

# “One Life to Live”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
8 November 2015

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** “Now I Become Myself “ – May Sarton

Now I become myself. It's taken  
Time, many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces,  
Run madly, as if Time were there,  
Terribly old, crying a warning,  
“Hurry, you will be dead before—”  
(What? Before you reach the morning?  
Or the end of the poem is clear?  
Or love safe in the walled city?)  
Now to stand still, to be here,  
Feel my own weight and density!  
The black shadow on the paper  
Is my hand; the shadow of a word  
As thought shapes the shaper  
Falls heavy on the page, is heard.  
All fuses now, falls into place  
From wish to action, word to silence,  
My work, my love, my time, my face  
Gathered into one intense  
Gesture of growing like a plant.  
As slowly as the ripening fruit  
Fertile, detached, and always spent,  
Falls but does not exhaust the root,  
So all the poem is, can give,  
Grows in me to become the song,  
Made so and rooted by love.

Now there is time and Time is young.  
O, in this single hour I live  
All of myself and do not move.  
I, the pursued, who madly ran,  
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

### **Sermon: “One Life to Live”**

Perhaps you first heard it from Drake, the rapper from Toronto.

Or maybe it was while watching some sporting event and seeing someone suddenly streak across the field with the word emblazoned on their bare chest, or on their bum.

Or you spotted it in a graffiti tag in a laneway,  
or saw it printed on merchandise for sale at Shoppers,  
or saw it printed on your granddaughter in the form of a cryptic, new tattoo.

YOLO. Y-O-L-O.  
You only live once.

It’s the catchy acronym used by younger people in recent years to capture the sense of abandon that can come from recognizing that, well, you only live once.

It implies the timeless question of, “What’ve you got to lose?”  
And answers with a playful, “Nothing! Or at least not much.”

Critics of the YOLO phenomenon point out that the acronym is too often used by people to explain away their having done something stupid.

Well, YOLO!  
You only live once.

Whether used to justify immature behaviour,  
whether used as a means to take a silly or a meaningful risk,  
whether used to live more fully—if just for a few moments—  
YOLO isn’t of course a new and startling truth.  
It was Goethe, over two centuries ago, who reminded us

that, “One lives but once in the world.”

It was the Roman poet Horace who, nearly two thousand years ago, implored his readers to “Carpe Diem”—to seize the day.

It was the authors of the biblical books of *Isaiah* and *Ecclesiastes*, almost three thousand years ago, who gave us the admonition to “eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.”

There is in each of these aphorisms  
the sense of urgency to make the most of life.  
A recognition that life is short and precious and meant to be used.

It’s telling then, to take a serious assessment  
of how we actually use this one life that is ours to live.

In his book *Sum* (S-u-m, as in total), David Eagleton  
imagines a different way to measure the days of our lives.

He writes:

In the afterlife you relive all your experiences,  
but this time with the events reshuffled into a new order:  
all the moments that share a quality are grouped together.

You spend two months driving the street in front of your house,  
seven months having sex.

You sleep for thirty years without opening your eyes. . . .

You take all your pain at once, all twenty-seven intense hours of it.  
Bones break, cars crash, skin is cut, babies are born.  
Once you make it through, it’s agony-free for the rest of your life.

But that doesn’t mean it’s always pleasant.

You spend six days clipping your nails.

Fifteen months looking for lost items.

Eighteen months standing in line.

One year reading books.

Your eyes hurt, and you itch, because you can't take a shower until it's your time to take your two-hundred and seven day shower.

Two weeks wondering what happens when you die. . . .

Three months doing laundry. Two days tying shoelaces.

Sixty-seven days of heartbreak. Five weeks driving lost.

Three days calculating restaurant tips.

Eleven months walking the dog.

Fourteen minutes experiencing pure joy.

Fifty-one days deciding what to wear.

Nine days pretending you know what is being talked about.

Eighteen days staring into the refrigerator.

Thirty-four days of longing. Twelve weeks doing your taxes.

Four weeks sitting in thought, wondering if there is something better you could be doing with your time.

And you spend four minutes (in the afterlife)  
wondering what your life would be like if—  
instead of all these events being lumped together—  
you reshuffled the order of things.

In this part of the afterlife, you imagine something analogous to your Earthly life, and the thought is blissful: a life where moments—the best and the worst—do not endure, where one experiences the joy of jumping from one event to the next, like a child hopping from spot to spot on the burning sand.

I don't know about you, but given the choice, I'd opt for what we have:  
having all the moments mixed up together, joy and sorrow, side by side;  
having the tedium of our chores interspersed with the experiences  
that give our lives their deepest meaning;  
having every day be an open-ended invitation into the richness of life,  
whether it brings happiness or heartache or a blend of both.

§

As I've been sitting with this month's theme question—  
of what it means to be a person of integrity,  
of what it means to be a people of integrity—  
I've found myself going back and forth between two of my favourite poets.

Both speak to me of integrity.

On one side I hear the powerful, poignant question  
at the end of Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer Day":

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

The word that pops out for me,  
the word that grabs me by the lapels and stares into my soul is "one".

So, what of it? You only live once, so tell me, she says,  
just "what is it you plan to do with your *one* wild and precious life?"

It's a question that has guided me for years.

It's the single phrase of her poetry that prompts me,  
and arguably many Unitarian Universalists, to feel  
this tiny, glorious poet is plugged into the universe in such an amazing way,  
and that she, more than anyone else, has a knack for writing modern scripture.

It's the question that opened my heart to her poetry many years ago,  
and that made me come close to falling down at her feet,  
when in a fleeting moment a decade ago, I realized it was she—  
the reclusive poet—who was getting into the taxi I had just gotten out of.

And, yet, as much as I adore her and her writing

and truly love this particular poem,  
I'm thrown a bit by how easy she makes it all sound.  
How it sounds so much simpler, so straightforward,  
to chart a course through life and follow it to the end.

Granted, she does point out that life is not merely precious, but wild, as well.

But as I've grappled with the question of integrity,  
it's the words from the Unitarian poet May Sarton  
that have spoken most clearly to me.

Now I become myself. It's taken  
Time, many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces...

Perhaps that's the wild life Mary Oliver was alluding to.  
The wild life that takes us on a journey through many different lives,  
not just one.

The wild life that makes and breaks us.  
That upends all that we thought we knew.  
That challenges our most basic assumptions about ourselves.  
That requires that we put on and take off the many masks of living,  
until we find that face, the life, that is truly our own.

The Latin root of the word integrity is the same as for integer—  
a whole, undivided number.  
Both speak of being entire, intact, whole.

Something with integrity is whole.  
All of the parts are present and accounted for.  
It is complete, with all of its pieces fitting into place.

When something has integrity, it holds together.

When people have integrity, we think of them  
as being honest, virtuous, morally consistent.

We think of them living out their values in all that they do.

Their beliefs, their values, and their actions are one and the same.  
They are of the whole.

And, yet, as Sartre reminds us, most of us are a veritable mess  
of contradictions and conflicted bits that don't fit so easily together.

For many of us, our actual wild and precious lives  
are filled with false starts and dead ends,  
as well as the long, smooth stretches of open road.

Such is life, where we live with the advantage  
of having our moments all mixed up, rather than doled out to us  
in vast blocks of the same old thing.

(Seriously, can you imagine twelve weeks of doing your taxes,  
or a shower that lasts for 207 days?!)

We may have only one life to live,  
but many lives are lived within that one, precious shot that we are given.

The chance, through trial and error, to become ourselves.  
The chance, with each day, to move toward greater integrity—  
to pull together, to truly integrate the disparate bits of our being  
into a meaningful whole.

Stephen Carter in his book *Integrity*, explains that creating  
what he calls “an integral life” is anything but easy.<sup>1</sup>

He holds up three steps on the path to building such a life.

The first of these is the act of discernment.

This is giving real and regular consideration of what's right and wrong.  
It's a lifelong process of bringing into alignment  
what we value and how we respond to the world around us.

The second step is when we put what we believe about these things into action.

---

<sup>1</sup> As described by Robin Landerman Zucker, in “Choose Something Like A Star - A Sermon Towards Integrity,” First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, December 21, 2014.

And the third step is to build the bridge that explicitly ties what we believe, what we value most deeply, to what we do.

To boldly state, “I’m doing X because I believe Y.”  
Or “I’m standing up for this because I’m a Unitarian.”

Or, put another way, to practice what you preach.  
To walk your talk.

To demonstrate through how you live your life, day in and day out, that you are actually guided by the values and principles that you profess.

It means asking ourselves on a regular basis, whether what’s on the outside of our life reflects what’s on the inside of our hearts.

Do our actions match our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of others?

Does our behaviour hold up our commitment to the interdependent web of being, of which we are a part?

Are we morally consistent?

Do all the pieces fit?

Are we whole?

I think if any of us dared to be completely honest, the answer would have to be a resounding “no.”

But that isn’t and can’t be our final answer.

Instead, may our answer be, “not yet.”

The truth is, it takes a lifetime to build a life of integrity.

Only through much effort can we proclaim, “Now I become myself.”

It takes “time, many years and places.”  
It involves being “dissolved and shaken,” over and over again.

It may mean wearing “other people’s faces” as we search for an enduring understanding of what it means to become the person we were born to be.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber put this so well, and so clearly: “Every single person is a new thing in the world and is called upon to fill his [or her] particularity in this world.

Every person’s foremost task is the actualization of [their] unique, unprecedented and never recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, be it even the greatest, has already achieved.”

May we strive on, then, to be a people of integrity.

Not seeking perfection, but instead summoning the conviction to live out of our deepest values.

That, with all of our contradictions, we may move through this one, wild and precious life, to become our best and highest selves.

That we might arrive at life’s end entire, intact, complete, whole.

Amen.

**Closing Words**     Hasidic Tale - Martin Buber

A rabbi named Zusya died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God.

As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done.

He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, “Why weren’t you Moses or why weren’t you Solomon or why weren’t you David?”

But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised.

God simply asked, “Why weren’t you Zusya?”

Go forth, knowing that each of you,

in all of your wholeness,  
with all of your complications,  
is a singular, precious gift.

Go forth knowing you are life's longing for itself.

Go forth to become who you truly are, for you only live once.  
Amen.