

# “Summertime... And The Living Is Not Easy”

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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.

## **Reading: “The Blessings of Earthiness – The Next Step”**

Our reading comes from Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz, the noted religious scholar, writer and teacher.

He studies the teachings of Jesus in their original Aramaic language and translates them in a way that’s in keeping with the spiritual understanding of indigenous people in Jesus’ time and place.

Native people in the ancient Middle East, like Jesus, felt a strong spiritual connection to the earth, which you’ll hear in this reading.

One of the most interesting aspects of translating the Aramaic is that, according to the mystical traditions of that time, each word had several different meanings simultaneously. It was not meant to have one literal meaning.

So, in the King James Version of the Bible, which is translated from Greek, the line reads “Give us this day our daily bread.”

But translated from the Aramaic,  
*Hawlan lachma d'sunqanan yaomana* could mean:

Grant what we need each day in bread and insight:  
subsistence for the call of growing life.

Give us the food we need to grow  
through each new day,  
through each illumination of life's needs.

Let the measure of our need be earthiness:  
give all things simple, verdant, passionate.

Produce in us, for us, the possible:  
each only-human step toward home lit up.

Help us fulfill what lies within  
the circle of our lives: each day we ask  
no more, no less.

Animate the earth within us: we then  
feel the Wisdom underneath  
supporting all.

Generate through us the bread of life:  
we hold only what is asked to feed  
the next mouth.

Grant what we need each day in bread and insight.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus's Words* (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 1-3, 26.

## **Sermon: “Summertime, and the Living is Not Easy”**

*(Sing: Summertime, and the living is easy...)*

Ever since I picked the title “Summertime” for this service, the song has been running through my mind.

Perhaps that happened for some of you, as well, when you read the title on the sign in front of our building.

For me, I just read the word “summertime” and that song begins to play.

It was written by George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward in 1935. It’s been covered more than 30,000 times...and that’s not counting the beautiful unrecorded versions including Kate Kudelka’s this morning.

The song was written for the musical “Porgy and Bess” which told the story of a disabled black beggar on the streets of Charleston, South Carolina, and his unlikely romance with a woman trying to escape an abusive relationship and involvement with drugs.

A hurricane takes place in the story. It leads to the deaths of two characters, who leave behind an orphaned baby.

“Summertime” is sung as a lullaby at that point, to comfort the child.

Needless to say, it’s not an “easy” story. So the song “Summertime” was written with a deliberate sense of irony.

Gershwin wanted to write a new song in the tradition of negro spirituals and folk songs of the period.

He’s said to have been influenced by the classic spiritual song, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”

Indeed, you can hear how the two songs are related.

*(sing both lines)*

*“Summertime, and the living is easy...”*

*“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...”*

Interesting, isn't it? Not only the similar melodies in a minor key, but the parallel words “sometimes” and “summertime.”

I didn't know about those connections until this week.

Now I understand a little better why the song comes across as a “blues” even though its lyrics are technically hopeful.

When we hear the song “Summertime,” even out of its original context, we know on some level that the living is *not* easy.

It's almost as if there's an undercurrent of disquiet there, no matter how cheerfully it's sung.

And we live in times where there's an undercurrent of uneasiness...even if on the surface, everything seems sunny and fine.

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We've all known times when things are not as sunny as they seem.

Sometimes a family or marriage may look just perfect on the surface...but there might be significant conflict underneath.

Or a career might look like a great choice...but the person it in might feel out-of-step with his or her deeper goals.

Or perhaps we may be enjoying a pretty good season where we live...yet be aware of how people in other parts of the world are not faring nearly so well.

Here in Toronto we've been having a pretty good summer so far...but the province just next door to us, Manitoba, has declared a state of emergency due to flooding. And in the Maritimes, thousands of people are without power because of Hurricane Arthur.

It comes just three years after the last huge flood, in 2011, in keeping with a pattern of increasingly severe storms we can now come to expect.

The recent 2014 National Climate Assessment Report in the United States<sup>2</sup> offers a forecast of what's coming.

Although it doesn't cover Canada, you can go to [GlobalChange.gov](http://GlobalChange.gov) and look up "Northeast" and you'll find information that's relevant for our region.<sup>3</sup>

Environment Canada's information on climate change isn't as easy to access as the American report. But it says up front that Canada's climate is warming, at a rate roughly double the global average.<sup>4</sup>

And it affirms that the most vulnerable people in our country—including the socially and economically disadvantaged, Aboriginal people, many seniors and children—will be most affected by the extreme weather...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> U. S. Global Change Research Program, *2014 U.S. National Climate Assessment*. <http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/report/our-changing-climate/heavy-downpours-increasing#intro-section-2>

<sup>3</sup> U. S. Global Change Research Program, *2014 U.S. National Climate Assessment* <http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/highlights/regions/northeast>

<sup>4</sup> Natural Resources Canada, *Canada in a Changing Climate: Sector Perspectives on Impact and Adaptation* (Government of Canada, 2014), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Canada in a Changing Climate*, 212.

Just as African-Americans living in poverty were affected in the greater numbers during Hurricane Katrina...in an echo of “Porgy and Bess.”

In times like these, is it still possible to sing?

Is it okay...or even appropriate? I believe that it is.

In fact, in the bright light of this summertime—which allows us to see both the joy and the sorrow of the world—I believe we’re called more than ever toward love.

Through beauty and grace—the kind that’s exemplified in the song “Summertime,” and “I Know This Rose Will Open,” and so many others—we’re invited to give voice to our pain and longing.

By giving voice to it, we connect to the larger whole and nourish ourselves...so that we might live with greater courage.

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In the book “Active Hope”, authors Joanna Macy and Steve Johnstone note that in our times, there is a sunny “business as usual”<sup>6</sup> veneer on most of our activities.

Yet it doesn’t blind us to the fact of climate change, and to our awareness that we, as modern people, must find a way to live differently, so that all life can be sustained.

They talk about a “double reality”<sup>7</sup> coexisting in our time.

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<sup>6</sup> Joanna Macy and Steve Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re In Without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), 14-17.

<sup>7</sup> Macy and Johnstone, 24-25.

On one hand, it's possible to forecast a future of prosperity much like today.

On the other hand, we know storms are coming.

We're using up natural resources at an alarming rate, and we're already seeing the devastating effects of our over-consuming lifestyle—our “easy living,” if you will.

The subtitle of the book “Active Hope” is “How to face the mess we're in without going crazy,” and I think it names the task before us very well.

If we lose heart...lose our centre...lose our courage...we won't be able to cope with the challenges ahead—whether they're challenges we face in our own lives, or challenges in the wider world.

So, how can we strengthen ourselves...so that we, and others, can survive?

Macy and Johnstone teach what they call a “spiral of the work that reconnects,” in which we begin by “coming from gratitude, becoming more present to the wonder of being alive in this amazing living world.”<sup>8</sup>

From there, we honour our pain for the world...allowing ourselves to feel our sadness and longing, and give voice to it.

By doing so, we connect more deeply to others and to the interconnected web of beauty and meaning to which we belong...

Which empowers us to go forward, taking whatever next step is ours to take, in the direction of love and the healing of the world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Macy and Johnstone, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Macy and Johnstone, 40-41.

We can do this in a prayerful or meditative way, and take this approach no matter what particular issue is troubling us.

As we continue to move through this spiral, we are continually brought back to gratitude, empowered to face our fears, so that we might connect to the larger whole, and take new action.

We start by affirming what we love...for example, beauty, warmth, music. “Summertime and the living is easy...”

Give voice to our longing. “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...”

And connect to the larger world, re-committing to healing action: “One of these mornings, we’re gonna rise up singing.”

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In a poem called “Splendor,”<sup>10</sup> Thomas Centolella makes a list of many things that sustain him, through what may be an uneasy summer.

It’s similar to a “gratitude journal”—something recommended in the book “Active Hope” and a spiritual practice some of you might already use.<sup>11</sup>

The poet writes:

One day it's the clouds, one day the mountains.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Centolella, *Views from Along the Middle Way: Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Macy and Johnstone, 43-44.

One day the latest bloom of roses - the pure monochromes,  
the dazzling hybrids – inspiration for the cathedral's round windows.

Every now and then there's the splendor of thought:  
the singular idea and its brilliant retinue:

Words, cadence, point of view,  
Little gold arrows flitting between the lines.

And too the splendor of no thought at all:

Hands lying calmly in the lap,  
or swinging a six iron with effortless tempo.

More often than not splendor is the star we orbit  
without a second thought, especially as it arrives and departs.

One day it's the blue glassy bay,  
one day the night and its array of jewels,  
visible and invisible.

Sometimes it's the warm clarity  
of a face that finds your face and doesn't turn away.

Sometimes a kindness, unexpected,  
that will radiate farther than you might imagine.

One day it's the entire day itself, each hour foregoing  
its number and name, its cumbersome clothes,  
a day that says come as you are,

large enough for fear and doubt,  
with room to spare:

the most secret wish, the deepest,  
the darkest, turned inside out.

The poet suggests that it is “splendor” itself that gives us a day  
“large enough for fear and doubt.”

A day in which we might “turn the darkness inside out.”

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I want to refer back now to the brilliant translation by Neil  
Douglas-Klotz of what is commonly referred to as “The Lord’s  
Prayer.”<sup>12</sup>

The splendour of the Aramaic language in the context of ancient  
Middle Eastern mysticism is that it is multi-dimensional.

It was meant to be understood in several ways simultaneously.  
It wasn’t thought to have just one “literally true” meaning.

My favourite line in the whole translation/prayer/poem is:  
“Generate through us the bread of life.”

This is a profoundly different way of looking at the line,  
“Give us this day, our daily bread.”

And as Douglas-Klotz suggests, it may reflect the original intent of  
the teaching more accurately than the Greek version with which  
we’re more familiar.

In the original Aramaic—a tribal or aboriginal language—Jesus didn’t  
teach his community to simply ask for bread...

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<sup>12</sup> Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original  
Meaning of Jesus’s Words* (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 26.

But to become people through which bread is generated.

That is, to be in synch with Life in a co-creative way.

We know what feeds us...what bread and insight keeps us going when “the living is not easy.”

It’s a little different for each of us, but I’d venture to say our lists probably have some things in common. Things such as:

Caring presence.  
Unconditional love.  
Acts of kindness.  
Beautiful melodies.  
Colour and light.  
Powerful stories.  
Laughter.  
Silence and stillness.  
Physical touch.  
Time to rest.  
Dancing and singing.  
Trees, animals...all of nature.  
Listening.  
Respect.

I could go on.

That is the bread we need...

And that is the bread we are called to create, protect or sustain.

Through service to others, and by lifting up whatever is good in this world and shining a light on it, we “turn the dark” inside out.

We generate new light, new bread.

In what is both an affirmation of prayer and a re-envisioning of it, the Sufi poet Rumi put it this way.

“Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

It’s worth remembering that the poem begins by saying “Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.”<sup>13</sup>

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In the second verse of the song “Summertime,” we hear the promise that “One of these mornings, we’re gonna rise up singing.”

It is a promise of singing that is offered *through* singing...a reminder that what we yearn for is always inside us.

As we give voice to our hunger, we can attend to it and create the bread we need.

We’ve been invited to do that by so many spiritual teachers, and as Unitarians it is our blessing and our delight to dance in the wisdom of every teacher we meet.

The song we’re about to hear, written by Billy Joel, talks of “a time for meditation, in cathedrals of our own.”

And indeed Unitarians have spoken of the entire world, and all life experience, as a cathedral.

By continuing to deepen in our spiritual lives, we strengthen our ability to make life-sustaining change...both as individuals and as a community.

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<sup>13</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi: Translations by Coleman Barks* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 36.

“We are always what our situations hand us.”

As we embrace both the “easy” and the “uneasy” aspects of these times...our “summers”...

May we journey together, in courage and in love.

Amen.