

“Now I Become Myself”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
20 November 2016

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 “Kindness” - Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Sermon: “Now I Become Myself”

It was a rather ironic place to bump up against bigotry.

A few years ago, Bob and I were visiting
the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam—
the site of the famous annex
where she hid with her family during the course of the war.

The house museum had recently expanded into a new building,
complete with a new visitors’ centre containing exhibits and a book shop.

In one room, there was an interactive exhibit
helping people to measure their own prejudices.

On a large central screen were questions that got at typical areas
where people might hold a bias against other people.

There were questions about race and gender,
religion and national origin, sexual orientation and gender.

What was both interesting and deeply uncomfortable about the experience
was that each person indicated their answers on handheld devices,
and then those answers were instantly compiled
and the results shown, in real time, on the large screen.

The exercise gave a very quick introduction to one’s neighbours,
at least in the aggregate.

With just a few questions and responses shown on the screen,
we learned a lot about the people around us.

But where it got really uncomfortable
was when the questions turned to sexual orientation.

The question that stuck out for me was:
“Should homosexuals have the same rights as other people?”

More than half the people in the room voted no.

As you might imagine,
that was disappointing to me, on a personal level.

Now, if there had been a hundred people in the room,
or even fifty, or just twenty, it wouldn't have been so jarring to me.

But there were only eight of us in that room.
This felt personal.

With Bob and I voting in the affirmative,
it was clear we had only one ally.

Did I mention we were at the Anne Frank House?

Everyone in that room had just climbed up five flights of stairs
to visit a tiny, cramped attic space where eight people
had lived for two years, fearing for their lives because they were Jews.

By the war's end, seven of those people had been murdered
in concentration camps, all because of a bigoted ideology
that had been wed to the violent power of the state.

I'm not naïve when it comes to prejudice.
I grew up steeped in it.
I've had it directed at me personally at various points in my life.
And I have spent a fair bit of time as an adult
examining my own prejudices, and working to dismantle them.

Still, that day in that exhibit was deeply disturbing to me.

If people can't open their minds after walking through the Anne Frank House,
if standing in the very room where she wrote the words,

“Despite everything, I believe people are really good at heart,”
if that experience doesn’t move a person to mere tolerance if not acceptance,
I’m really not sure what will.

I’ve thought back to that experience in the wake of the election
as we’ve seen hateful acts of bigotry unfold not only in the U.S.,
but now in our country, and even within our own city.

The election results have been taken by some
as a mandate to practise their prejudices in public.

To paint swastikas on the doors of a synagogue in Ottawa.
To hurl racist threats at someone on a street car in Toronto.
To post signs in East York asking “white people”
if they’re “tired of being blamed for all the world’s problems.”

These acts have reminded me of the lesson learned in Amsterdam,
that there is sometimes more bias
simmering beneath the surface than we realize.

And it’s caused me again to question whether I can affirm
the immortal words of a teenager who, from her hiding place,
could say that, “Despite everything, [she] believe[d]
people are really good at heart.”

And, yet, with those words,
as she has done countless times,
Anne Frank called me back to the conviction at the heart of my religion—
that, yes, I do believe people are, at heart, good.

To affirm this is sometimes a total leap of faith.

A leap against all the prevailing evidence.

But a leap of faith that is ultimately
more about the state of my own heart
than about the behavior of other people.

To believe in human goodness,
to uphold, as our faith does,
a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person,

involves a bedrock commitment to seek out the good in people,
in spite of any present circumstances.

...and to think our critics say this is an easy faith!
It's just not so.

Over the past few months, I've heard repeated many times
the famous phrase, "the better angels of our nature."

It figured into the end of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address.

It was an appeal to his people,
amid the brewing tensions of a civil war,
to live into their best selves.

Yet, it's likely that the phrase, "better angels,"
actually came to Lincoln
because the man who helped him write that speech
had read the novels of the Unitarian Charles Dickens.¹

Twenty years earlier, in his book, *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens wrote:

The thoughts of worldly men are forever regulated
by a moral law of gravitation, which, like the physical one,
holds them down to earth.

The bright glory of day, and the silent wonders of a starlit night,
appeal to their minds in vain.

There are no signs in the sun, or in the moon, or in the stars,
for their reading.

They are like some wise men, who,
learning to know each planet by its Latin name,
have quite forgotten such small heavenly constellations
as Charity, Forbearance, Universal Love, and Mercy,
although they shine by night and day so brightly

¹ Gene Griessman, "'The Better Angels Of Our Nature': How Charles Dickens Influenced Abraham Lincoln."

that the blind may see them; and who,
looking upward at the spangled sky, see nothing there
but the reflection of their own great wisdom and book-learning...

It is curious to imagine these people of the world,
busy in thought, turning their eyes
towards the countless spheres that shine above us,
and making them reflect the only images their minds contain...

So do the shadows of our own desires
stand between us and our better angels,
and thus their brightness is eclipsed.

As Dickens claims, our better angels call us
to look beyond the limits of our own minds
toward those heavenly constellations
of "Charity, Forbearance, Universal Love, and Mercy."

As he makes clear, this is a real struggle.
It doesn't seem to come to us easily or naturally.

And, yet, the struggle is worth our efforts.
For the striving toward our better angels is sacred.

It is the ennobling call to our best and highest humanity.
And it is the vital work involved, I believe, with being Unitarian.

I realize these are lofty aspirations.

There are times, I know, when, for most of us,
it's all we can do to get through the day
without summoning our worst demons,
let alone our better angels.

Fortunately, calling on our better angels isn't something we do,
once and for all and, then, live happily ever after.

Calling on our better angels is a spiritual practice.

It's something we do over and over again.
And something we hopefully get better at over time.

* * *

This term, as part of my doctoral program,
I'm taking a course exploring the meaning of "religious experience."

It's a new field of study,
and this is the first time such a course has been offered at UofT.

This semester, we've drawn on psychology, anthropology, and linguistics
to get at describing and understanding what's going on
when people have religious experiences.

It was my turn to run the seminar this week,
and, of course, I drew the short stick
and had to present to the class
the neuroscience textbook on the syllabus,
and then guide our discussion.

Needless to say, I'm not a neuroscientist.
But I did find compelling what Patrick McNamara, the author,
has to say about neuroscience and religion.

Through the work he's done on brain-imaging,
he's established that there's significant overlap
between the parts of the brain that are tied to religious experience
and the parts of the brain tied to our sense of Self.²

In other words, when scientists look at brains having religious experiences,
they see the same part of the brain that "lights up"
when people are reflecting on their sense of self, or self-consciousness.

He argues there must be an evolutionary cause for this.
And he believes that cause is that religion
helps us to overcome the competing wills within us
to move toward a more unified sense of self—
a unified self that can regulate our behaviours
and make us more compatible members of human society.

² Patrick McNamara, *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience*, xi.

Building on the work of other theorists,
he says we conjure up images of other “possible Selves”—
images of what we hope to become, expect to become,
or, even, fear becoming.³

As we wrestle with the gap between
these possible selves and our current Self,
that wrestling leads us on
toward our becoming our best, or ideal self.

He calls the process behind this “decentering.”

It has four steps.⁴

The first involves—
when needing to resolve conflicting or competing desires within us—
setting aside our own action, suspending all activity.

In that moment, the second step,
our current Self is freed up from decision-making
and placed in a virtual “box” of other, “possible worlds.”

In the third step, we search our memory,
and the part of the brain where we do “meaning-making,”
looking for files for our other possible selves,
for the best possible self for the challenge we’re facing.

And when we find one, the fourth step is integrating
that better possible self with our current self.

A new self, a new-and-improved self,
emerges to take charge again,
springing to action and making decisions.

I realize this is a bit wonky,
but what’s so striking to me about it
is that this process is a neuro-scientific explanation
for what it means to summon “the better angels of our nature.”

³ McNamara, 24.

⁴ McNamara, 47-53.

Now the step I find most intriguing is the third.

That's the step when we're searching our memory bank,
when we're looking through our meaning-making files.

Here's the thing: religion significantly shapes what's in these files.
These files where we store our notion of our other possible selves.
These files where we hold our sense of our "ideal Self."

This ideal Self is a goal toward which we strive,
and against which we evaluate our current self,
and religion can be instrumental in shaping what it is,
and how we understand it.

Our ideal self can be rooted in our notion of God or the divine;
it can be linked to saintly figures or ancestors we see as models for living.

Religion helps us build character strengths
that empower us to close the gap
between our current and our ideal selves.

And all of that experience figures into those files,
the ones we go searching through,
when we're in the process of resolving an internal conflict
over how to handle a major problem or manage an important task.

Religion helps to shape the values
that define the content of the files we access
when we're really showing to ourselves and others who we truly are.

I go into all of this with you, because I believe
it's vitally important in the world we're living in and living into.

I feel that we're living on the knife's edge.
That humanity could go one way or the other at this point,
toward a brighter future or toward bringing about our own swift demise.

What will, I think, make the difference—
what will decide the outcome—
is whether people are awake,

whether people come alive,
whether people truly know themselves,
whether they have at least some passing acquaintance with their better angels.

Too many goodly souls are sleepwalking through life,
aware only of themselves,
self-absorbed to the point of being unable to know themselves
as a vital part of the sacred ecology of life on this planet.

Isolated and disconnected, they live with a hunger to fill the void,
yet too often that void is filled with the things that do not serve life.

Too often, we proudly chalk up this isolation to our individualism.
But such individualism comes at a very steep cost
to the life-giving role of community, of humanity,
in sustaining our collective well-being.

The great psychologist James Hillman
spoke of “the soul’s need to place itself
within the great scheme of things.”

That is, I believe, what it means to become ourselves.
To find where it is that we fit into the fabric of life.

To see that we share a common destiny
with all who travel this world with us.

To learn, as the poet says, “the tender gravity of kindness,”
that depends upon our knowing in our bones
a depth of compassion for our fellow travelers,
that springs from recognizing our own reflection in their eyes.

May such compassion, such understanding,
may “the tender gravity of kindness,”
call us again and again to the better angels of our nature.

May they summon us to those celestial spheres
of “Charity, Forbearance, Universal Love, and Mercy.”

May they lead us to affirm, with every breath we take,
a belief that, people, ourselves included, are truly good at heart.

May they lead us, ever onward, to becoming our truest, highest selves. Amen.