

“The Door of Compassion”

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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.

Reading:

Call Me By My True Names

-Thich Nhat Hanh

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,

to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,
learning to sing in my new nest,

to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river,

and I am the bird which,
when spring comes, arrives in time
to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who,

approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda,
all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the [young] girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being [violated] by a sea pirate,

and I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands,

and I am the man who has to pay
his "debt of blood" to my people,
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring,
so warm it makes flowers bloom
in all walks of life.

My pain is like a river of tears,
so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,

and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Sermon: “The Door of Compassion”

Imagine a village, where there’s been no crime—not even petty theft—for more than four hundred years.

This village is located in a region of India that has one of the highest crime rates in the country.

And yet, in Shani Shingnapur, the home of about three thousand people, there are no disputes between neighbours...no murders or crimes whatsoever.

When shopkeepers go on vacation, they simply put a wooden plank across the door, confident that nothing will be stolen.

What could account for this phenomenon?

The people of the village worship a Hindu god: Lord Shani. They have great faith that Shani will protect them.

That faith is one thing that sets the village apart. But there’s something else, too.

None of the buildings have doors, locks or keys.

As one resident describes it:

“Everybody lives together here, with our hearts connected.”¹

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In the poem “Call me by my true names,” the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh calls the heart “the door of compassion.”²

¹ Great Big Story, “This town has no locks, no doors, and no crime,” <https://www.greatbigstory.com/stories/a-town-with-no-doors-or-locks/?xrs=CNNHP>

² Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1999), 73.

In it, he suggests that the way to open the door is to actually share a name with the beautiful and the ugly, the violent and the tender.

It's a challenging poem...and it seems to beg the question:
Is it possible—or indeed realistic or advisable—to open our hearts that wide?

Last fall, here at First Unitarian of Toronto, in response to an audit on fire safety, we began to keep many doors closed that were previously propped open.

Doors to the kitchen and office, for example.

The fire marshals explained that open doors could allow a fire to sweep through the building...

And indeed as a metaphor we know that to be true:

An open heart is vulnerable to “being burned”...to getting
“burned out”...to being brought down to the ground.
Back to the starting-point.

We understand the risks and so we protect ourselves.

Yet at the same time, we long to open the doors...to live in a place where our all our hearts are connected.

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I chose the poem by Thich Nhat Hanh today in part because it is challenging.

One of the first questions it raises is:
Who's speaking?

Who is the “me” saying:

“Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one”?

Who says...

“Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion”?

Surely it is someone or something more than the human author himself.

Indeed, the narrator identifies with the bud on the spring branch and the tiny bird with wings...

As well as with the grass-snake who devours the frog...
and the human beings who commit unspeakable crimes...

So much so, that I took the liberty of editing the poem of the Buddhist master this morning.

In the unnamed voice of wisdom that speaks through that poem, everybody is somebody who is intimately known...

Everybody is part of the universal story...
Everyone is an integral part of the whole.

This key idea is, needless to say, echoed in the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism,
which affirms “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

Through it, we are called to open our doors wide—

Not only to the best and the brightest and most effective and high-achieving among us.

Not even the most “moral” or “good” or “right.”
But to all people.

Can we open our doors that wide?

As well, and by living according to the next five principles, we seek to live in “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.”

ALL existence.

Not the interdependent web of the things we like, approve of, and currently understand.

The “every” and the “all” affirmed in our principles speak to our Universalist heritage.

They find resonance in core spiritual understandings that can be found in virtually every faith tradition.

While we as congregations and individuals affirm and promote these principles, I think it’s safe to say that we live them only imperfectly.

Yet they allow us to hold open the door to compassion...a holding open that requires effort, patience, and as much grace as we can muster.

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We’ve heard it said that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions...”

Well, it seems to me also that “the door of compassion is closed with good intentions.”

We as humans close our doors, both consciously and unconsciously, with solid rationales and logical arguments.

It makes perfect sense to keep certain doors closed...and yet a deep part of ourselves—

Perhaps that deep Self with the capital “S” which transcends our ego-awareness—

It yearns to keep them open, no matter what shows up.

I’m reminded of the famous poem by Rumi, the 12th Century Sufi poet...who’s been translated (some say quite liberally) by the American writer Coleman Barks.

“This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.”³

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Well, that said... From a practical standpoint, who wouldn't want to bar the door?

We tend not to welcome the shadow sides of ourselves.

The aspects of ourselves and others that do not conform to our hopes and dreams...that make terrible mistakes...that fail...that let others down.

Yet the poet calls us to attend to them.
He even suggests that they could be “a guide from beyond.”
And what can we make of that?

While some of us here might envision that as God, or Higher Power...others might see that “guide from beyond” as the person beyond whom we are today.

The person we may yet become.

³ Jalaluddin Rumi, “The Guest House” in Coleman Barks, ed. *The Essential Rumi* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 109.

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As an artist, I am drawn to poetry as a source of spiritual wisdom—in part because it invites me to welcome paradox.

To see that all the names are true, whether they be beautiful or ugly, familiar or strange...

And to put them together in unexpected ways that give rise to a sense of deep wholeness and peace.

The word describing this perspective is non-dualism.

It's at the heart of many wisdom traditions, accessed through contemplative spiritual practice...deep engagement with the natural world...and also artistic practice, I have found.

At the same time, of course, human beings quite rightly name things. We categorize and judge.

We separate right from wrong, and we take action to make the world a more just and equitable place.

Lately, perhaps because the world today seems particularly unpredictable or uncontrollable or frightening, efforts can be seen to control what we can—such as, for example, our language.

A 2015 article in *The Atlantic* described the “coddling of the American mind”—noting that on many college campuses and elsewhere, certain words are now being banned, so as to not upset the students.

Jonathan Haidt, one of the article's co-authors, suggested that instead of actually protecting young people, this approach might in fact be undermining their capacity for resilience.⁴

⁴ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

I wonder, too, if the approach might tend to alienate people from one another, at exactly the time we need to create community.

That desire to bar the door, to control what comes in, can a natural response to fear and anxiety.

We might notice it in ourselves in many situations, and wonder about it—perhaps attending to the closed doors of our heart with compassionate kindness and curiosity.

Perhaps even our feelings of fear, anxiety or resentment could be gently held—in ways that do not increase our own nor each other's pain.

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The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield tells a very powerful story about compassion.

Kornfield is still living, and this is told in the first person, so its factuality is not in doubt.

Yet, it is the kind of wisdom story that may be hard to take in—because it may challenge our assumptions about the human capacity for forgiveness and for love.

Kornfield writes:

“Once on a train from Washington to Philadelphia, I found myself seated next to [a man who had run] a rehabilitation program for juvenile offenders in [Washington D.C.]

Most of the youths he worked with were gang members who had committed homicide.

One fourteen year-old boy in the program had shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang.

At the trial, the victim's mother sat impassively silent until the end, when the youth was convicted of the killing.

After the verdict announced, she stood up slowly and stared directly at the young man and said, 'I am going to kill you.'

The youth was then taken away.

After [six months had gone by] the [woman] went to visit her son's killer.

He had been living on the streets before [committing the crime], and she was the only visitor he'd had.

For a time they talked, and when she left she gave him some money for cigarettes.

Then she started step-by-step to visit him more regularly, bringing food and small gifts.

Near the end of his three-year sentence, she asked him what he would be doing when he got out.

He was confused and uncertain, so she offered to set him up with a job at a friend's company.

Then she inquired about where he would live, and since he had no family to return to, she offered him temporary use of the spare room in her home.

For eight months he lived there, ate her food and worked at the job. Then one evening she called him into the living room to talk.

She sat down opposite him and waited. Then she said:

"Do you remember in the courtroom when I said I was going to kill you?"

"I sure do," he replied.

"Well, I did," she went on. "I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth.

I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you and bring you things. That's why I got you the job and let you live here in my house.

That's how I set about changing you. And that old boy, he's gone.

So now I want to ask you: since my son is gone, and that killer is gone, if you'll stay here.

I've got room, and I'd like to adopt you, if you'll let me.”⁵

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That any heart could open that widely and in that way...
and through such tragedy...

Is hard for me—and perhaps many of us—to imagine.
It may seem indeed “beyond us”...

And yet, as the wisdom teachers tell us, that mother is also “of us.”

She, too, is one of our “true names.”

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“Com-*passion*” or “feeling with.”

It's not a pleasant sensation that originates and remains with the person doing the feeling.

It's an active and intimate connecting with others: a sharing of mutual vulnerability.

Only by letting Life in—including the aspects of life that are difficult or strange—can we gain access to the deep Self that transcends our individuality.

In the language of spiritual wisdom, the “heart” is more than a part of the body: it connects us with the entire body of life.

The “stirrings of compassion” can indeed “sing in our heart”⁶...
But only if we keep it open.

⁵ Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2002), pp. 44-46.

⁶ Lyrics from Carolyn McDade's “Spirit of Life,” *Singing the Living Tradition* #123.

So may it be.

Amen.