



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“A Holy Life,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on February 27, 2011

There's a second reading today, it's from the book *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, by Dorothee Soelle:

“At the theological seminary in New York where I used to teach, we were once asked about our religious experiences. There was an embarrassed silence; it was as if we had asked our grandmothers about their sex life. A young woman eventually spoke up... She told us that as a very young girl in the Midwest, she had spent many hours reading in bed at night, without permission. One winter's night, she woke up at four in the morning, went outside, and looked at the stars in the clear, frosty sky. She had a once-in-a-lifetime feeling of happiness, of being connected with all of life, with God; a feeling of overwhelming clarity, of being sheltered and carried. She saw the stars as if she had never seen them before. She described the experience in these words, ‘Nothing can happen, I am indestructible, I am one with everything.’ This did not happen again until ten years later, when, in a different context, something similar took place. The new context was a huge demonstration against the Vietnam War. There, too, she knew that she was sheltered, a part of the whole, ‘indestructible,’ together with the others. Struggling for words and with her own timidity, she brought both experiences together under the rubric of religious experience.”¹

I've had these experiences too.

When I was eleven or twelve, walking alone one day across a field beside a pond, something got my attention. I sensed that I was in the presence of something more. It was like I woke up for a minute and saw the world in a new way, that gave me the sense of being both very small and, at the same time, belonging to something vast and timeless.

Thirty years later, eight years ago, standing on the Mall in Washington DC with thousands of others, I experienced this again. In the middle of all those people, there to take a stand against the impending Iraq war, I was moved to tears because where we were standing felt like holy ground.

¹ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 195.

Maybe that's why I like to lie on my back under the stars, and why I love to be in church--because I'm waiting and wanting to sense that Presence again, and more often. To be reassured that , as we sang a few minutes ago, there is more Love somewhere, and we are going to find it.

Today I invite you to remember, to bring up in your imagination, your own experiences of awe and wonder, the times in your life when you felt the presence of something More. Are there times, perhaps times you have never told anyone about, that come to mind?

The writer J.D. Salinger tells of a particularly vivid awakening he had when he was little. He says, "I was six when I saw that everything was God, and my hair stood up . . . It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was only a tiny child then, and she was drinking her milk, and all of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean."

What he's describing is a mystical experience--a time when what is hidden becomes, for a moment, visible and apparent. When you see there is more going on than meets the eye. When you wake up, and see that there is more love, and it is right here.

The mystic Rainer Maria Rilke said that the only courage that is required of us is to seek this Mystery, to face it, to be open to what is strange and inexplicable, to open our selves to those things that should be close to us but that we tend to push away: death, visions, "the so-called spirit world." We have crowded them out of life, he says, and in doing so have let our senses atrophy, so that our ability to sense this Mystery is not what it could be.

We live in a culture that is particularly oriented toward what is material and tangible. We equate happiness with possessions, and busyness with importance and success. Fewer and fewer people are part of any intentional faith community. You are doing something countercultural just by coming to church! But even as religious participation is dropping, there is a spiritual poverty in our land that is deep and broad. People are hungry for an experience of the holy. But most of the time, seeking it in things that will not satisfy.

"This is not the age of information," the poet David Whyte proclaims,
This is not
the age of information.
Forget the news,
and the radio,
and the blurred screen.
This is the time of loaves
and fishes.
People are hungry,
and one good word is bread
for a thousand."²

That word, at least today, is "holy." People are hungry for a holy life.

² David Whyte, "Loaves and Fishes," from *The House of Belonging*, 1996.

Nora Gallagher was a writer, a wife, a woman approaching middle age, when she started attending a church in Santa Barbara, California. This stirred up something in her. Eventually she joined a small group there and she got involved in the church's ministry to the homeless. Sound familiar to anyone? She says, "I came to this church five years ago as a tourist and ended up a pilgrim." She wrote about this in a lovely book called *Things Seen and Unseen*.

For Nora Gallagher that pilgrimage eventually led her to wonder if she was being called into ordained ministry, and she tells the story of that journey in a second book called *Practicing Resurrection*. A poignant moment in that story, at least for me, is when, trying to sort out what she may be getting herself into, she seeks out conversations with clergy folks. One of them, a friend who's an Episcopal priest, warns her about the professional ministry. She says, "We want to live a holy life," this woman says," and what we end up with is a (bleeping) profession."

There is a danger for clergy of losing track of why they went into ministry in the first place. Of letting what is urgent but not important crowd out what is vital and holy But that's not the sermon you need to hear. There's another danger that Gallagher raises--the danger of thinking that the work of ministry is only done by the clergy. But you know that's not true. You know that this work belongs to all of us. As Claudia said earlier, it's work that's too important to be left to the professionals.

What I want to lift up today is the possibility and the necessity of living an openhearted life, a committed life, a holy life. If you want it and will seek it, you can find it. And it's necessary, I believe, in these days of fragmentation, hyperactivity and overconsumption. What I want you to hear today is my encouragement to seek and to embrace your own holy life. To remember, like that young woman I read about at the start, your own deep and religious experiences.

I want to live a life that matters, that is balanced and whole; a life open to the depths and the heights of human experience and to that eternal More I catch glimpses of from time to time. Don't you want this too? You want to be awake to this moment and this day. You want to be in deeper relation with the people around you, and with the good earth, and with the spirit of life and love that courses through the world. Don't you?

One of my colleagues said are doing something wrong in the church if people want to go deeper in the spiritual life and the only avenue open to them is to go off to seminary. I have this dream of us being like a little seminary here--expanding our worship opportunities and our offerings of classes and small groups, making a difference in your lives by helping you engage your head and your heart, deepen your understandings and connections and ignite your passions--so you go out, into workplace, into the community, and make a difference there.

I want to live a holy life. By that I mean a life awake to wonder and mystery, to joy and sorrow, to deeper connection. I don't mean a particularly pious or churchy life. A holy life has nothing to do with stained glass windows or old books or beautiful vestments, as much as I like these things. A holy life is more earthy, more risky, and more fun than you may have been told.

This week I happened on the website of a church in Traverse City, Michigan. I laughed out loud when I saw that on Thursday nights they offer something they call “Pub Theology.” The description says, “Some of the most important moments in the history of the church took place in the pub. Martin Luther kick started the Reformation over a few pints. The church of England was started in a tavern. Hymns were inspired by pub music. And some of the best conversations take place in the pub.”

Last week I shared with you Ted Loder’s prayer “Pry Me Off Dead Center,” which reminds us that a holy life is one that draws us away from the safe center and toward the borders of what we know, of what is comfortable, of what is expected. Bringing together beer, conversation and God sounds holy to me. A holy life is not a particularly pious or churchy life--it’s a life that is real.

William Countryman, a seminary professor, wrote a book called *Living on the Border of the Holy*. He says we are all called to live “in the dangerous, exhilarating, life-giving borderlands of human existence where the everyday experience of life opens up to reveal glimpses of the Holy.” He says we’re not only called to live there, on the border of the holy, but “to come to the aid of others who live there.”

Think, for a moment, about your own life. Remember times in which you felt the presence of something More. When you felt more fully alive, more deeply connected to others, companioned by an unseen but powerful Presence.

I have to warn you, it’s taking a risk to say, “I want to lead a more holy life.” To move from being a tourist to a pilgrim. It means being open to that mystery that both comforts and disturbs you. It means being changed and then doing something about it.

Our youth and their adult companions, twenty-two of them, spent Friday night and all day Saturday here in the church, fasting for thirty hours and doing works of service and learning about world hunger. They took it upon themselves to not only imagine what it is like to live without enough food, but to experience what it’s like to go hungry. Theirs was certainly a borderland experience. And from my perspective of a few hours with them on Friday night, it was transformative and holy time.

As can be this moment, right now.

This moment, which invites you to your holy life. A life pulled away from the safe center and toward the borderlands, toward that risky and lively place where you are in touch with who you are, and who God is, and who your sisters and brothers are.³ That place of transformation and grace that compels us give our thanks and praise; that challenges us to build the common good, that blesses us and makes our own days glad.

Amen.

³ This phrase is from Ted Loder’s prayer “Pry Me Off Dead Center.”