

The Myth of Certainty

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Online Service, due to Coronavirus Pandemic

Rev. Shawn Newton

22 March 2020

Reading “First Lesson” – Philip Booth

Lie back daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man’s float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Reading “Missing the Boat” - Naomi Shihab Nye

It is not so much that the boat passed
and you failed to notice it.
It is more like the boat stopping
directly outside your bedroom window,
the captain blowing the signal-horn,
the band playing a rousing march.

The boat shouted, waving bright flags,
its silver hull blinding in the sunlight.

But you had this idea you were going by train.

You kept checking the time-table,
digging for tracks.

And the boat got tired of you,
so tired it pulled up the anchor
and raised the ramp.

The boat bobbed into the distance,
shrinking like a toy—
at which point you probably realized
you had always loved the sea.

Sermon

“Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.”

So said John Lennon, of course.

It’s a bit of wisdom that may, for many of us,
have the ring of truth at the end of this extraordinary week,
as so much has shifted in the world around us.

As we have started to come to terms
with a rapidly changing reality that means our lives
will never be quite the same again—
and that there may never be a complete return
to what we, just a few days ago, considered normal.

Indeed, as epidemiologists and economists
try to make sense of it all, we’re being told
that we will likely never be able to truly go “back to before.”

Alongside the fear and anxiety
we are all carrying to varying degrees,
many of us are also contending, on a personal level,
with plans that have been dashed, and dreams deferred.

And on a practical level, real worry
for our loved-ones and our neighbours
and for our own well-being or our livelihood.

So much of what we only recently believed to be certain
is now less of a sure thing.

I don't know about you, but I'm finding it hard, at times,
to wrap my mind around—or keep my mind wrapped around—
the countless ways this virus is upending our lives.

More than once this week,
I woke up, got out of bed,
and made it through a few minutes
before remembering that we're in the middle of pandemic.

More than once, I got downstairs to make breakfast,
glanced out the window,
saw the bright crystal blue of a sunny morning,
saw the buds just forming on the tips of the cherry trees in the back yard,
saw the leaves of tulips reaching towards the sky—
and everything seemed right in the world.

And then it would hit me:
that I wouldn't be going outside, not today,
or at least not very far.

I keep thinking I'm waiting for the train,
when it's really the boat I'm supposed to be boarding.

We're living in a moment, when it seems all bets are off—
when so much feels uncertain,
and when the way forward is not completely clear.

And while all of that is true in many respects,
we must never forget that it is not the whole of the story.

It is nothing less than a great and glorious gamble
to be alive on this little blue-green planet,
circling a mid-sized star
embedded in a swirling galaxy
within a universe so vast we can barely begin to comprehend it.

There is mystery and majesty and miracle in our existence—

that against such long odds we are here,
to make meaning of the wonder of life,
to grapple with what it means to be human,
and along the way, to bear witness
to the beauty and the heartbreak of it all.

That is the bittersweet bargain of being alive.
That is the bittersweet bargain of this life.

We are now, of course, at the beginning
of a particularly painful chapter—
as we are forced to face life's fragility,
as we witness the strains on our social fabric,
as we worry about the well-being of everyone and all that we love,
and which we probably have for too long taken for granted.

We are in difficult days, with so much that feels uncertain.

And, so, this is a moment that calls on us
to seek out what endures.

To hold to what abides.

To find what we can truly lean on and trust, come whatever may.

While it would be easy to go searching for something solid.
Something sure and certain.
What I speak of is something else,
something far more ethereal.

For me, I call it the Eternal.

It is that which connects the stardust of my being
to all that has been, is now, and ever will be.

And when I feel bewildered by the world,
it is that sense of connection that helps me
to hold my little life in its larger frame.

And to feel an abiding peace
in knowing that my being is a part of the whole.

I think this is an experience available to us,
whether we be theists or ardent atheists.

Like the little girl in the poem, learning to float,
each of us can open ourselves
“gently and wide to the light-year stars,”
lying back, and trusting that “the sea will hold you,” too.

There is real-life wisdom in that lesson
so many of us learned as children,
in lakes, and ponds, and pools.

To just still ourselves.

To open. To rest. To trust.

To stop kicking our legs and flapping our arms
in a frantic attempt at control,
and, instead, to allow ourselves to simply be held
in something so much bigger than we are.

There are countless names given that that greater thing.

But the name matters less than our relationship to it.
Our ability, even when things are hard,
and especially when they are hard,
to relax into it and rest.

I take as my teachers people of any faith who,
past or present, have been able to do just that.

I've shared with you before the story
of a Christian mystic who pre-dates the Reformation,
a woman who died in the early 15th century in the east of England.

Julian of Norwich lived much of her life as an anchoress,
the odd title given to a woman who lived as a religious recluse.

Julian likely took her name from the small church in Norwich
where she lived in a small room that had been built for her.

Attached to the outside walls of the church itself,
the room afforded her what few women
of her time (and even our time) had:
a room of her own,
a place to think, reflect, and pray in peace and quiet.

Julian is best known for a short declaration of faith
that has been passed down the centuries,
quoted in books and emblazoned on bumper stickers:

“All shall be well, and all shall be well,
and all manner of things shall be well.”

It is a powerful statement of faith.

The words of someone
with a tremendous sense of trust.

It would be easy to dismiss these words
as those of an extreme optimist.

The naïve ramblings of a misguided mind.
The medieval version of the power of positive thinking.
The banal assurance that “It will all work out,”
that “everything will be okay.”
Don’t worry, be happy.
Akuna Matata.

Several years ago, my colleague, Meg Barnhouse,
wrote a powerful song about Julian and her statement of faith.

In the song, she asks Julian,
how she can possibly say that “All shall be well.”

She presses her.
“Don’t you know about sorrow and hunger and shame,
don’t you know about loneliness and disease and cruelty?”

She wants to know how she can assert
that all will be well,

when there's clearly so much heartache
involved in the human condition.

In her imagined response, in the song, Julian replies,
“Nobody does not know about sorrow and hunger and shame.
No one does not know about loneliness and disease and cruelty.”

And then Julian presses back:
“But don't *you* know [that] there is also tenderness and friendship
and love that never ends.”

“...don't *you* know [that] there is also tenderness and friendship
and love that never ends.”

It is as though she's saying,
don't you know that there are things that endure and sustain us.

That we are held in a larger love.
That there is hope knowing ourselves to be part of what is eternal.

To dismiss Julian of Norwich as naïve
is to ignore the facts of her life.

As a young woman, she lived through the plague, the Black Death,
that wiped out the lives of half of her village.

At the age of thirty, she was on her death bed.

She and those taking care of her believed she was near the end.
A priest performed last rites.
And, yet, she somehow survived the ordeal.

And in the midst of that experience she had a vision so powerful,
it became the focus of her life to understand it.

The vision was the basis of her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*,
the first book we know to have been written by a woman
in the English language.

In it, she speaks of God as Mother.
She sees suffering outside of God's will.

She writes about an ultimate reconciliation of all creatures,
an early expression of universalism.

This was cutting edge theology for her time,
and arguably still is for ours.

And some would still say it is naïve.

But it speaks to me of a deep and abiding faith.
A profound trust in that something bigger that holds us.

Born from the dust of the stars,
we are part of the great song of the universe.

This, for me, is the foundation of my own faith.

While suffering and illness and death
are certainly part of the human experience,
we are held in a larger story—
a story that speaks of love and compassion,
strength and courage,
resilience and hope.

To say that all shall be well
is not to deny the reality of what is,
what is happening, here and now,
or, what might be in the days ahead.

It is a statement of faith—come what may—
about how we will be,
about how we will be through it all.

It is statement that says
while not everything may actually be okay in this moment,
ultimately, all will be well.

I invite you to live with this mantra, to take it in.

To let it move you to accept what is,
to take in our present reality, and,

as difficult and daunting as all of that may be,
to find some measure of peace within the storms.

To lie back in the waters
“gently and wide to the light-year stars,”
lying back, and trusting that “the sea will hold you,” too.

May it be so for us, one and all.

Blessed Be.