

“Awake, Arise!”

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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.

Meditation “Half Life” – Stephen Levine from *Breaking the Drought*

We walk through half our life
as if it were a fever dream

barely touching the ground

our eyes half open
our heart half closed.

Not half knowing who we are
we watch the ghost of us drift
from room to room
through friends and lovers
never quite as real as advertised.

Not saying half we mean
or meaning half we say
we dream ourselves
from birth to birth
seeking some true self.

Until the fever breaks
and the heart can not abide
a moment longer
as the rest of us awakens,
summoned from the dream,
not half caring for anything but love.

Sermon: “Awake, Arise!”

I’m a bit embarrassed to admit it,
but my ideological outlook really took hold with the help of the Muppets.

You know, as in Jim Henson’s rag-tag band
of friendly puppets who are always keen for adventure.

I was in Grade Three when I first hear Kermit sing
his warbling ode to the Rainbow Connection.

You might recall that he wondered why
there are so many songs about rainbows,
and about what’s on the other side.

About the amazement that keeps
all the lovers and the dreamers star-gazing.

About that voice that calls our name and can’t be ignored.
The voice that tells us who we are supposed to be.

That song tugged at my ten-year old heart like nothing ever had.

It held out the hope of a place over the rainbow,
a world better than the one I knew.

It spoke to the budding idealist in me.
And it told me there was a music in the universe
that others could hear, too.

I knew, even then, that I wanted to be counted among
the lovers, the dreamers, and the stargazers
who, Kermit said, heard this sweet song
and laboured to find that longed-for rainbow connection.

Over three decades later, I still cherish the song
and its yearning for purpose and the prospect of a better world.

Even though I'm prone these days to much less dreaming.

Even though I've come to question the assumption of human progress.

Even though I've learned to see the downsides
of putting too much focus on a far off utopian future,
especially when so much around us
is going to hell in a hand-basket in the here and now.

All these many years later, though, the song stays with me.

And the line that most haunts my grown-up mind is the one that asks:
"Have you been half-asleep...?"

Have I, I wonder.

I imagine each of us has a similar song, or even a collection of them,
that holds a sacred spot in the music library of our minds.

A song that spoke deeply and directly to us
at some moment in time, at a turning point in our lives,
and reminded us of who we most hoped to be in this world,
of all that we longed to do with our life.

Songs that, with the passage of time, cause us to ask,
when we happen to hear them again, if we've been half-asleep,
if we've truly been awake to the hopes and dreams
we once imagined would give shape to our lives.

Do you have such a song? Such a dream?

And, if so, how's it going? How's it playing out?
Has the world and your place in it turned out as you had hoped?

I'll admit that it's really hard to look around our planet right now
and feel that we're on the verge of making the rainbow connection,
where our dreams and reality become one.

It's not easy to find much hope that the Age of Aquarius
is about to break out at any moment.

In fact, the future that so many of us have dreamt of—
have laboured and longed for—through the years of our lives
can seem, at times, as distant and dim as the stars in the night sky.

Points of light so remote to us that their pulsating glow
now seems but a faint reminder of what might have been.

Constellations of disappointment and regret in a sky full of “if only’s”.

The obvious truth is that the world that many of us long for—
a just world living at peace—
is still a very long ways off, if in the offing at all.

And so it makes me wonder just what song we shall sing,
here, in the meantime, in this one and only world that we’ve got.

At the threshold of a war it seems we have already entered,
in a week when new reports tell us half the world’s wildlife
has disappeared over the past forty years,
when so many around the globe
live under the tyranny of growing inequality,
and we struggle to find our way to a truly just world,
it can be very hard to find the song of our hearts.

That’s even true of the many peace and justice hymns in our hymnal.

Hymns that speak of that better world we long for can seem quaintly behind
the times, if not outright absurd, in light of today’s headlines.

There’s an awkward tension in even trying to sing hymns like
“We’ll Build a Land” with a modicum of integrity—at least
while inequality underwrites the world’s business model,
while the planet careens toward ruin,
and while war without end is the order of the day.

It’s as though we have no business singing them at all.

That is, unless we are willing to do something about it.

Unless we are more deeply devoted to living out our values every day.

Unless we are truly committed to working to make so
that better world of which we so often sing.

In short, we have no real right to sing these songs of yearning,
unless we're determined to wake up and do our part.

And there is, of course, so much to be awake to—so much so
that it can be incredibly tempting to simply hit the alarm,
crawl back under the covers, and hope for a sound sleep.

And, yet, this isn't a time for dozing off.
It's a time when we need to sing with gusto
of the world we want to live in—
and the world we're determined to build.

The stakes could not be higher.

Ninety years ago this month, Mahatma Gandhi warned
in a publication called *Young India*
that there are seven blunders that lead to violence in the world.

In contrast to the Seven Deadly Sins of Catholicism,
these have been labelled the Seven Social Sins or the Seven Blunders.

They are wealth without work,
pleasure without conscience,
knowledge without character,
commerce without morality,
science without humanity,
worship without sacrifice,
and politics without principle.

Even graded on a curve, the world as a whole would fail by every measure.

And graded individually, even we Good Unitarians
might well find we don't personally stack up so well either.

“Have we been half-asleep?” Kermit asks.
I wonder, and I worry that the answer is yes.

The clearest commentary Gandhi ever published on these seven points

came in the form of a single sentence.

He simply said that the goal was not
to “know these things merely through the intellect
but to know them through the heart so as to avoid them.”

So I wonder. Do we know these things through the heart, our heart?

I'd like to think so, though it's much more likely
that we know these things—these principles—through our intellect.

We likely think they're all good ideas—we welcome conversations
about character, and conscience, about principles and humanity—
but do we know these things in our hearts?

And is there any evidence of that knowledge to be found in our lives?

Are we truly singing the song, or just mouthing the lyrics?

Which begs, for me, the pressing question of why this congregation exists.
Of why we are here and what purpose we serve in the world.

I believe we are here to help heal the world.

We cannot, of course, solve all of the world's problems.

But I believe this congregation is here
to help us become the kind of people
who can avoid the sins Gandhi named,
by living out a faith that strives to increase
the sum total of love and justice in this world.

I don't know about you, but for me that requires work.
A lot of it. It takes transformation.

It demands a change of heart—my heart—on an almost daily basis,
as I am awakened again and again to the responsibilities that come
with the values that I profess and this faith I attempt to practise.

I've often referred to our congregation
as a little loving laboratory of the human spirit—

as the workshop where we come together
and struggle with what it means to be the people we most aspire to be.

That involves encouraging one another to spiritual growth,
and being compassionate when we stand in disappointed awe at
the sometimes unbearable gap between who we want to be and who we are.

It involves, in the face of our failings and of those around us,
hearing the call of our faith to forgive ourselves and each other,
and begin again in love—to take up the work anew
with a greater understanding of what is at stake,
and a deeper commitment to do whatever we can.

All of this, to my mind, speaks to the transformation
that is at the heart of who we are trying to become as a congregation.

As this year's pledge materials point out, this is a place that changes lives.

Now, we don't often have the kind of highly dramatic conversion experiences
here that other religious traditions offer.

Lightning bolts tend not to strike us here on a regular basis.

But a good many of us arrive here and weep, with some frequency,
for the unquenchable longing that stirs our souls.

And many of us have come to see that this is a faith
that works on us over the long haul,
slowly bending our hearts and minds toward love and justice.

That is the change our faith offers.
Changed lives that often go forth to change the world.

Someone recently pointed out to me in our pledge drive materials,
that the phrase “change lives (*as a verb and then a noun*)”
can also be read as a noun and a verb: “change lives”—
as in, “it lives here” in what we make possible.

And to the degree to which we are open to it.

Over the next month, we will all be invited to make

significant and highly personal decisions about our degree of openness to change and changing lives, as we consider our pledges to the well-being of the congregation for the coming year.

We are at a critical point as an organization.

For years, we have depended on the generosity of past members who left legacy gifts intended to strengthen the congregation for generations to come.

We have endeavoured to use these funds responsibly to grow the vitality of the congregation. It has, by many measures, worked.

Yet, with each passing year, we have fewer of these funds to draw on.

Unless we summon a powerful sense of generosity, our budget for 2015 will make crystal clear the gap between our bottom line and what we aspire to be.

Our budget will confront us with the question of who we are and why we exist.

It'll require that we grapple with our priorities and carve out a vision of not only what is possible, but what we could make possible if we responded with genuine generosity.

Studies have shown that Unitarianism is, generally, the highest educated among faith groups, and in the top one or two religions when it comes to accumulated wealth.

And, yet, despite our collective resources, the overall level of giving for Unitarians ranks consistently at the bottom of the list.

Imagine the force that our faith could be— in our lives, our city, our country, and our world— if we gave even half as generously of our means as people in other religious traditions who, studies show, have fewer financial resources than we do.

I have an enduring memory that makes the point.

In another congregation I served, some years ago, someone called the office one day to say their family would not be making a pledge to the congregation that year because they had run into some unexpected costs while installing a new salt-water swimming pool at their ocean-front vacation home.

Whatever is one to say in such an indelicate moment?

Gandhi, of course, would have repeated what he'd said about the perils of worship without sacrifice—about venerating something without actually valuing it.

He'd point out that devotion comes at a cost.

For me, what comes to mind, is wanting to ask those people to reexamine their priorities and grapple with whether their chequebook and credit card statements match the values they are trying to live out.

My hope is that they could wake up to their lives and hear a voice calling their name.

That they could find the rainbow connection by aligning their dreams and their values within the reality of their everyday.

In this season when we invite you to put your resources where your faith is, I have the same deep hope for each one of us.

And here's why.

As an institution, we are not nearly as effective as we could be or, arguably, should be.

Many of us long for First to be a beacon for progressive religion.

Yet, we too often struggle to get by.

Our financial and human resources are stretched to their limits.

And we are, at best, held back to the status quo in a rapidly changing world.

If we want to affect that change, and even be an active part of that change,
we will need to step up to the challenges we face
by taking our faith and our congregation's future more seriously.

In the end, in order for our giving to really make a difference around here,
it actually has to make a meaningful difference in each of our own lives.

It's what's behind the idea that one should give until it feels good.
If our contribution doesn't really cost us anything, personally,
its value—no matter the amount—is so much less than it could be.

I think that's what Gandhi was really getting at
in warning against worship without sacrifice.

So, as we renew our commitment to this community,
let us be awake to what matters most in our lives.

Let us set our hearts to the work
of becoming the people we are called to be.

Let us labour to build a better world
and give of ourselves to raise up in this place
an ever brighter beacon for all who seek it.

And as we do, let us boldly sing the songs
that call a better world into being.

So may it be. Amen.