

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Theme: “Intention”
Sunday, January 7, 2018 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are you busy about?”

~Henry David Thoreau

Sermon “Resolution Dissolution”, Rev. Paul Sprecher

The Stoic philosopher Seneca, who was born just about when Jesus was born, offers this goad to an active life: “This is no time for playing around. You have been retained as counsel for the unhappy. You have promised to bring help to the shipwrecked, the imprisoned, the sick, the needy, to those whose heads are under the poised axe. Where are you directing your attention? What are you doing?”

In the same vein, the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius commends himself – and us – to remember his purpose in this manner:

In the morning, when you can’t get out of bed, tell yourself: ...“Was I made for lying warm under a pile of blankets?” “But I enjoy it here.” Was it for enjoyment you were born? Are you designed to act or be acted upon? Look at the plants, sparrows, ants, spiders and bees, all busy at their work, the work of welding the world. Why should you hesitate to do your part?... “Yes, but nature allows for rest too.” True, but rest — like eating and drinking — has natural limits. Do you disregard those limits as well?... Do you think less of your life’s work than sculptors do their sculpting, dancers their dancing, misers their money, or stars their stardom? They gladly forgo food and sleep to pursue their ends. To you, does the work of building a better society seem less important, less deserving of your devotion?

Which brings me to the question: How are you doing with those New Years Resolutions? Who made resolutions? How's that working out for you? Well, it's still early days!

I want to suggest that it's worth considering a deeper level of commitment than the making of resolutions – valuable as the making of resolutions, the setting of goals, can be. That deeper level is what our theme of the month, “Intention,” refers to. The question here is not just “What shall I do,” but “What/who shall I be?”

A first step for setting intentions is often to divest ourselves of the things we don't need in our lives. The clutter of too many things can create a distraction from the time needed to be intentional in our living. I often give into a kind of busyness that can consume a day. If I turn to my to do list first thing in the morning, I can become distracted by doing lots of little things that probably need to be done but that would be more satisfying to do if I kept sight of the larger purposes of which they are only a part. And then there are the time-fillers that can distract us from goals and intentions. For example, the average American spends an average of five hours each week watching live television. Surely some of those hours serve as a distraction rather than advancing our High Resolve, as Howard Thurman put it in our opening words. And how many of you have fallen into the sin of Solitaire? That's one of my favorite ways of filling a few fleeting moments – you get little jolt of dopamine when the right cards appear and a bigger jolt when you get all the cards in their place – or the disappointment of an unfinished game that almost demands another try until you can get it “right.” [Anyone else ever succumb to that

temptation?]

As Henry David Thoreau puts it in our thought for contemplation this morning, “It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are you busy about?”

When we let go of some of the clutter and busyness that distracts us we can begin to find the time and mind-space to reflect on our lives and our intentions at a deeper level.

One way we have of doing this here in our congregation is our Connections group, which gathers once a month to think through what matters most to each of us in the presence of the other members of the group. We undertake one or several spiritual exercises each month to open our eyes to wider and deeper possibilities in our lives. For this month’s theme of “Intention,” two exercises are offered. The first exercise invites us to fill in the blanks with attention. Here are a few examples of blanks we are asked to consider and fill in; you might take a moment to think of your own answer as I read them:

- I am on this earth to
- I will learn more about
- I am avoiding
- I have always wanted to
- When I stop procrastinating, I will
- I want to spend the rest of my life becoming a
- I want to spend the rest of my life *doing*
- I have always intended to Once I have finished

After doing this exercise, each of us is asked to consider:

- What I would change after I give the completed sentences a look?
- What surprised me?
- Which 2 or 3 merit attention right now?
- What single intention am I ready to make based on listening deeply to what the list of completed sentences is trying to tell me?

An alternative exercise invites us to start our day with intention. Marianne Williamson says, “At the beginning of the day, the mind is most open to receive new impressions. One of the most important things we can do is to take full responsibility for the power of the morning.” This exercise suggests a few practices, one of which can be applied on a regular basis to begin the day with a greater sense of intentionality and purpose:

- Pick a word – carve out a little time to choose a word to end this sentence: “Today I want to be/feel” And walk with the word through the day. Some ideas for words to use are generous, powerful, unruffled, trusting, present, nurturing, kind.
- Get grateful – for example, think of four people you are grateful for in your life, things and possibilities you are blessed with; and then write them down in a journal or notebook.
- Walk in nature first thing in the morning in preference to attending to the day’s news and allow yourself to imbibe a greater sense of who you are

and the wondrous web of life of which you are a small but significant part.

- Be silent – the most basic of spiritual practices. Empty yourself and let yourself sit only with silence and your breath. Or engage in a more formal practice of prayer and meditation and let that help you to set an intention for the day.

If you find yourself drawn to this kind of work and reflection, please consider joining our Connections Group on the 3rd Tuesday of each month – there's always room for me. Talk to me if you'd like to learn more.

Part of the power of our monthly gatherings is that we are listening to each other's questions as well as formulating our own. Denise Levertov speaks of such listening in her poem "The Gift":

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given
the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps

this gift is your answer.

Paying attention to one another's questions, to the world of nature, to the stirrings of the spirit within us when we find the stillness, when we enter into silence, as our hymn put it – these are all ways of setting intentions, of finding true harmony. These are ways of figuring out how “To Be of Use,” as Marge Piercy put it in our responsive reading. These are ways of aligning our intentions with our purposes and our capacities so that, as George Bernard Shaw put it, we can be thoroughly used up when we die.

Mary Oliver puts this in pithy form in her “Instructions for living a life:”

- Pay attention
- Be astonished
- Tell about it

She expands on her pithy instructions in her poem “Mindful,” which reminds us – whatever our temperament – to listen, to pay attention:

Everyday
I see or hear
something
that more or less
kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle
in the haystack
of light.

It was what I was born for —
to look, to listen,
to lose myself
inside this soft world —
to instruct myself
over and over
in joy,
and acclamation.

Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant —
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these —
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

Amen, and blessed be.