

“Healing and Wholeness”

Rev. Lynn Harrison

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

15 October 2017

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.

I have to say, I was surprised to find it in our hymnbook.

I had decided to use Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese” as the reading before the sermon this morning.

I knew it would be familiar to many of you—perhaps not novel or impressive—yet I felt there would be value in the repetition.

In Unitarian Universalism, we don’t often repeat sacred texts the way other traditions do....yet the reciting of scripture can have a comforting and healing quality.

As Unitarians, the repeating of a 1993 Mary Oliver poem might be as close as we get!

Even so, I didn’t realize it was right here in our hymnbook: Number 490 to be exact.

It surprised me to see it there, because of its first few lines:

“You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.”

Really? Could that be true?

When I hear those words—
and for that matter when I hear the equally familiar hymn “Spirit of
Life”—a profound relaxation comes over me.

Writing this sermon (at 4:30 in the morning because I could not
sleep, given the stage of life I’m struggling through)
I breathed a deep and healing sigh.

“You do not have to be good.”

Isn’t that at odds with our usual way of doing things:

Our desire to get things right...
To live up to our principles...
To strive to fix what is broken?

What on earth is “You do not have to be good...”
doing in our hymnbook?

Could it be some kind of mistake?

§

Well, of course it’s not a mistake.

The way I see it, the inclusion of Mary Oliver’s “Wild Geese” reflects
the strength of our Universalist roots...which promised “salvation”
to all people, warts and all.

I won’t dwell on that troublesome word “salvation” very long,
because for many of us it conjures up fundamentalist stories of life
after death.

But salvation can also be seen as deliverance from pain and
suffering...

Being brought back to life from deadness of the spirit.

Healing of the soul.

Our Universalist teachers believed that every person is inherently worthy of the experience of deep healing and peace...

That is to say: “You do not have to be good.”

“Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --

Over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.”

§

I was reminded of that place again, when I returned to walk recently in the Don Valley.

As I’ve shared with you before, it’s a contemplative and healing place for me.

I return to it regularly because pattern can be an important part of spiritual practice.

And also, I believe that physical landscapes can be read as wisdom texts...as can our physical bodies.

On this particular day, I was nursing a hurt.

The exact circumstances don’t matter, and the bruise was the kind of thing we all experience as people in this world.

A bruise, I would add, that may have arisen in large part from my own clumsiness.

Like Carolyn McDade, on the day she sat down, exhausted at the piano, deeply discouraged by the frustrations of her social justice work...

I returned to the Valley, saying “Spirit of Life, come unto me.”

Within minutes, I found myself embraced again by the fragrant beauty of the fall leaves and the soothing sound of crickets and birds...

And the thought came to me suddenly:

“When I remember I am part of the Whole, I am healed.”

It was an announcement of my place in the family of things.

Not coincidentally, when I heard it, the “bruise” I was walking with felt less painful.

It seemed more possible to return again in love...
To reconnect and heal the wound that had occurred.

I have to admit, I didn’t “do” anything particularly special for the healing to take place.

I only arrived again at a place of openness and receiving...

Where my awareness of Wholeness could transcend my sense of separateness.

Some people see that receiving stance as a form of prayer...

Some also understand the Wholeness (which is expressed in our tradition as the Interdependent Web of All Existence) as a contemporary definition of God.

The Jewish non-dual teacher Jay Michaelson writes:

“When I remember Who I am,” (and by this he means part of the wholeness of God), “I find it is easy to love almost everything [...] even those who have broken my heart.

When my mind becomes distracted, I forget, and it feels impossible to love--least of all myself.”

He goes on: “So much of my own spiritual work recently has been to submit to love always,

To love myself unconditionally,

And, as the Hasidim say, to extend that light as much as possible—

To the legal papers as much as the poetry, the shopping as well as the dance.”

“I fail more than I succeed,” says Jay Michaelson, “but I try to love the failure.”¹

§

When we become aware of our connection with a greater wholeness than ourselves...it’s possible to see that virtually everything might be useful in our quest for healing and growth.

¹ Jay Michaelson: *Everything is God: The Radical Path of Non-Dual Judaism* (Trumpeter: Boston & London, 2009)

In his book, “Healing Words,” physician and author Larry Dossey passes along the following story that a reader shared with him:

“When I was a small child, my sister and I used to play a game we invented called Perfect Leaf.

We would go into the backyard and search diligently for a leaf on any tree or shrub that was perfect.

The first person to find one was the winner.

This may sound unbelievable, but the game could go on for hours, particularly in late summer and fall.

By then almost all of the leaves were imperfect—chewed by insects, shriveled on the edges, marred in endless ways.

Perfect Leaf was more than a game.

It taught us a lesson we didn’t know we were learning at the time—that beauty and ugliness, perfection and imperfection can coexist—not only in the same leaf, but probably in ourselves as well.”²

This reminds me of a passage from Parker Palmer’s book “A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life” when he writes:

“Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.

Knowing this gives me hope that the human wholeness—mine, yours, ours—need not be a utopian dream, if we can use devastation as a seedbed for new life.”³

² Larry Dossey: *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (Harper: 1993), 26.

³ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass: 2004), 5.

§

In 2012, almost twenty years after writing “Wild Geese,” Mary Oliver used the devastating diagnosis of lung cancer as the seedbed of a poem called:

“The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac”

“Why should I have been surprised?

Hunters walk the forest
without a sound.

The hunter, strapped to his rifle,
the fox on his feet of silk,
the serpent on his empire of muscles—

All move in a stillness,
hungry, careful, intent.

Just as the cancer
entered the forest of my body,
without a sound.”

And here is Part Three of that same poem.

“...why not get started immediately.

I mean, belonging to it.
There is so much to admire, to weep over.

And to write music or poems about.

Bless the feet that take you to and fro.
Bless the eyes and the listening ears.

Bless the tongue, the marvel of taste.
Bless touching.

You could live a hundred years, it's happened.
Or not.

I am speaking from the fortunate platform
of many years,

none of which, I think, I ever wasted.

Do you need a prod?
Do you need a little darkness to get you going?"

§

Mary Oliver was treated for her cancer and she recovered with a
clean bill of health.

Yet, in this world of course there is no shortage of darkness.

I'd be lying to you if I said it was easy to be comfortable with it...to
escape being bruised or broken as we scrape up against the jagged
edges of this world.

This year, the theme for United Nations Sundays at Unitarian
Universalist congregations around the world is "Arm in Arm:
Interfaith Action to Disarm Our Planet."

The message being shared across the UU movement this month is
that disarmament and healing of global violence depends upon the
affirmation of wholeness.

With the threat of nuclear war once again in our collective awareness,
we seek the wholeness of collective action, and the wisdom of
compassionate leadership.

As the UUA wrote in its messages for this morning:

“All people are interconnected and dependent upon one another. An attack on the citizens of one country harms all other countries.

Additionally, ceasing armed violence protects the environment on which we all depend.

It is critical to remember that all issues are interdependent, but also that to solve them, all people must recognize our common humanity and band together.

We must rely on each other.”

Aware of the urgency of cooperation between nations for peace and the well-being of all...

Today we are proud to support the work of the UU-UNO, and its healing work around the world.

§

Through acts of generosity, and solidarity in justice, we affirm our place within the Interdependent Web.

But each day, often in the smallest and humblest of ways, our connection with the whole can be affirmed...and that's to the good of our bodies, minds and spirits.

We might make a compromise to support the greater good, in our family or congregation.

We might honour our ancestors, at family reunions or school anniversaries...

We might marvel at the mystery of synchronicity...the meaningful coincidences that link us in unexpected ways.

All of these announce our place in the “family of things” and connect us to a wholeness that can be healing.

And they are here, each day,
For each and every one of us.

§

Circling back again now to the healing found in poetry, I’d like to leave you with a song by Leonard Cohen...one of the prophetic voices of our time.

This is a slightly abridged version of his song “Come Healing.”

O gather up the brokenness
And bring it to me now
The fragrance of those promises
You never dared to vow

The splinters that you carry
The cross you left behind
Come healing of the body
Come healing of the mind

And let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb

Behold the gates of mercy
In arbitrary space
And none of us deserving
The cruelty or the grace

O solitude of longing
Where love has been confined
Come healing of the body
Come healing of the mind

O see the darkness yielding
That tore the light apart
Come healing of the reason
Come healing of the heart

O longing of the branches
To lift the little bud
O longing of the arteries
To purify the blood

And let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb

And let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb⁴

§

⁴ Leonard Cohen, "Come Healing" on *Old Ideas*.

In the words of the poet, we are but limbs on the tree of life...

Branches connected to so many others...

Both strong and fragile...so frequently broken...

And yet held within a healing Wholeness that links us arm in arm,
for this time we are here.

May we listen each day
for the voices that call to us...

“Announcing [our] place in the family of things.”

May we remember we are part of the Wholeness, and be healed.

§