

“Stay Tuned”

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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.

Call to Worship

Wake now,
To this moment
of connection
and community

As we rouse our
minds and spirits
toward new insights...

Opening ourselves
to new possibilities
for ourselves
and our world.

Be now,
In this time of arrivals
and departures...

Welcomes and farewells...

Passages we share
in this, the human journey

Live now,
into love, this moment.

That all life may awaken
and re-awaken
anew.

Sermon: “Stay Tuned”

As a guitar player, I know how difficult it is to “stay tuned.”

In fact, it’s virtually impossible.

Tuning a guitar or any other fretted instrument is really an exercise in compromise, as a result of mathematics too complicated to go into here.

We can never get the tuning exactly perfect.
But that doesn’t stop us from trying.

I’m sure you’ve witnessed many anxious performers trying desperately to tune onstage...and getting more and more out-of-tune the more they try.

Perhaps you’ve not only witnessed such players, you’ve been one yourself.

And perhaps you've noticed how difficult it is to stay in tune even when you're not playing an instrument...in the great auditorium of life—which is, of course, what I'm really talking about.

I'd venture to say that all of us know that feeling, whether we're musicians or not.

There's an old one-liner that people sometimes say when they know their guitar is still a little bit “out.”

They say it's “close enough for folk music.”

We might as well say “close enough for human music.”

Or even, “close enough for life music.”

Because no matter how hard we try, we'll never get the tuning exactly right.

That doesn't mean, though, that the music of life doesn't keep on playing.

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Of course, when we say “stay tuned” in most situations, we usually mean, “wait and see what happens next.”

The phrase originally meant something like, “Don't touch that dial!”

“Stay tuned to this frequency, so you don’t miss the next interesting program.”

The words “stay tuned” had to do with waiting or anticipation. The pregnant pause before something else happened.

The “in-between” time.

Which is something I’m entering into, as I leave this internship and enter the final stages toward ordination.

Times like these have been described as “liminal”—on the border between two worlds. On the verge of something.

So, “staying tuned” means maintaining a state of readiness. Staying present.

The way we use the phrase, it seems to point toward the future.

And yet “don’t touch that dial” is really about being right here and now, no matter what happens next.



When an instrument is tuned, it’s ready to play.

The tuning itself isn’t the main event—at least we hope it doesn’t take the whole evening—but it makes possible the music that is about to ensue.

The “being-in-tune” is actually a non-action. Nothing exciting at all.

Nobody gets a standing ovation for tuning.

But it’s what makes the Music possible.

And if we see music as a metaphor for meaning, or for God, or for the “interconnected web of existence” named in the Unitarian 7th Principle, we can see that the tuning must have already happened.

Somehow or other, without any effort from us, the universe has been tuned—not perfectly perhaps—but tuned well enough that beauty and meaning and order and harmony and joy can play.

And each of us is part of that song.

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Whether or not it’s seen as a metaphor or an actual concept of physics, the “Music of the Spheres” has been described for centuries.

The poet Ernesto Cardenal took this concept and turned it into a poem that’s found at #532 of our hymnbook.

It reads in part, “A harmonious universe—like a harp. Its rhythms are the equal, repeated seasons. The beating of the heart.

Day/night, the going and coming of migratory birds...

Rhythms of moon and tide.

One single rhythm in planets, atoms, sea,

Apples that ripen and fall in the mind of Newton,

Melody, accord, arpeggios,

The harp of the universe.

Unity behind apparent multiplicity

This is the music.”¹

Cardenal mentions Isaac Newton, whose apples fell in a predictable ways.

But in recent years, physicist Richard Feynman discovered that although large objects like apples seem to follow singular and straightforward paths, the tiny particles that make up the apples do not.

Not only is there is mind-boggling unpredictability in the song of the universe...

Science now points to a multiplicity of universes all playing at the same time--as hard as that is for most of us to comprehend. ²

¹ Ernesto Cardenal, “The Music of the Spheres” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #532.

² Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam, 2012), 5-10.

In fact, the findings of modern physics are so incredible, one can imagine a return of not atheism but “a-sciencism”...in which human beings are as skeptical of science as they are of religious faith.

No matter from what angle we perceive the Totality, it’s hard for human beings to open ourselves to it.

How on earth can we “stay tuned” in a situation like this?
When so much is unpredictable and indeed incomprehensible?

How can we stay present and receptive in a world where we have so little control...and where there is so much suffering?

On the other hand, how can we not “stay tuned?”

And is it possible that we are already tuned without knowing it?



Many spiritual teachers have suggested that our human judgments of what’s good and bad can blind us to the divine integrity of the Whole.

Both Buddha and Jesus are quoted as directly saying, “Do not judge.”³

³ Matthew 7:1, Luke 6:36-38; Dhammapada, 4:7. Quoted in Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (Crossroad: 2013), 49.

The modern teacher Eckhart Tolle draws on both Eastern and Western wisdom traditions.

In his book “A New Earth,” he writes:

“The deeper interconnectedness of all things and events implies that the mental labels of “good” and “bad” are ultimately illusory. They always imply a limited perspective and so are true only relatively and temporarily.”⁴

As human beings, it’s our way to make assessments of what’s “in tune” and what’s not...what’s is beautiful or true or right.

And yet...in order to live in harmony with each other and with the imperfection of life itself, we also have to reserve judgment and wait and see...to “not touch that dial.”

Tolle re-tells a familiar Taoist story:

“A wise man won an expensive car in a lottery. His family and friends were very happy for him and came to celebrate.

“Isn’t it great!” they said. “You are so lucky.”

The man smiled and said, “Maybe.”

For a few weeks he enjoyed driving the car. Then one day another driver crashed into him at an intersection and he ended up in hospital with multiple injuries.

⁴ Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 196.

His family and friends came to see him and said, “That was really unfortunate.” Again the man smiled and said, “Maybe.”

While he was still in hospital, one night there was a landslide and his house fell into the sea.

Again his friends came and said, “Weren’t you lucky to have been here in hospital.”

Again he said, “Maybe.”⁵

By staying open to whatever circumstances presented themselves, the man “stayed tuned.”

He remained able to fully engage with life, with kindness and a clear and intelligent mind.

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Several years ago I came to know a very elderly woman in my neighbourhood. I’ll call her Nadia.

For many months we simply spoke on the sidewalk in front of her house, as she swept her walk each day.

It was difficult for her to do this because she was hunched over and moved very stiffly.

⁵ Tolle, 197.

One day I helped her carry her recycling bins up to the porch, and she invited me in.

In her living room stood an old black piano, piled very high with sheet music.

“You play the piano,” I said.

“Oh yes,” she told me. “I play every day. Perhaps you would like to hear something?”

I sat down as she began to play a complex and difficult piece by Chopin, or perhaps it was Beethoven. She loved both, I learned.

I was amazed at how well she played—fingers flying along the keyboard through very difficult passages.

As I listened, I thought she was surely the most accomplished musician I had ever met.

Over the course of many visits, I learned that she was almost ninety, and that she played the piano every day for several hours.

Along with housework, that was really all she did. She said it kept her alive.

She didn't play for me every time I visited—one doesn't play a concert every day—and meanwhile it was becoming clear that her health was declining.

But a few months later, she offered to play again.

And as I listened this time, I couldn't help but notice that the piano was significantly out of tune.

It seemed a shame, to me, that someone so accomplished should have to play on an out-of-tune instrument.

Because I had a lot of musician friends, I knew a piano tuner. I asked her if she'd like me to bring him around to tune her piano, at no charge.

She thought that would be wonderful, and so it was arranged. My friend came and tuned the piano, and all was well.

A few weeks later I visited again and asked, "How is your piano?"

She paused for a moment, and smiled.

"It was very kind of you to tune my piano," she said. "I appreciate it very much. But, you know...it is not the same."

Suddenly I felt a surge of embarrassment and remorse. Had I inadvertently caused harm, through my well-intentioned action?

What had I done?

But instead of rushing in with an anxious offer to try to fix it...to ask my friend back again and un-tune the piano...I just listened and stayed with her, as she let me know that all was well.

We both had thought that tuning the piano was a good idea, at the time.

When it didn't work out as well as we'd hoped, she stayed in tune, despite that fact.

Maybe the piano needed tuning. Maybe not.

In any case, Nadia's kind smile and ability to stay in tune with me in that moment—and I with her—taught me an important lesson about harmony and grace.

And about love.

She died peacefully in her home, a few weeks later, leaving a music that remains.

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Whenever we open ourselves up to Life as it is, the intertwined comedy and tragedy of the cosmos, over which we have so little control...

We become engaged in a holy, creative, transforming process.

A process through which we may reach out to others who are also struggling to remain open, to remain willing, to stay alive in this world.

This week, with the death of Robin Williams, many of us have been more aware than usual of how important it is to reach out to others—

And to not assume that just because someone looks as if they're "in tune" with life, that they necessarily feel that way.

Joining hands with each other and with the Divine Mystery, we co-create the world...we make the music of heaven, here and now.

Maybe "staying tuned" is nothing more than "staying open."

Listening for—or listening *into*—a Music so much more vast and beautiful than we could ever understand...

But which needs us, and our love, each moment.

So may we now "stay tuned," in faith and love.

And when it is our turn to play, may we do so with soul and grace.

Amen.

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