



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“To Love What is Fleeting,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on August 24, 2014

“You know what happens,” the poet says, “the days shorten, the nights grow colder, the summer ends.”<sup>1</sup> You know what happens. Children grow up and move away. Relationships that were supposed to last, sometimes don’t. People we love get sick and die. Our own bodies start to fail. Things come to an end, whether we want them to, or not.

I’m not trying to make you sad. I’m just naming this truth about life, that things are always changing, whether we are able to see and acknowledge that truth or not. We are part of a great cycle of beginnings and endings, of births and deaths. But we tend to deny this, to pretend it isn’t so, because endings can be sad, and hard. But it’s the way things are. What if we could just accept this?

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha put it this way: “This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds,” he said. “To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky, rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.”

But we aren’t the Buddha. We need to be reminded. Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote, “We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity - in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern.

“The only real security is not in owning or possessing, not in demanding or expecting, not in hoping, even. Security in a relationship lies neither in looking back to what was in nostalgia, nor forward to what it might be in dread or anticipation, but living in the present relationship and accepting it as it is now. Relationships must be like islands, one must accept them for what they are here and now, within their limits - islands, surrounded and interrupted by the sea, and continually visited and abandoned by the tides.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These lines are from Robley Wilson Jr.’s poem “The Summer Place,” which was this morning’s reading. It’s available online at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse/144/4#1/20599957>

<sup>2</sup> From *Gift From the Sea*, by Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

At this time of year, I'm mindful of the summer slipping away. The nights are getting cooler, and the sun is setting a minute earlier each day. But do any of us think we can reverse this process? Any of us think we can stop our end of the earth from tilting away from the sun?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus asked his friends, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Luke 12:25). He knew that it's our nature to fret over things we can't change. He understood that this worry is a kind of fear, which is the opposite of faith, which is what sets us free.

Most of us don't have a summer place, a vacation home like the one described in our reading this morning, but don't we have our own summer places that we like to inhabit this time of year? It could be a beach where you wiggle your toes in the sand, or a path beside a lake where you walk. It might be an ice cream stand or a farm stand. It may be where you go camping or gardening or it could be a chair and a book, on your porch or in your back yard.

What is your summer place? And have you been there enough? Summer is as much a state of mind as anything. Have you allowed yourself enough of the simple pleasures this summer season invites us to enjoy?

At the start of the summer, I shared with you some words from Parker Palmer, in which he describes the wild abundance that summer brings to our world, with so much green and growing, blooming and ripening. Like Jesus, he says we should learn from all this abundance, and not worry so much. Palmer says, "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."<sup>3</sup>

We might cease our anxious machinations and give ourselves to the abiding and abundance grace. "Consider the lilies," Jesus said, "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" (Luke 12:27).

You could rightfully ask, after all the bad news of the past couple of weeks, "How can I allow myself any pleasure when there is so much trouble and sorrow and pain in the world?" How can I be happy, how can I enjoy these waning August days, when Israelis and Palestinians keep killing one another, when the brutal insurgency in Iraq is gaining ground, when in our country black parents fear for their son's lives, and children are being detained at our border, and the promise of "liberty and justice for all" seems farther away?

If you worry about these things, and I hope you do, because it means you are paying attention and that you care; if you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by all the trouble in the world, then hear these words by the farmer and poet Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,

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<sup>3</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*.

I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.<sup>4</sup>

When despair and worry and sadness start to overtake you, that's your warning system lighting up, telling you it's time to go to a place where you remember there is goodness and grace too. It doesn't matter what or where this place is, just that you know how to get there.

Isn't that what we love about summer, it's promise of a respite from the cares of this life? Like when we were children, and summer was a time to do a whole lot of nothing, a time to wander and be free. Even if summer is mostly a state of mind, what is wrong, in these waning August days, with taking some time to savor the pleasures of this season?

Some years ago, I walked into my minister's office one day in mid-August to say hello. Mindful that the summer was slipping away, I told him I was trying squeeze as much from those days as I could, before they were gone. Without missing a beat, he turned toward the neat stacks of papers on his desk. Pointing at them he said, "As far as I'm concerned, summer's over."

Only it wasn't! It was still summer right outside his window, the one he had his back turned to! I didn't understand why he took such a black and white view of this seasonal shift. I wonder if he was afraid of getting his heart broken by loving what was fleeting. Why fall in love with these late-August days when you know they are running out like sand through an hourglass? Why cherish a flower that is blooming right now, when you know that soon enough it's going to be gone?

Because the only place we meet life, the only place we are allowed to love, is in this present moment. What is holy, what is sacred, are those times when we are simply present to the grace of the moment, when our eyes are open to this reality. The poet David Whyte says

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.

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<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things," from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, Counterpoint Press, 1998.

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.<sup>5</sup>

Life keeps offering us these opportunities to open our eyes, to open our hearts, to be amazed, to touch and be touched. Some of us hold back from these experiences, because we know it can hurt to love and then lose what we have loved. It is bitter to be disappointed, which is what happens sometimes to hopeful people.

You know what happens. The days shorten,  
the nights grow colder, the summer ends.  
Just when we imagine the puzzle ready  
for finishing, two pieces come up lost  
and we never make the heaven we look for.<sup>6</sup>

Life is no movie with a picture-perfect ending. It is fully of missteps and mistakes, regrets and second chances. The invitation is to love live in all its imperfection, to love what is fleeting and fading, in all its precious glory. Not to try and make heaven, or perfection, as if we could, but to be part of the radiant dance of light and shadow, growth and decline, beginning and ending.

Life is fleeting. And in the midst of all that is passing away, there is a Presence that abides. "The letter fails, the systems fall, and every symbol wanes," wrote John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Spirit over-brooding all, Eternal Love remains."

May that Love bless us and keep us, in these days, and always,

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> From David Whyte's poem, "The Opening of Eyes," published in *Songs for Coming Home*, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Robley Wilson, Jr., "The Summer Place."