



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Good Work,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on April 7, 2013

“May the house we create together here today shelter us.” Those words from John O’Donohue’s “Blessing for a New Home,” offer a different way of imagining a home and a community. Not as a building, not as walls and a roof, but a house that we build together, here, today. “When we gather, may all of the weight of the world fall from our shoulders. May our hearts be tranquil here, blessed by the peace our gathering gives.”¹

When our two spiritual direction groups met last fall, we started each time with this reading. Kimberly, our leader, offered an image for us to consider. She asked us to imagine our coming together as like the chuppah at a Jewish wedding; the canopy that’s held over the couple during the ceremony and which symbolizes the home they will build together.

That image--of our gathering as like a house, a place of safety and discovery, of courage and welcome, informed what happened in those gatherings. It created a space within which people shared powerful stories and experienced deep connections with one another, where we touched what is good and true and real.

We live in a time when this kind of connection, this kind of community, seems hard to find. Many of us are busy, harried even, distracted by all kinds of things. Some of us have lives that are too full. And some, lives that are too empty. Some of us are looking for some peace and quiet, and some are lonely and longing for companionship.

The good news is, creating a space for connection and challenge, for healing and hope, it’s not rocket science. It doesn’t even require bricks or mortar or brute strength or unusual intelligence. We already have within us what we need--I’m convinced of that.

Today I want us to explore what our work is, as individuals and as a community, and specifically, what constitutes good work. How do we find happiness and fulfillment, and how do we create houses of hope and healing, of learning and justice-making?

When you hear that word “work,” what comes to mind? Do you think of Monday morning, and heading back to your job? Do you think about the chores you do at home--raking out the flower beds in spring or shoveling snow in winter? Do you think about everyday tasks like cooking and

¹ John O’Donohue, “Blessing for a New Home,” from *To Bless the Space Between Us*.

washing dishes, doing laundry and making the bed? When you hear the word “work,” do you think of what you get paid to do, or do you have a broader definition?

There’s a bumper sticker, a take off on the song from Disney’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” that reads, “I owe, I owe, it’s off to work I go.” And there is truth in this--we work in order to survive, and especially over the past few years, some of us have not had enough work, or been paid well enough, to make ends meet. I’m not an economist, and am not going to try to tell you how we can solve the systemic problems we face. What I can do is make the case that it’s possible change our relationship with work and lead happier and more productive lives.

When I say the word “work,” I’m not just talking about what you get paid to do. A broad definition of work includes volunteer work, of course, and chores, and even some things you do for fun. “I’m working on a novel,” you might tell a friend. Or, “I’m working on eating better, and losing a few pounds.” Or, “I’m working at being a better parent.” Or spouse. Or friend.

Anyone who has tried something like this, making a change, making a commitment, knows that it is work--it takes effort and persistence. There’s a difference between work and play, and we all need time to play. There’s a difference between work and rest, and we all need sabbath time, time to slow down and unplug and just be.

Today I speak to you in praise of work, and especially, of good work. And what is good work? That is a question each of us must answer for ourselves. We know good work when we experience it. Good work is in line with our values and our aspirations. If you feel like you’re selling your soul to make a living, or if you’re regularly bored at work, or chronically frustrated, you probably aren’t doing work that’s good for you. Though any work at times is boring or tiring or frustrating, good work is not something you experience as deadening or as drudgery. Good work is challenging and inspiring.

For over fifteen years I worked as a freelance photographer, and there was a lot I loved about that life. But over time, my energy and enthusiasm began to wane. I realized that what I was really doing was running a small business--and that was never something I had much interest in, or much aptitude for. Looking back on it now, it was a good and attractive life--what was not to like about it?--but in the end it was not my life.

When I went off to divinity school, I expected to end up in some kind of chaplaincy or community ministry. I didn’t see myself working inside the church. But every minister needs some parish experience, so one year I worked part-time at the UU church in Newburyport. Halfway through that year, I realized how much I was loving parish ministry. It didn’t feel like work to me.

Good work is like that--it fits who you are and what you value. It makes good use of your particular interests and skills. It just feels right, and some days, it doesn’t seem like work at all. The poet Denise Levertov writes

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.

But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.²

What is your good work? Can you name something that, for you, is worth doing? Something that calls to you, engages you, brings you joy and satisfaction? Anyone want to name it out loud?

I hope you will remember what you said, or what came into your heart. What is good work for one can be drudgery for another. It's so important to find your own work, and pursue it. Last week, when I told you that my father had died, I said that his had been a somewhat tragic life. When he was a young man, he got a lot of pressure to follow in his father's and his grandfather's footsteps and become a lawyer. And he was a good one. But eventually, he self-destructed that career, harming himself and betraying others in the process. I'm ever grateful to my dad for never pressuring me the way his father did to him. My father's mistakes taught me the importance of living the life that is your own, of doing your own work, and not what someone else wants or expects you to do.

Good work is not just about our individual selves. It calls us into connection with others and with this good earth; it can have a transcendent quality--when you are absorbed in good work, you can lose track of time, and become one with your work and all creation even, you can feel, at times, that some power is moving through you. That you aren't so much in control of your work as a medium through which it is moving.

Making art is like this, when it's going well. Being pregnant--growing a new life, and preparing to welcome it into the world, is good and important work. Companioning someone who is dying, as some of you are right now, is good and hard work. As is earning to read, and teaching someone to read, and grieving, and so many other things. Do you have enough good work in your life? Are you making space and time for the good work that is yours?

Last week I attended a program on time management, something I need help with. Acknowledging that we each have a bunch of competing things tugging at our attention, the leader of that program encouraged us to be sure to make time for what we desire. She said, "You must do what's most attractive to you. The universe is saying, 'C'mon, you have to do this!'"

Seen this way, following your own desires, your own bliss, as Joseph Campbell used to say, is not selfish at all. It's participating in the dance of the universe, in which we each have a part to play. If we don't play our part, and do our own good work, then who will? And if we don't follow our own desires and longings, what kind of damage are we doing, to ourselves and to others?

The farmer and writer Wendell Berry says good work "does not dissociate life and work, or pleasure and work, or love and work, or usefulness and beauty. To work without pleasure or affection, to make a product that is not both useful and beautiful, is to dishonor God, nature, the thing that is made, and whomever it is made for. This is blasphemy: to make shoddy work of the work of God. But such blasphemy is not possible when the entire Creation is understood as holy."³

² Denise Levertov, "To Be of Use."

³ Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," pg. 312 in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*.

This community is, I hope, a place that invites you into finding ways to connect with that great mystery, and into gathering back together what sometimes gets split apart--pleasure and work, usefulness and beauty, work and love. This community only thrives when you find your own good work here. It may be lighting the candles in the dark sanctuary before vespers begins, or making the soup that we share afterwards. It may be visiting someone who is grieving or in the hospital, or writing a condolence letter. Or going to the state house on Lobby Day, or preparing and serving a meal to those who are hungry, or setting up chairs or putting them away, or offering a testimonial or singing in the choir. Or serving on a committee or being part of this worshipping congregation.

It's good work, isn't it? And when it's not, then let someone else do it, ok? So you can find your own good work. What I know is that our choices matter, and we each have this one life we have been given. You and I, we don't have all the time in world. Are you doing the work that is yours? If not, why not? What are you waiting for?

There's a home improvement chain that has the slogan, "Let's build something together." That's a pretty good way to imagine religious community, as a place where we bring our own gifts and talents and put them to use, a place where we discover new interests and abilities, where we build homes of welcome and discovery, of courage and blessing.

One of my favorite hymns evokes the image of a glorious city, where love and justice will reign. It says "we are builders of that city."⁴ That's what are called to do--find our own good work and then, to do it. To be workers, builders, for the good.

Amen.

⁴ *Hail the Glorious Golden City*, words by Felix Adler, #140 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.