

“Both Sides Now”

The Reverend Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
15 August 2010

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

“Accepting This” by Mark Nepo

Yes, it is true. I confess.
I have thought great thoughts,
and sung great songs - all of it
rehearsal for the majesty of being held.

The dream is awakened
when thinking I love you
and life begins
when saying I love you
and joy moves like blood
when embracing others with love.

My efforts now turn
from trying to outrun suffering
to accepting love wherever
I can find it.

Stripped of causes and plans
and things to strive for,
I have discovered everything
I could need or ask for
is right here -
in flawed abundance.

We cannot eliminate hunger,
but we can feed each other.
We cannot eliminate loneliness,
but we can hold each other.
We cannot eliminate pain,

but we can live a life of compassion.

Ultimately,
we are small living things
awakened in the stream,
not gods who carve out rivers.

Like human fish,
we are asked to experience
meaning in the life that moves
through the gill of our heart.

There is nothing to do
and nowhere to go.
Accepting this,
we can do everything
and go anywhere.

Reading “Train” by Ted Kooser

Our reading by the insurance executive turned poet Ted Kooser is titled “Train.”

Life is a long walk forward through the crowded cars of a passenger train,
the bright world racing past beyond the windows,
people on either side of the aisle,
strangers whose stories we never learn,
dear friends whose names we long remember,
and passing acquaintances whose names and faces
we take in like a breath and soon breathe away.

There is a windy perilous passage between each car and the next,
and we steady ourselves and push across the iron couplers
clenched beneath our feet.

Because we are fearful and unsteady crossing through wind and noise,
we more keenly feel the train rock under our legs,
feel the steel rails give just a little under the weight,
as if the rails were tightly stretched wire
and there were nothing but air between them.

So many cars, so many passages.

For you there may be the dangerous passage of puberty,
the wind hot and wild in your hair, followed by marriage,
during which for a while you [may] walk lightly under an infinite blue sky,
then the rushing warm air of the birth of your first child,
and then, so soon it seems, a door slams shut behind you,
and you find yourself out in the void
where you learn that the first of your parents has died.

But the next car is warm and bright,
and you take a deep breath and unbutton your coat and wipe your glasses.

People on either side, so generous with their friendship,
turn up their faces to you, and you warm your hands in theirs.
Some of them stand and grip your shoulders in their strong fingers,
and you gladly accept their embraces, though you may not know them well.
How young you feel in their arms.

And so it goes, car after car, passage to passage,
as you make your way forward.

The road bed seems to grow more irregular under the wheels as you walk
along—poor workmanship, you think—and to steady yourself,
you put your hands on peoples' shoulders.

So much of the world, colorful as flying leaves,
clatters past beyond the windows while you try to be attentive
to those you move among,
maybe stopping to help someone up from their seat,
maybe pausing to tell a stranger about something you saw
in one of the cars through which you passed,
was it just yesterday or the day before?
Could it have been a week ago, a month ago, perhaps a year?

The locomotive is up ahead somewhere,
and you hope to have a minute's talk with the engineer,
just a minute to ask a few questions of him...
but there are still so many cars ahead,
the next and the next and the next,
clatter to clatter to clatter, and
we close a door against the wind and find a new year,

a club car brightly lit, fresh flowers in vases on the tables,
green meadows beyond the windows,
and lots of people who, together—stranger, acquaintance, friend—
turn toward you and, smiling broadly, lift their glasses.

Sermon: “Both Sides Now”

It’s not every day that you see a guy shot out of a cannon.

But this summer, I did just that, not once, or even twice, but thirty times.

I was in Montreal during the Just for Laughs festival,
and the place where I stayed had a perfect view
three times a day for ten days in a row
for seeing a man shot from a “human cannon” some five metres long.

Now, when I made my reservation for this place months ago,
I had no idea this peculiar ritual unfolding outside my window
would become significant part of my stay.

But unfold it did.
And try as I might, I could not avert my eyes.
Curiosity got the best of me every time.

It always started in the same way.

The growing buzz of the gathering crowd outside
would serve as my cue to move to the window.

With much fanfare, the man in his shiny red spandex suit
would bid the crowd farewell and then disappear into the cannon.

A few seconds later, when he was ready for blast-off,
the count down would begin: cinq, quatre, trois, deux, un: Poof!

Out of a big boom and an impressive puff of smoke, the man would sail
some 50 metres through the air before landing in the safety of a small net.

As he hit the net, with a flourish of golden fireworks,
the crowd would go wild.

The daredevil would then heave himself over the edge of the net,

and before taking a bow to acknowledge the crowd's applause,
would drop to his knees and kiss the ground
as though he'd just made it back from the moon.

It was quite something to see,
and it was certainly something to have seen it more than once.

In ways that surprise me even still,
it became an important part of my summertime spiritual practice—
an invitation issued three times a day
to contemplate matters of life and death, wisdom and folly.

It wasn't long before I started to wonder just how this guy got this job.

I found myself curious about what's listed on his resume.
Does he actually put down as his profession "Human Cannonball"?

And where exactly did he ever get the needed experience
to say that this is what he does professionally?

How much practice does it take
before one can climb into a cannon with a sense of confidence?

Can you imagine how steep his learning curve has been?
Can you imagine how hard it's been to get that kind of experience?

No wonder he's so quick to kiss the ground!

And, yet, haven't we all been there?

As outlandish as it might seem to put ourselves in his shoes,
haven't we all found ourselves, at some point,
careening out of a cannon, just hoping there's a net out there—
and praying that it holds?

Haven't we all gained most of our life experience
while flying by the seat of our pants?

I'm reminded of that sage old saying that
"experience is what you get when you don't get what you want."

By that definition, the human experience comes
with a fair bit of disappointment and heartache,
even as we gain in knowledge and grow in wisdom.

Even with things going our way,
experience often turns out to be less than we had hoped
and sometimes more than we ever bargained for.

It frequently comes with scrapes and cuts and bruises,
and sometimes even worse.

Getting it—gaining the experience we need and want,
as well as the experience that we don't—
tests our mettle and our resolve.

And, yet, all of it is our life, if we are awake to it.

The good, the bad, the ugly and the glorious.

All of it is the stuff from which a life is made.

It doesn't mean that it's easy, that it all makes sense,
or that it comes without regret.

Indeed, making mistakes is part of the game,
and, arguably, the quickest way to finding wisdom.

Nothing ushers in wisdom quite like an experience we never want to repeat.

Once upon a time, an angel appeared at a university faculty meeting.
The angel told the dean
that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior,
God would reward him with his choice
of infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty.

Without hesitating, the dean asked for infinite wisdom.

“Done!” said the angel before disappearing
in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning.

Dumbstruck, all heads in the room turned toward the dean,

who sat surrounded in a faint halo of light.

At length, one of his colleagues whispered, “Say something.”

The dean looked at them and said, “I should have taken the money.”¹

Experience is indeed what we get when we don’t get what we want.
The gift of hindsight is sometimes bittersweet.

How often we hear people say. . . “if I had it all to do over again. . .”

Usually, though, when people say those words,
they’re pointing to a lesson learned, an understanding
of how they would handle some situation differently if given the chance.

But rarely have I ever heard someone say they would really want to live their
lives over again—especially without the benefit of knowing
what they have learned the hard way this time,
without the hard-won wisdom that has carried them this far.

Can you imagine going back to square one and starting from scratch?

Sure, it might be nice to have an extra shot at life,
but would you be willing to give up the wisdom life has already given you
just to have to experience the hard lessons that went with it all over again?

I’m not so sure I would.
I’m not sure I’d push my luck.

As wild and hard and beautiful as this time through life has been,
I can’t quite imagine a second round.

In the words of the Humanist Manifesto, this life is “all and enough.”

Whatever wisdom I’ve been able to patch together
has come at so high a price that I’m not sure I’d be willing to gamble it away.

I love the way that Theodore Levitt puts it:

¹ Adapted from a telling in Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, *Absolute Zero Gravity*, Simon & Schuster.

Experience[, he says,] comes from what we have done.
Wisdom comes from what we have done badly.

I don't know about you, but I've had to make some epic mistakes
to have what little wisdom I've amassed in this life.

As painful as it has sometimes been,
I can't imagine trading any of it in for a second chance.

When I look at the path my life has taken,
I find I cherish all of it in some odd way—
perhaps because I simply can't imagine who I would be
had life not unfolded as it has.

All of the disappointment, devastation, and heartbreak I have known
at one time or another has had a hand in shaping me—
most often for the better.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in reflecting on the mixed blessings of her own life,
writes:

In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count.

I have set out to be married and ended up divorced.
I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. . . .

When I was thirty, I set out to be a parish priest,
planning to spend the rest of my life caring for souls
in any congregation that would have me.

Almost thirty years later, I teach school. . . .

While none of these displacements was pleasant at first,
I would not give a single one of them back.

I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered
if I had stayed on the path.

I have lived through parts of life
that no one in her right mind would ever willingly have chosen, finding
enough overlooked treasure in them

to outweigh my projected wages in the life I had planned.²

I think her words, more than any I know,
point to what it means to truly see “both sides now,”
to glimpse the start of the many other possible paths
that your life might have taken,
but to embrace the meandering path that you’re on,
knowing that it is yours and yours alone,
and that its many detours, smooth spots, and rough patches
make up the substance of your days on this earth—
and are the source of the wisdom and experience
that you have carved out of being alive.

Toward the end of his life in 1960,
the Broadway lyricist, Oscar Hammerstein got at this with great eloquence
when he described why he considered himself to be a happy man.

Why do I believe I am happy?
Death has deprived me of many whom I loved.
Dismal failure has followed many of my most earnest efforts.

People have disappointed me.
I have disappointed them.
I have disappointed myself.

Further than this, I am aware that I live
under a cloud of international hysteria.

The cloud could burst, and a rain of atom bombs could destroy millions
of lives, including my own.

From all this evidence, could I not build up a strong case
to prove why I am not happy at all?

I could, but it would be a false picture,
as false as if I were to describe a tree only as it looks in winter.

I would be leaving out a list of people I love, who have not died.
I would be leaving out an acknowledgment

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, pp. 72-73.

of the many successes that have sprouted among my many failures.

I would be leaving out the blessing of good health,
the joy of walking in the sunshine.

I would be leaving out my faith that the goodness in humanity
will triumph eventually over the evil that causes war.

The conflict of good and bad merges in thick entanglement.

You cannot [he says] isolate virtue and beauty and success and laughter
and keep them from all contact
with wickedness and ugliness and failure and weeping.

I don't believe anyone can enjoy living in this world
[without accepting] its imperfection.

[We] must know and admit [that we are] imperfect,
that all other mortals are imperfect,
and go on in [our] own imperfect way,
making . . . mistakes and riding out the rough and bewildering,
exciting and beautiful storm of life until the day [we] die."

I don't know if Oscar Hammerstein was a Unitarian,
but with ideas like that, he certainly could have been.

Since the middle of the 19th century, Unitarianism has held up the belief
that we are saved not by faith, by grace, or by good works,
but by the growth and development of our own character.

William Ellery Channing, who articulated this idea of Salvation by Character,
believed that our great task on this earth
was to commit ourselves to what he called "self-culture."

He believed that by cultivating the self we worked out our own salvation
by caring for ourselves and dedicating our energies
to the unfolding and the perfection of our nature.

Salvation by Character involves two important tools:
self-searching and self-forming.

To Channing, this meant that we must make a careful study of our lives, looking into those corners of our souls that needed improvement, and then making an intentional move toward our continued growth and spiritual development.

While this may now seem the obvious stuff found in the self-help aisle of any modern bookstore, it was a radical proposition back in 1843.

The prevailing religious views in North America at the time championed dramatic conversion experiences that changed people's hearts and minds in an instant, rather than the "slow and steady, self-managed progress toward wisdom and goodness."³

That slow and steady work, as much today as it was generations ago, is the project at the heart of being a Unitarian Universalist.

To do this, as humans always have, we work with what we've got.

In his essay "Self-Culture," Channing wrote:

We pine for a sheltered lot, for a smooth path,
for cheering friends, and unbroken success.

But providence ordains storms, disaster, hostilities, suffering;
and the great question, whether we shall live to any purpose or not,
whether we shall grow strong in mind and heart,
or be weak and pitiable, depends on nothing so much
as on our use of these diverse circumstances.

Friends, we are called to look at our lives from all sides,
to cultivate from the diverse circumstances of our days
wisdom and experience that leads on to our own growth
and the betterment of the world around us.

May we, with every fiber of our being,
commit ourselves to the work of love and justice
to which this great faith calls us.

³ "Salvation by Character," Rev. Christine Robinson, March 7, 2010.

Amen.