

“Blessed Being”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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This past summer, I took a personal pilgrimage that was long overdue.

I returned to the State of Texas, where I was born...and where my family spent summer vacations, after we moved to Canada when I was little.

Returning to the Lone Star State for the first time in about thirty years, I played some music, met some cousins, and splashed around in the Gulf of Mexico.

I loved the wide open spaces of that place...along with the generous expanse of time I had before my new ministry position began.

(A generous expanse of time that has now faded into a distant memory, I might add.)

That open space gave me a chance to reflect deeply on just being.

Being by myself.

Being myself.

At one point, when I was travelling from the home of one set of relatives to another, I noticed a place on the map I thought would be worth visiting.

It was a town called Blessing, Texas.

This would be well-worth the detour, I figured!

So I took the time and drove an hour out of my way...

Only to find that there was very little there.

Just one frozen-in-time hotel, miraculously still in business...

Some boarded-up shops...a few houses.

Mostly, though...empty space.

No noisy overcrowded place.

Blessing was simply a place where a weary traveler could stop.
As I did, for little while.

And that was blessing enough.

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By the way, as I was writing this message, its title evolved from “Blessed Be!”
inspired by the Wiccan greeting...to the more spacious “Blessed Being.”

I was guided by the quote at the top of your Order of Service:
“Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.”

The author of that passage, Abraham Joshua Heschel, was one of the great
prophetic thinkers of the 20th Century. He died in 1972.

His words of wisdom echo the call to be a “human being”
rather than a “human doing.”

Many of us have heard that, and likely struggled with it at times.

Retreats such as the one I found in Blessing are short-lived.

And indeed, they’re not places we’d be advised to stay...if we’re to lead an
engaged and purposeful life.

It’s instructive, then, to hear to Rabbi Heschel’s quote in its fuller context.

He wrote, “Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy”...

“And yet being alive is no answer to the problems of living.

To be or not to be is not the question.

The vital question is: how to be and how not to be.

The tendency to forget this vital question is the tragic disease of contemporary
[humanity],

A disease that may prove fatal, that may end in disaster.”

“To pray,” he said, “is to recollect passionately the perpetual urgency of this question.”¹

According to Rabbi Heschel, to pray is to ask ourselves how to be...and to remember how urgent it is that we do so.

He also wrote: “To be human is to be involved, to act and react, to wonder and to respond.

For the human individual to **be** is to play a part in the cosmic drama, knowingly or unknowingly.”²

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It seems to me that the Rabbi was talking here about engagement. Involvement and response...even wrestling with or grappling with.

I’m here as your new Minister of Community “Engagement”...

So help me, I hope I never become your Minister of Community Detachment!

And in light this “engagement” we are in, and our October theme of “blessing,” I’m reminded of a story about Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, in the book of Genesis, in the Hebrew Bible.³

Re-telling the story, the religious broadcaster Krista Tippett calls Jacob “a quintessential late-bloomer, conniver and egoist,” whose life was marked by “foibles and false starts.”

She recalls that “at mid-life, full of both pride and regret, he heads home to face his demons and past mistakes.

He makes his way across the land in which he has spent his adulthood back to the land of his childhood.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Wisdom of Heschel*, Ruth Marcus Goodhill ed.,(New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 220.

² Heschel, xi

³ Genesis 32:22-31

His sins were great and his absence has been long, and he is terrified of what will greet him on the other side.”

In the process of crossing a river at night, Jacob encounters a mysterious figure who might have been even an angel or God himself.

We don’t know what to call it and neither did Jacob.

He asked for a name and never received one according to this ancient story.

Nevertheless, not knowing exactly what it is he is wrestling with, Jacob says, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”⁴

At the start of a new day, he finds himself released, with an injury to his hip, and with a blessing and a new name.

There are many interpretations of this story, and I don’t pretend to be a Biblical scholar.

But I can relate to the “wrestling” with Mystery that Jacob undergoes...and the fact that it takes place at night...

That he doesn’t come out of the grappling unscathed...and that he is ultimately blessed, and indeed re-named by the experience.

We go through such wrestling with ourselves, and with life’s mystery, at many points in our lives...

And we do so as institutions and organizations as well.

We may seek to be freed from old ways of “being” that hold us back.

But it may be that we cannot discover the blessing of our true name and calling if we do not “wrestle.”

⁴ Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters, and How to Talk about It* (Penguin: New York, 2007), 52.

This may be useful to remember as we at First Unitarian of Toronto enter more deeply into a time of discernment about our mission and purpose in the world...and what space we need to do it.

What “room” we may need, in order to offer our particular blessings and love to the world.

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Now, given my new job description, you might think that I’m very comfortable talking in large and collective terms.

But in fact, as a person, and an artist, I find myself drawn to the very small and particular.

No matter how intrigued I may be by theological reflection, or the evolution of the institutional church...

It’s hard for me to wrap my head around the really Big Picture.
I don’t think I’m alone in that.

Perhaps that’s why human beings have created myths involving personal figures.

They’re much easier to manage than the whole of Ultimate Reality.

In the face of the billions and billions of stars that are so far beyond our individual comprehension, we choose, and wisely I think, to focus on “this little light of mine”...

Or... “this little light of ours”...our chalice.

We seek, through religious tradition and other means, to understand our place in what Heschel calls “the cosmic drama.”

Indeed, coming to know ourselves may be the most daunting challenge there is...and one that can last an entire lifetime.

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Consider this well-loved story.

Once, the Rabbi Zusya came to his followers with tears in his eyes. They asked him: "Zusya, what's the matter?"

He said, "My friends, I've just learned the question that will be asked of me, at the end of my life."

His followers were puzzled.

"But Zusya, you are wise and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying?"

Zusya replied: "I have learned that in the coming world, they will not ask me 'Why were you not Moses?'

They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"⁵

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As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the "inherent worth and dignity of every person."

And yet, like Zusya, we may at times have difficulty affirming, or indeed knowing, the essential personhood that is ours alone.

The psychologist Carl Jung envisioned the Self, with a capital S, as an integrated wholeness.

Some speak of "the God within" or the "still small voice" of the soul.

The "essence" of our being.
Our inherently worthy "is"-ness.

We too often lose touch with it.

And often because of seemingly worthy activities...

⁵ Buber, Martin. *Tales of the Hasidim. Vol. 1: Tales of the Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 251. (Adapted)

Many areas of interest... flights of fancy and distractions.

“Of the many million things we wish for,
We only need a precious few.”⁶

And the teacher asked himself: “Why was I not Zusya?”

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As the story makes clear, Love asks us to reveal and share our unique blessedness.

Meanwhile, we’re taught by virtually every faith tradition that the route toward the essential Self...

Toward our true name given by God or Life...

Is in and down, toward silence and space.

Spiritual practices such as prayer and mindfulness can bring us back to the blessing of being itself.

And that “being” alone—that “non-doing”—may provide the grounding we need to grapple with life’s most urgent questions.

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön has said that meditation creates “more room in her mind”...which allows her to be more awake to life and more compassionate to others.⁷

Needless to say, it’s not always easy to appreciate the “blessing” of life itself, especially when life is difficult.

In our individual lives, we may struggle to find meaning in times of deep disappointment...

When all the “blessings” we once took for granted seem to have dropped away.

⁶ Lynn Harrison, “Room to Love” (Lynoleum Music, SOCAN). Sung as Introit.
⁷ On Being: “Pema Chodron on Quieting our Racing Minds and Powering Down”
<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/pema-ch%C3%B6dr%C3%B6n-on-quieting-our-racing-minds-and-powering-down-video/6128>

In our world today, we may wake up to a sense of bewilderment or even dread...when we contemplate climate change, or the rise of political figures whose presence among us seems anything but a blessing.

Contemplation, in its many forms, can ground us in the awareness that “just to be is a blessing...just to live is holy.”

And from that awareness, we might renew our commitments to do the work of justice and peacemaking...

To take the next steps on our individual paths with clear direction and purpose.

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Thanks to the great blessing of working with Reverend Shawn Newton, who keeps blessedly well-organized files...I found the following poem.

It takes me right back to my trip to Texas, where everywhere I went, I heard a phrase familiar from my childhood vacations.

[Ad lib, inexact: This poem reminds me of how families bring home the blessing...ha, the “blessing!” That slip is a blessing in itself...and not in my script.]

This poem is called “Bless Their Hearts” and it’s by Richard Newman.

“At Steak 'n Shake I learned that if you add
‘Bless their hearts’ after their names, you can say
whatever you want about them and it's OK.

My son, bless his heart, is an idiot, she said.
He rents storage space for his kids' toys—they're only one and three years old!

I said, My father, bless his heart, has turned into a sentimental old fool.
He gets weepy when he hears my daughter's greeting on our voice mail.

Before our Steakburgers came
someone else blessed her office mate's heart....

Then, as an afterthought, the jealous hearts of the entire anthropology department.

We bestowed blessings on many a heart that day.
I even blessed my ex-wife's heart.

Our waiter, bless his heart, would not be getting much tip, for which, no doubt,
he'd bless our hearts.

In a week it would be Thanksgiving,
and we would each sit with our respective families,
counting our blessings and blessing the hearts of family members as only family
does best.

Oh, bless us all, yes, bless us,
Please bless us and bless our crummy little hearts.”

(The poet, Richard Newman.)

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Speaking of family...today, October 2nd, was the birthday of my paternal
grandmother, Joy Harrison.

She lived in Corpus Christi, my destination on the day I stopped in Blessing.

When she was alive, she wrote to me regularly, and often asked me in her
letters, “Have you found a church home?”

As a young person I wrote back without answering her question, hoping she
might forget that she asked it.

But I wish she could see how I've found a home among you now.

It is, indeed a blessing to be with you...and at a time when we are asking
ourselves, both as individuals and as a congregation:

“Who, and what, is Life asking us to be?”

Today, I'm still grappling with that question...but I do know this:

We are blessed by our very being...
And blessed by being part of the Whole that is holy.

May we carry this blessing with humility and love,
every day that we live and breathe. (Amen.)