayer: That we will be like trees planted by the river, deeply rooted and nourished by springs of living water. That we will remember, like the trees, this simple invitation: that we come into the world to do this: "to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."⁵

Amen.

⁴ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, p. 107-09.

⁵ Mary Oliver, "When I Am Among the Trees."