"The Inner Work of Outer Work"
Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto (Online)
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With deep gratitude to the late Maurice Sendak, and in the spirit of using myth and metaphor as a way to illuminate our lives at every stage, I'm going to draw creatively on "Where the Wild Things Are" today as I reflect on the "inner life"--that is, the life of the unconscious.

It's been said that humanity will survive only if enough of us do our "inner work."

The pioneering psychiatrist Carl Jung said it first, likely around the end of his life in the 50's, but it's an idea now being echoed by people working hard to address the issues of our times.

Last Sunday, I quoted an activist and writer named Zaid Hassan. He linked inner work to the need for open space, both in our ourselves and our organizations.

He said we need such openness to change the habitual patterns that arise from anxiety; to understand what triggers and motivates us most deeply.

By coincidence, I found a similar idea in a new book I'm reading called "The Night is Long, But Light Comes in the Morning" by Dr. Catherine Meeks.

She's a Black American writer and teacher in the work of dismantling racism.

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1 Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others (Berrett-Koelher Publishers, 2009), 166.
In the very first pages of her book, she recalls saying to her university students:

"If you do not do your inner work with sincerity and intention, you will never do anything in the outer world that is worth speaking about."²

Now, that's a pretty dramatic statement, and one that can be unsettling if "inner work" hasn't been part of our usual experience.

So today, with the help of our young friend Max (and recognizing that I'm likely speaking to the converted) I'll try to provide a small taste--an appetizer if you will--of what "inner work" could be, and how it might help us create lives of meaning and purpose at every stage of life, and no matter what our external circumstances.

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In Unitarian Universalist congregations, where we're often focused on outer goals and needs in the world--as per the line in our covenant: "service is our prayer"--it may seem strange for a minister to be speaking about the inner life or the unconscious.

Indeed, there have been times in Unitarian circles when I've raised the subject of "inner work" and suddenly had the uncomfortable feeling that I was speaking the wrong language and that I didn't fit in.

That is to say, my inner issues around belonging and approval were triggered--so I was away to the races in terms of inner work!

I had a golden opportunity to explore why I felt so anxious in that situation.

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When I do my "inner work," that is, when I become aware of my inner patterns and storylines, when I begin to explore what's beneath the surface of my life, I become better able to act with courage, wisdom and compassion.

When I don't, my unconscious runs me.

It can cause me to act in ways that are out of alignment with my principles and values...and it can inhibit me from acting in ways that would uphold them.

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We live our lives thinking that we're in control and that we completely understand the motivations behind our actions.

But in fact, each of us is deeply influenced by our unconscious drives: that is, aspects of ourselves deep below our awareness.

In his book "Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life, “the writer and psychoanalyst James Hollis tells the story of a man who bought a huge, luxury recreational vehicle: one of those big RVs that seem like a house on wheels.

The man took the vehicle out on the road, put it on cruise control, and then got up and walked to the back of the RV to make himself a cup of coffee.

Not surprisingly, the RV crashed and the man was injured.

The insurance company sided with him though, when he said he couldn't be expected to know that "cruise control" didn't mean the car would automatically take him where he wanted to go.

When it comes to our unconscious, we're often just as, well, unconscious as that man who wasn't behind the wheel when he should have been.
And that's perfectly understandable when we consider that especially in the modern, Western world, we pay very little attention to the inner life: focusing instead on external markers of validation, success and achievement.3

Yet the powerful "house" of our psyche can and will carry us along without our awareness...and lead us into all kinds of trouble.

We see this in the story of Max, who acts like a "wild thing"—aggressively running around and harming others, while not getting himself fed and nourished as a result—that is, not until he travels inward, to get to know what's going on in there.

In the forest of his unconscious, he meets the "wild things" that are part of him. The wild things he's been acting like in his waking life...the ones he both fears and is fascinated by.

In an important sense, Max himself has become a "wild thing" before he goes on his journey.

As the philosopher Nietzsche said: "He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster."

And as the Gospel of Thomas put it:

"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you fail to bring forth what is within you, what you fail to bring forth will destroy you."

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The unconscious aspects of ourselves often come up in challenging ways.

We call them "shadow projections"...the aspects of ourselves we've neither recognized nor accepted, and that we're unaware of in our conscious minds.

I'm sure you've heard the phrase "you spot it, you got it."

This means that we tend to be especially irritated, rejecting and mistrustful of people whose characteristics mirror our own unconscious traits.

Jung said that "projections change the world into the replica of one's unknown face."

Until we bring the "unknown face" of ourselves into consciousness, we will project it onto other people, and groups and organizations.

I recall with deep regret times in my own life when I saw others through the lens of my own projections, and was unable to meet them in their full humanity.

And I know there are times when others are projecting their shadow onto me.

These can be the shadows of what's rejected in ourselves, and it can also be the "bright shadow" of what we revere or idolize.

Either way, our projections change our view of life.

Without doing our inner work, we unconsciously "make mischief of one kind and another"...just like Max.

This happens even when we're "fighting the good fight" of trying to improve the world.
It's been said, in fact, that all wars are the result of projections. 4

When we begin to "spot what we've got," we grow into our ability to appreciate the "inherent worth and dignity of every person," "to live lives of equity, justice and compassion" and to begin to "dismantle systems of oppression."

Catherine Meeks writes:

"The interiority of a human being is projected into the outer world and helps to create that outer world, and until we can see that more clearly and govern ourselves accordingly, we will continue to flounder in unnecessary long nights of suffering and failure.

The effort that we put forth to avoid inner work by pursuing life solely in the outer domain only separates us from the sources of life and healing that are to be found in our inner communities."5

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Hold on a second...sources of life and healing? That sounds a whole lot more appealing than the shadowy forest of projections, doesn't it?

As well it should.

In addition to becoming aware of the role of projection in our lives and the harm it can cause, there are other ways we can engage in inner work...many of which may not seem so scary.

For example, we can invite our inner life to be revealed through meditation or prayer.

4 Jerry Wright, lecture at the Haden Institute, March 2023.
5 Catherine Meeks, 2-3
As we explored last week, there are so many contemplative practices to choose from!

Toward the end of his life, Leonard Cohen spoke about how he heard the "divine voice" of "this other deep reality singing to [him] all the time...

That much of the time [he couldn't] decipher it, but that the voice was more compassionate than it had been at any other time of his life."^6

This was important inner work.

Inner work can also take place through creative activity, journaling, communion with nature, or in simply beholding beauty in any form... anywhere we invite in the Spirit of Life and reflect upon it.

We also engage with the inner life when we marvel at the synchronicities that take place in our lives...the seemingly magical coincidences that occur, when it seems the Universe may be winking at us.

Or when we remember an intriguing and mysterious dream...when the morning brings a "new arrival" as Rumi called it. A dream that invites us into conversation with the inner world.

We don't have to figure it all out.

In fact, sitting with riddles and paradoxes is an important aspect of inner work.

All of these experiences and more can invite a dialogue with our inner world...what some might call our inner teachers or the Divine Indwelling Presence...a source of life and healing that is quite different than our ego awareness.

^6 https://www.faena.com/aleph/a-divine-voice-the-spiritual-path-of-leonard-cohen
Our relationship with this presence or "inner community" can shape and transform us...as it did with Max, who returns from his inward journey a different person: un-costumed and receptive to nourishment and rest.

It's suggested that we approach these inner energies with curiosity...engaging in conversation with them as we would other intimate friends.

Many times, this dialogue may call us toward radical change and transformation...words that sound lovely, but are actually very challenging.

Speaking of the outer work of anti-racism and anti-oppression, to which Unitarian Universalists are sincerely committed, Catherine Meeks puts this very plainly.

She says, "Each person must ask 'who am I' and listen carefully for the answer. This is crucial in the work that needs to be healed in both our inner and outer worlds."

She goes on to say, too, that a "dying" is needed, so that healing change can take place.

"As we move into being more awake, some of the ideas that our families and cultural spaces passed on to us must die," she says.

Each of us must find our own way to what has to die, because it is a very individual process that differs from person to person, even though the end result is shared."

While she may be talking about the "death" or letting go of certain attitudes, or cultural ways of living in the world...

This also applies to the letting go of the ways our lives looked at different stages...the shape that justice-work may have taken for us...or the expectations we may have had for ourselves that didn't come to fruition.
Catherine Meeks writes: "one of the hardest ideas to lay to rest is the idea of certainty or permanence," but that resistance to change can "disrupt" the "rhythms of healing" that are necessary.\textsuperscript{7}

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As Unitarian Universalists, it is the "encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations" which will, we hope, allow us to live according to our principles.

But no matter how lofty our principles are, they're not worth much if we don't have the maturity to live into them...and an important element of spiritual growth is engagement with our inner life.

Far from being an exercise in "navel-gazing" or a self-centred activity, it puts us in touch with that which transcends our single selves...so that we may truly "serve Life" to bring about a greater harmony.

While some inner work is no doubt challenging...it has other dimensions that can be a great joy.

If we let it, our inner world can inspire our reverence and awe just as surely as any mythological deity "out there" may have inspired our ancestors.

As it reveals itself through contemplation, dreams, synchronicities, creative work and even the humbling "ah-hahs" of projection, the living presence within is one of mystery, awe and wonder: an ocean whose depths are fathomless.

The ways we engage with the inner life are personal and diverse, and uniquely suited to us as individuals even as they link us more deeply with the interdependent web of all existence.

\textsuperscript{7} Catherine Meeks, 39-40.
In Carrie Newcomer's beautiful song "A Gathering of Spirits" that Gabrielle sang earlier, we heard Rumi's words, saying that there are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground...and indeed this is true.

There are countless ways for us, as individuals, to touch and be in relationship with the ground of existence, the spirit of life, the mystery of being.

Inner work isn't only about uncovering our unhealed places, although that's an important part of it.

It's also about delight and amazement.

The home-in-motion of our inner RV is actually pretty fantastic and can take us to many places!

Thinking once again to our hero, Max, what a joy it is for him when the "wild rumpus" starts, and so it is with us!

Like the hero Milarepa from Buddhist mythology, who sits down to tea with his demons after he's invited them to eat him up, we too may find that once we've fully owned up to the wild things within us (and the mayhem they have caused) we might form meaningful and creative relationships with them.

Like Max, no matter how long our journey has been, or the depth to which it has taken us, we can arrive "home"...at a place of belonging, where nourishment awaits us, "and it is still hot."

Blessings, and thank you for listening.