



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“We Would be One,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 17, 2012

On a Sunday evening in mid-July, in the year 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke to the senior class at the Divinity College at Harvard. His address was a radical departure from rational Unitarian theology of the day and was an impassioned articulation of transcendentalism. On this June day, I’m not going to try and explain Emerson’s theology. I just want you to hear the first lines of the Divinity School Address:

“In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily. The corn and the wine have been freely dealt to all creatures, and the never-broken silence with which the old bounty goes forward, has not yielded yet one word of explanation. One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world, in which our senses converse.”¹

I had to look up the word refulgent. It means “radiant, shining brightly, gleaming.” “In this refulgent summer,” Emerson said, “it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life.”

If there is one thing I could wish for you this summer, it would be this: that you will have moments when, like Emerson, you know, what a luxury it is to simply breathe in and breathe out. I wish for you the simple pleasures of this season: the smell of newly mown grass, the sound of birds singing before dawn, the expanse of a starry sky, time with those you love. I wish for you moments like the one that inspired Virginia Woolf to write in her diary, “If one does not lie back and sum up and say to the moment, stay you are so fair, what will be one’s gain, dying? No, stay this moment. No one ever says that enough.”

I can have a hard time sitting still. I rush around too much. There’s so much to do! I need to remember the words of Emerson’s friend, Henry David Thoreau, who said, “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry.”

¹ The text of Emerson’s Divinity School Address is available online at <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>

A few years ago I had the chance to go fly fishing in Slovenia, in the former Yugoslavia. At the end of a great day, I asked my guide about the people he'd fished with. He said there's a difference between countries. "The English are traditionalists," he said. "The just want to fish the dry fly. The French like to enjoy themselves. They don't want to work too hard. The Germans, they want to catch big fish."

"What about Americans?" I asked. "Americans," he answered, "are always in a hurry."

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? It may be in our nature. It's certainly in our culture. But it's not good for us. Carl Jung said, "Hurry is not of the devil; hurry is the devil."

Do you know how time sometimes seems to fly, and sometimes it slows way down? Recently I've found that I can slow time down by slowing down myself. If I sit in a chair reading, the day seems to open up, and an hour or two is a good, long time. So if you feel that you don't have enough time, stop rushing around! Sit still for a while. Listen to the birds sing and watch the grass grow. Ponder these words: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Matt 6:28-29).

Summer comes, and the invitation is to slow down, and pay attention to the present moment. Of course we always have that invitation, but it seems particularly apt and welcome in these sweet June days. In her poem, "The Summer Day," Mary Oliver writes

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?

You could ask, what is the point of this slowing down? Is it simply to rest and to savor these summer days? That would be enough. God knows too many of us are tired or stressed or anxious. We need the balm that summer can bring.

But there's a deeper reason to be idle and blessed--so you can be in touch with what's beneath the surface of things, so you can touch and be touched by that force that pulses through the universe. So you can remember that you are not separate from this this force, that it pulses through you too.

Because we forget. As that Ojibwe prayer says,

Look at our brokenness.

We know that in all creation
Only the human family
Has strayed from the Sacred Way.

Our culture, in spite of all its accomplishments and achievements, is not much help if you want to stay on the Sacred Way. We spend too much of our time in manufactured and even virtual environments, and not enough time in the presence of what is real.

If we are tired or discouraged, anxious or depressed, it's no wonder--we have cut ourselves off from that which feeds and restores our souls. There is in us a longing to be united with that source from which we come; to be at one with the mystery, the spirit, the presence; whether you call it Nature, or Spirit, or God, whether you call it anything at all. Using traditional theological language, St. Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Bernard Berenson describes an experience he had of that presence. He says, "It was a morning in early summer. A silver haze shimmered and trembled over the lime trees. The air was laden with their fragrance. The temperature was like a caress. I remember---I need not recall---that I climbed up a tree stump and felt suddenly immersed in Itness. I did not call it by that name. I had no need for words. It and I were one."

I've had moments, when I am still and my mind settles down, when I sense a presence in my midst. When this happens I don't want to move a muscle, for fear of breaking the spell. I want to bask in the presence, that sense of oneness it brings. Of course, it doesn't last--the experience fades, the moment passes. But the memory remains. Surely many of you have had these experiences too?

I expect you have also known moments of absorption in what you were doing, when you were in the flow, in the groove, at one with life itself. Writers and artists talk about this, so do athletes and dancers and musicians; when the work is going well, the invitation is let that force flow through and not get in the way, to let it flow onto the page or the canvas, to let it flow through one's body like you are a musical instruments, a conduit for that creative force.

There are moments when our awareness is heightened and we see that our perspective is too small, that our worries and our fears are not the whole story. In these moments we see that we are part of the whole, that life is precious and good. That we are part of a great and abiding Love.

These moments, these experiences are central to our faith. They feed and sustain us, they remind us who we are and whose we are. They inspire us to live with compassion, to stand on the side of love and justice, to join hands and work for the common good,,

There are pressures, within us and around us, that would have us take a narrow view; that encourage us to be self-absorbed and self-centered, insulated and isolated. But that is not who we are meant to be. No, we are meant to be open to and in touch with the fullness of life, in touch with as much of its beauty and pain, joy and sorrow, as we can bear.

The 2nd century theologian, Irenaeus, said, “the glory of God is a human being fully alive!” The invitation is to jump into life; to be at one--with our own deepest selves, and with our companions and with this beautiful world.

My hope for you, in these days, is that you will be open to these holy mysteries. That you will know, as Rev. David Bumbaugh says, “that beneath all our differences and behind all our diversity there is a unity which makes us one and binds us forever together in spite of time and death and the space between the stars.”

In this refulgent summer, may we know what a blessing it is to draw in the breath of life May we find ourselves drawn into ever deeper connections, with this good earth, and with our companions, and with that unity which makes us one and binds us forever together.

Amen.