

“Summertime Blues”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
12 August 2018

Reading

Ash Wednesday (Excerpt, adapted) - *T.S. Eliot*

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this [one]'s gift and that [one]'s scope

I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)

Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour

Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power

Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow,
for there is nothing again

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place

And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place

I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessed face
And renounce the voice

Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice,
having to construct something upon which to rejoice

And pray [that there may be] mercy upon us

And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain

Because I do not hope to turn again

Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again

May the judgement not be too heavy upon us
Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air

The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

Sermon

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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.

A friend shared a New Yorker cartoon with me,
early this summer.

It was by David Sipress, who commented recently in an article¹ that drawing cartoons is his “personal self-care remedy for news-induced psychosis.”

Because he practices that self-care, he provides support for the millions of people now finding it hard to cope with current events.

Here’s his cartoon:

A couple is watching the news, and the commentator says:

“Everything is horrible—worse than we ever imagined—
and there’s not a damn thing we can do about any of it.

¹ David Sipress, “How to Stay Sane as a Cartoonist in Trumpland”, The New Yorker, February 3, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/how-to-stay-sane-as-a-cartoonist-in-trumpland>

But whatever happens, we can't give in to despair."

It made me wonder whether David Sipress might consider a career in the ministry!

Because so often, it seems to me,
that's what we're trying to say.

We try to name the pain and suffering in the world,
which at times seems to know no limit...

And yet at the same time, we say,
"we cannot give in to despair"...
despite how counter-intuitive that may seem.

The details of our message will vary of course,
depending on our theological outlook.

But it often boils down to this:

"Things are horrible, worse than we ever imagined...
and we cannot give in to despair."

§

Three days after my summer break began,
Doug Ford was elected Premier of Ontario.

Two thoughts occurred to me at the same time:
"I wish I were preaching this Sunday" and
"Thank God I'm not preaching this Sunday."

As bad as that news was in the opinion of many people...
it was a bit of a foreshadowing of the summertime blues to come.

Here are just a few low points from the past few months...

and I know it's not a complete list:

Unprecedented forest fires, floods and heat waves
as a result of climate change.

The forced separation of refugee children and parents at the southern
U.S. border.

A deadly shooting on Danforth Avenue.
And now one in Fredericton.

Donald Trump's support of Vladimir Putin in Helsinki.

Untold suffering in Yemen, Syria, Palestine.

Tension between Canada and Saudi Arabia

And the new Ontario government
decimating Toronto City Council,
rolling back progressive education,
eliminating environmental protections,
slashing basic income...and the list goes on.

In addition to all this,
I know that many of you have experienced personal losses, challenges
and even tragedies this summer.

This has not been an easy time.

In a rare bit of good news, those 12 young soccer players were
rescued from that cave in Thailand!

But truly, it has been a summer when it's been hard to rise above the
"deep blue."

§

Some of you know that the ministers here write our sermon titles well in advance.

When I plugged in the title “Summertime Blues” several months ago...I actually thought:

After a summer of joyful reflections on the stages of life, and the arrival of Carly and Curtis’ baby... there might be *some* sad news that I would need to acknowledge.

I had no idea that the “summertime blues” would come in such a tidal wave.

§

When the pop songwriter wrote, *“Sometimes I wonder what I’m a gonna do, but there ain’t no cure for the summertime blues!”*

I think he was alluding to the fact that “blues” in the time of “summer” seem somehow out-of-place.

Maybe even a little unjust.

After all, this is supposed to be the time of “blues skies, nothing but blue skies”...and the clear blue water of peaceful rivers and lakes.

In her powerful and courageous monologue “Nanette,”² the Australian writer and comedian Hannah Gadsby offers this aside about the colour blue:

“Blue is full of contradictions.

Blue is a cold colour, it’s at the cold end of the spectrum,

² Hannah Gadsby’s “Nanette” is on Netflix.

but the hottest part of the flame? Blue!”

“If you’re feeling blue, you’re sad,” she says.
“But optimism? Blue skies ahead!”

I thought the same thing years ago, and wrote a song called “Two Shades of Blue” that goes like this:

*“Why do we say that we’re blue when we’re down,
when high up above all that blue shines around
that’s just a riddle so old that it’s new,
Life paints a picture in two shades of blue.*

*There’s the blue that will sail you through clear summer skies
That blue will wake you and widen your eyes
But the ocean of sorrow is darker, it’s true...
Life paints a picture in two shades of blue.”*

§

As both Hannah Gadsby and David Sipsess tell us,
laughter and sorrow can and do co-exist
in summers like this one...

In lives such as ours.

This truth is obvious, yet it is hard to grapple with:
the reality that that life holds both joy and sorrow
together continually.

We tend to want to say that it’s one or the other
and to try to fix it when it isn’t to our liking.

But as we grow, we may gradually become more adept at holding
these paradoxes together

and living with less fear and resentment

and more gratitude and serenity...

No matter what is going on.

§

At first glance, the choice of the poem “Ash Wednesday” by T.S. Eliot may seem a strange choice of reading for this time of year.

The title refers to the holiday just before Good Friday in the Christian calendar—before Easter, in the spring.

A cross is marked in ash on the forehead, with the words “from dust we came and from dust we will return.”

“Ash Wednesday” is sometimes called Eliot’s “conversion poem.”

It marks a personal shift for him toward a more religious outlook, at a significant time in his life.

As one commentator writes:

“Eliot had become increasingly dissatisfied with the ‘real world’ and the sense of sickness and decay which he saw at the root of modern life.

Modern life had lost its meaning and its ‘edge’.

Through religion, Eliot found a way to restore that meaning.”³

³ Oliver Tearle, “A Short Analysis of T.S. Eliot’s Ash-Wednesday, Interesting Literature blog, July 18, 2017. <https://interestingliterature.com/2017/07/18/a-short-analysis-of-t-s-eliot-ash-wednesday/>

It's a mid-life poem, written at a time when the author was trying to come to terms with his own mortality.

(Mind you, he was only forty at the time!)

In the poem you can hear his disenchantment with ambition-- with the seeking of personal power that had kept him going in the past.

He says he feels unable to drink "where trees flower and springs flow" in the innocent and optimistic way he once did.

He says he knows that things are exactly as they are, and in this particular time and place...

And he is troubled by what he calls "these things that I too much discuss, too much explain."

He no longer plans to turn again to any "blessed face" or "blessed voice" or "the vanished power of the usual reign" which could refer to traditional religious thought.

But in the face of these losses...he found himself turning unexpectedly in a new way.

Needing, in his word, "consequently"...

"[To] rejoice, having to construct something upon which to rejoice."

That lovely line, and especially the word "construct" reminds me so much of a UU adult education curriculum called "Building Your Own Theology"...

In which we're encouraged to seek out our own path

toward deeper meaning...

So that we might make peace with this world.

A world in which there are no easy answers,
no matter which way you turn.

§

In times when the air becomes so “thoroughly small and dry”...it’s hard to keep the wind in our sails.

The New Yorker cartoonist David Sipress says that he, too, struggles to maintain his mental health as he stays aware of world events.

He says that he finds it therapeutic to attend demonstrations, send postcards, sign petitions...and I couldn’t agree more!

...and he now spends time in meditation.

Indeed, many people find that spiritual practice—such as meditation or contemplative prayer—can create a new spaciousness in the mind and in life...

A spaciousness that can help us stay calm and present in the midst of all these blues.

So we can do the work of social justice that is ours to do.

As for T.S. Eliot, he was descended from a long line of American Unitarians.

His paternal grandfather was a Unitarian minister.

That Unitarian upbringing placed great emphasis on the doing of good works in the world...and of course that emphasis continues for us today.

Although he affirmed the value of this active engagement for the improvement of society, Eliot also yearned for deeper religious experience and disciplined spiritual practice.

He ultimately found it in a branch of the Anglican church that drew heavily on its early Catholic roots.⁴

That's where his personal journey led him...and needless to say, it's a route that would not be typical among Unitarians.

Yet when Eliot writes, "Teach me to care and not to care. Teach me to sit still,"

He seems to be seeking the ability to stay engaged with the world...without being engulfed by it.

And I think that's something we all can relate to.

§

Early this summer I had a dream
in which I unexpectedly encounter a spider's web.

At first I see only one linear strand of web in my path,
and I'm not at all bothered by it.

But then, I turn and am enveloped by a much larger, denser web, and I immediately try to escape, to disentangle myself.

⁴ Barry Spurr, "T.S. Eliot's Extraordinary Journey of Faith," Australian Broadcasting Company Religion and Ethics, August 3, 2010.
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2010/08/03/2972229.htm>

Then I see the spider... a large fuzzy tarantula, like the kind you can see right now at the Royal Ontario Museum.

I recommend this exhibit very highly, especially if you're afraid of spiders, as I am, most of the time.

But in this dream, I am not at all frightened of the spider.

In fact, I see her as a friendly presence.

And in the dream,

I am amazed,
and grateful,
that I am no longer afraid.

§

You know, when we modern UUs talk about the “interdependent web of existence”...

We often think of it as a beautiful and embracing entity:

One in which we feel somewhat safe and comfortable...
perhaps because we think we're doing a fair bit of the weaving!

But we know, too, that the web of life demands loss of control as well...and that it can be overwhelming,
if not terrifying, at times.

It's true that people come to places of worship to be
with like-minded friends...to experience the sustaining
love of community.

We also come, it seems to me, to glimpse...
if only for a moment,

...a transformed way of being that might allow us to live more peacefully, joyfully and courageously in this world full of suffering...

...and through that transformed way of being,

become better able to contribute,
in own singular ways,
to the weaving...
and the mending,
of the world.

Poets, artists, cartoonists, comedians...
and more traditional spiritual teachers as well...
they can all teach us to live in the paradox.

To embrace this un-embraceable world.

To be immersed in the deep blue, as dark as it is...
And yet to sail on it.