



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Wide Horizon’s Grandeur View,”
a homily given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on June 2, 2013

About a year ago I read a brilliantly written novel, an acute observation of our contemporary culture that won the National Book Award. This story, of a typically dysfunctional family and the absurdity of life and relationships, drove me crazy, because there was no redemption in it. Just people bumbling about, making mistakes, hurting and disappointing one another.

Call me a sap if you want, but the stories I love best have a moment in them when the lightbulb clicks on, when someone comes to a deeper understanding--a moment when hope is possible, when healing or transformation happens. The prodigal son finally comes to his senses, and starts the journey home. In my wife’s favorite scene from “Pride and Prejudice,” Mr. Darcy finally confesses his feelings to Elizabeth: “I love you. Most ardently.”

David Whyte has a poem about these moments of clarity, these epiphanies, called “The Opening of Eyes”:

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.
It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.
It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

The name “Buddhism” comes from a word that means “to wake up.” Whatever your theology, whatever your spiritual path, isn’t that what it’s all about? To wake up to this life you have been given, to come to your senses, to see more clearly this world and your place in it.

You know those blinders they put on horses, to keep them looking only straight ahead? You don’t want to go through life like that! But to some extent, that’s what we do. We each are conditioned, by our upbringing, by our experiences, by our social location, to see things from a fairly narrow perspective.

The invitation is to pull off those blinders. To develop your peripheral vision, to see the wider view. If you travel overseas, you get a different perspective on our country simply by getting beyond its borders. If you come to church, or are part of any community, you are exposed to perspectives and opinions that are different from your own. Which is a good thing--because people tend to group with those they already agree with. And who wants to live in that kind of echo chamber? Today, I speak in praise of the wider view.

I know this isn’t as easy as it sounds. There’s something in our human nature that draws us toward what is comfortable. We seek out like-minded people. But we are capable of so much more! A couple of weeks ago I talked about the margins, as a place of energy and possibility, and how we might learn to be more comfortable with, and even embrace, the places where find ourselves in the minority or out of step, of how we can find joy and liberation in that kind of healthy border-crossing.

At our annual meeting today, you will consider whether to adopt the proposed covenant, which says, right at the start

We honor our diversity, so I vow to speak my truth
And encourage others to voice their truths.

It doesn’t say, “I’ll speak only to those who agree with me,” or, as I heard when I was a child, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” No, it says, we honor our diversity, so I will speak my truth, and will make space for others to speak their truth. And when we do this, it is an eye-opening and a heart-opening experience.

As much as anyone, I am prone to my own perceptions and misunderstandings. I make judgements based on the available evidence and my own perspective. And more often than I would like, I discover later that I was wrong. That’s the great thing about being part of a community--if you pay attention, and listen to others, your judgments and perceptions are constantly being altered by what you see and hear. The UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed says

“The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

“It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to

see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

Simply put, we need one another. We need one another for support and encouragement, and for accountability too--to tell us the truth when we need to hear it.

About 150 years ago, Samuel Longfellow, younger brother to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and a Unitarian minister, wrote the words to the hymn we just sang: “The freer step, the fuller breath, the wide horizon’s grander view, the sense of life that knows no death, the Life that maketh all things new.”

Isn’t that what we are made for? To be alive, really alive, and not just going through the motions?

At almost the same time Samuel Longfellow was writing that hymn, Walt Whitman was writing his poem, “Song of the Open Road.” People were looking west, and that wide horizon was changing the way people saw themselves and the world. Liberal religion, as it moved west, became more expansive, and made what was happening here in New England seem parochial in comparison.

Whitman’s words have a religious ring to them. “You shall not heap up what is called riches, You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve,” sounds like Jesus in the gospels.

And what follows sounds like a Zen teaching:

However sweet the laid up stores,
However convenient the dwelling, you shall not remain there.
However sheltered the port, however calm the waters, you shall not anchor there.
However welcome the hospitality that welcomes you,
You are permitted to receive it but a little while.
Afoot and lighthearted, take to the open road...

Sam Abell, a photographer for National Geographic, grew up in Ohio. The Midwestern horizon, that strong horizontal line, is a common and powerful element in his photographs. He writes, “To me that grand level landscape was utterly optimistic. It said, ‘You can go anywhere.’”¹

I hope being here gives you that sense too, of energy, of possibility, of promise. That you can go anywhere you feel compelled to go, anywhere the Spirit calls you. I hope and pray that we are a community helping you to have that wide and expansive view.

Because it is a grander view, that comes when your horizon is wide. When your heart and mind are open. What adventures await us, my friends, when we have ears to hear and eyes to see?

Amen.

¹ Sam Abell, *Stay This Moment*.