

# “Ahhhh...”

Rev. Lynn Harrison  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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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.

Have you been stopping to smell the lilacs lately?

This is something I've been doing a lot.  
As often as possible, as a matter of fact.

You'll see me crossing the street to do it,  
even it means going out of my way.

People might think I'm avoiding them by going to the other  
side...but it's really all about the lilacs.

I can't resist taking a moment to pull the blossoms close to  
my nose and breathe in their pure deliciousness.

I can't help myself; I have to smell the lilacs.

And yet, as I do, I find myself worrying a bit about exactly  
how *long* I should be smelling them.

How many deep breaths is okay?

Pausing for one breath of lilac in the month of June  
seems perfectly acceptable.

But two long inhales might seem a bit decadent...  
even selfish somehow.

And standing there for three, four, even five deep breaths?

Well, just the thought makes me feel uncomfortable.

Aren't there more important things I should be doing?

It certainly seems that way.

I don't see many people gathering around lilac bushes,  
in this goal-directed city of ours.

Likewise, I limit my time with the lilacs,  
keeping in step with the times.

## §

It's hard to capture in words,  
the feeling of stopping to smell the lilacs.

At the heart of it, for me, is a wordlessness:  
a sense of gratitude and release expressed only by the sound  
of breathing.

Ahhhh.

As the Ojibway author Richard Wagamese put it:

“To breathe is to take in the breath of all breath.

To exhale slowly is to open myself  
and glide over everything  
I feel.”<sup>1</sup>

His encounter with the hawk took place  
in a rapid flash of action—and yet, what he remembers,  
and what he wants to pass along to us,  
is the importance of that slow exhale of breath.

The slowing down that is necessary...  
That is inevitable, perhaps...

After events of high speed.

## §

There are times when our wordless breath is one of gratitude.

There are also times when it's one of grief.

“Ahhhh...” can express reverence and awe at the beauty of  
existence:

The grateful lying down into *shivasana*,  
at the beginning of a yoga class.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Reflections* (Douglas & MacIntyre: Madeira Park, BC, 2016), 39.

The moment of astonished relief  
when the ball goes into the net!

But it can also be the defeated out-breath of  
“I give up”...or “nothing more can be done”...  
or “I have no answers.”

In its wordless expression of the inexpressible,  
the sound of “Ahhhh...” links us with all human experience,  
both sorrowful and joyful...

and it joins us with all living things.

In one of the helpful serendipities that often comes in  
sermon-writing, I happened upon a poem by Joy Harjo.

She is another Indigenous writer, from the Muskogee nation  
of the American Southwest.

Her poem is called not “Ahhhh” but “Ah, Ah!”

Even better! Here it is.

## §

“Ah, ah cries the crow  
arching toward the heavy sky over the marina.  
Lands on the crown of the palm tree.

Ah, ah slaps the urgent cove of ocean  
swimming through the slips.  
We carry canoes to the edge of the salt.

Ah, ah groans the crew with the weight,  
the winds cutting skin.  
We claim our seats.  
Pelicans perch in the draft for fish.

Ah, ah beats our lungs  
and we are racing into the waves.  
Though there are worlds below us and above us,  
we are straight ahead.

Ah, ah tattoos the engines of  
your plane against the sky—away from these waters.  
Each paddle stroke follows the curve from reach to loss.

Ah, ah calls the sun  
from a fishing boat with a pale, yellow sail.  
We fly by on our return,  
over the net of eternity thrown out for stars.

Ah, ah scrapes the hull of my soul. Ah, ah.”

## §

It's a poem that defies easy interpretation.  
But to me, the “ah” here speaks to exertion and effort:

The never-easy moving forward  
through the harsh realities of life...

Whether you are a crow or a person or even the sun itself.

No matter who, or what, you are in the story of existence,  
you express the same, simple syllable.

The “ah” of struggle.  
The “ah” of surrender.

At the heart of life is an essential wordlessness that  
transcends all judgment and connects us with the Whole.

Interestingly, when I typed “wordlessness” into my phone the  
other day as I was writing this,

It auto-corrected to “wordless mess”...

And actually, I think that’s about right!

In her poem called “What is There Beyond Knowing?”  
Mary Oliver writes:

“What I know I could put into a pack  
as if it were bread and cheese  
and carry it on one shoulder,

Important and honourable, but so small,

While everything else continues,  
unexplained  
and unexplainable. [...]

Mostly I just stand in the dark field,  
in the middle of the world,  
breathing in and out.

Life so far doesn't have any other  
name but breath and light,  
wind and rain."<sup>2</sup>

§

Of course, when I chose the sermon title “Ahhhh” a few  
months ago, I didn't have such poetic thoughts in mind!

I was in the midst of First Unitarian's busy season...  
racing through my to-do lists, trying to be as efficient as  
possible.

Staring at the blank spot on the worship calendar,  
in the middle of a busy day, all I could imagine was the  
feeling of relief I might experience on the last day before my  
summer break.

So I typed in the non-word “ahhhh...” and hoped for the  
best!

At that time, some of you may have been in the same boat:  
volunteering to ensure that the religious education  
program ran smoothly...

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, “What Is There Beyond Knowing?” In *New and Selected Poems*,  
*Volume Two*

Or working hard so that special meal or concert went off without a hitch.

At this time of year, when the fog of the church calendar clears, we appreciate all the dedication and commitment of so many people who make First Unitarian a place of connection and meaning throughout the year.

But perhaps it wasn't congregational life that was filling your schedule.

You may have been caught up in the demands of school, work or caregiving. You may still be in the thick of it.

In fact, even when there are few external demands on our time, we may find our days filled with worry.

At times like these, stopping to breathe is necessary, but we likely don't linger long.

We barrel along, on the highway of our activities, thoughts fixed on destinations of many kinds.

So often, in the course of any journey, we miss the moments of beauty that might sustain us...

As they remind us that we are part of something so much larger than ourselves:

Something healing and sacred and fully Whole.

When we hear the sound “ahhhh...”  
we know that it’s an exhale, not an inhale.

Come to think of it, I’m not sure how to articulate  
the inhale sound.

Both, of course, are necessary for breathing.

The fact is so obvious, it hardly needs to be stated.

Yet, maybe it does need to be said,  
in this time of what has been called “The Great Turning”—  
the change our species needs to make from acquiring and  
consuming, to nurturing and sustaining.

In the most simple and personal act of breathing,  
perhaps we have a metaphor, or a even a template,  
for the kinds of changes that need to take place  
on a far larger scale.

## §

I’ve been reading recently about “degrowth” or *décroissance*...  
a social, political and economic movement based on ideas of  
ecological economics.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Shayla Love, “The Radical Plan to Save the Planet by Working Less,” Vice  
online, May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/bj9yjq/the-radical-plan-to-save-the-planet-by-working-less?utm\\_source=vicfbus&fbclid=IwAR2vrtLNUEm-qCIFHXbB1S44Ut6bdobd4tYOPIDEqd-beEgcNsv3EoMW1I0](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bj9yjq/the-radical-plan-to-save-the-planet-by-working-less?utm_source=vicfbus&fbclid=IwAR2vrtLNUEm-qCIFHXbB1S44Ut6bdobd4tYOPIDEqd-beEgcNsv3EoMW1I0)

Degrowth is described as “a form of society and economy which aims at the well-being of all and sustains the natural basis of life.

“To achieve degrowth,” its advocates say,  
“we need a fundamental transformation of our lives  
and an extensive cultural change.

The current economic and social paradigm is ‘faster, higher,  
further.’

It is built on and stimulates competition between all humans.  
This causes acceleration, stress and exclusion.

Our economy destroys the natural basis of life. [...]

The common values of a degrowth society  
should be care, solidarity and cooperation.

Humanity has to understand itself as part of the planetary  
ecological system.

Only this way, a self-determined life in dignity for all  
can be made possible.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Degrowth website: <https://www.degrowth.info/en/what-is-degrowth/>

As Unitarians, we enshrine the worth and dignity of all people through our First Principle...but we've often fallen short of providing a map to get there.

In fact, in some ways, we may have unconsciously undermined our good intentions.

Historically, our religious movement has emphasized human progress and achievement:  
more “doing good” than “being with.”

But now, new perspectives are emerging.

I'm thinking of a new book by UU minister Nancy McDonald Ladd called “After the Good News.”

She asks, what comes after the “onward and upward forever” that was such an unquestioned part of our heritage...

...and not only for Unitarians, but for many people in “first world” developed countries?

Advocates of degrowth emphasize deceleration, time welfare and “conviviality”—that is, mutually supportive community life.

They warn against overwork and over-consumption... calling us to slow down and live with less.

Critics of the movement say that what mostly needs to de-grow is the fossil fuel industry...

...and that a total transformation of the world's economy isn't possible—at least, not quickly enough.

Well, perhaps it doesn't have to be all-or-nothing.

And perhaps on a personal level, we can simply notice how much “de-growth” takes place from moment to moment...as we breathe out, in wordless release, after times of effort.

## §

When I wrote the song “Slow Me Down”<sup>5</sup> several years ago, I hadn't heard of the degrowth movement.

I'd been asked to write a song inspired by the call for speed limiters on 18-wheeler trucks.

But through the singing of it so many times, I've internalized its message, and tried to live in a way that is slower...allowing more time for contemplative experience, care for others and for the earth.

I have to admit that for the most part, I have not succeeded.

As a child of my culture, I too have been caught up in the taking and the doing, not to mention the increasing speed of it all.

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Harrison, “Slow Me Down,” from *Simplicity* (2008)  
<https://store.cdbaby.com/cd/lynnharrison4>

As much as I like to slow down and smell the lilacs,  
I find it hard to let things drop...and to make do with less.

“To live simply, so that others may simply live,”  
as the saying goes.

Yet when I do slow down,  
whether in formal meditation or prayer  
or informally on a city street,  
my breathing teaches me that letting go is possible...

That I don't have to control everything.  
That I don't have to hold on so much...

Indeed that I'm not supposed to hold on,  
just as I can't hold my breath!

The feeling and sound of my breathing  
reminds me that I am enough as I am right now...

That this moment alone is sufficient...

That I need less entertainment and stimulation  
than I thought I needed...(and am still over-willing to spend  
money and time to buy)...

That the earth is breathing...and that it will continue to  
breathe long after I am gone.

Ahhhhh.

We use the word “growth” to describe  
“spiritual growth”—it’s encouraged in our UU Third  
Principle.

But I wonder whether it’s really about “maturity”...  
which is as much about letting go  
as it is about gaining ground.

As our species matures into a more sustainable way of living,  
our ability to release, to surrender,  
to open ourselves to transformation  
will be a gift to ourselves and to all yet to come.

This may come as a relief...this may come as a surprise.

This may come as an affirmation  
of something very deeply known.

As the summer unfolds,  
I wish for you many moments of “ahhhh...”

Wherever you may find them.

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