

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Trust”
Sunday, March 17, 2019 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “All journeys have a secret destination of which the traveler is unaware. ~Martin Buber

Sermon “From Wholeness to Wholeness” Rev. Paul Sprecher

For some obscure reason, I’ve gotten myself on email lists that focus on productivity and success and often on that original sin of procrastination. Some might say that reading articles like this is *itself* no more than another form of procrastination. But I was especially struck by an article this week that reflected on the costs of the striving and the discipline and the singular focus that is celebrated in these circles. Jenny Anderson, writing in *Quartz*, says:

On a blustery March day five years ago, I locked arms with my mother and walked into a church in Maplewood, New Jersey to bury my brother [who died of cancer in his mid-40s). Bagpipes played “Amazing Grace.” I remember shivering and worrying: that my dad would slip, my mom would collapse, and that I would botch the eulogy.

The church was packed. My brothers’ four daughters looked empty, absent; all eyes on them, no escape from the hell that was that moment. His wife’s pain and fear were palpable. When I stood up on the lectern and saw several hundred people, all of whom seemed to actually know my brother, I was humbled by the life he had created. He had designed exactly the life he wanted: running his own architecture firm in New York City, parenting four

girls, belonging to a community that he had helped build, literally (by designing houses) and figuratively—by coaching lacrosse, talking to neighbors in the yard and strangers at the grocery store, and attending approximately two million children’s birthday parties.

In seeing his community, I became acutely aware of the feeling that I did not have my own. I had friends and a loving family. But as Annie Dillard wrote, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” And I spent my days focused on optimizing myself: Endlessly working and improving, on a permanent quest to do as much as possible in the unforgiving confines of 24 hours. It was the only way I knew how to be. Compete. Excel. Win.

I had never considered there might be a cost to a life of high-octane, high-reward competition.ⁱ

She goes on to reflect on the ways that she had made different choices than her brother, ways that she had let her career take up all the time she had, ways that – unlike her brother – she had failed to participate in any real community. She goes on to say,

I used to think that community was as simple as having friends who bring a lasagna when things fall apart and champagne when things go well. Who pick up your kids from school when you can’t. But I think community is also an insurance policy against life’s cruelty; a kind of immunity against loss and

disappointment and rage. My community will be here for my family if I cannot be. And if I die, my kids will be surrounded by people who know and love them, quirks and warts and oddities and all.ⁱⁱ

Jenny Anderson's reflection is a caution for those in the middle years of their lives who are so caught up in their striving that they lose sight of what really matters. And of course this congregation is one of the stronger communities available to us to build the kinds of relationships she came to treasure, "an insurance policy against life's cruelty."

When I originally this service, I had the wild notion that I could provide some sort of insight into the arc of our lives from birth to death, from wholeness to wholeness. Imagine: What if there were a handbook for living that could be pulled out when tough decisions need to be made, that would guide us in making the right choices of partners and careers and hobbies, raising our children well, and moving with serenity toward the ending of our lives. How valuable such wisdom would be. Alas, I have not acquired such wisdom – not yet, at least. And, of course, far wiser men and women than I have been thinking and writing about this very matter for more millennia than we know. We humans are constantly facing the question "How then shall we live?" – and have been almost forever. Part of the problem is that, as Martin Buber puts it in our thought for contemplation, "All journeys have a secret destination of which the traveler is unaware."

Religions, schools of philosophy and wisdom traditions all strive to answer this question. The only simple answer I've found is "balance" – which is a pretty bare answer to so profound a question, really.

The riddle of the sphinx that appears on the cover of the order of service was said to have tripped up travelers on the road to the city Thebes – and led to their deaths if they couldn't answer – until Oedipus solved it. "What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?" Perhaps all of us have learned this already, knowing that most babies crawl, most adults who don't suffer from disability walk, and many elders require the assistance of a cane. So, to follow the pattern of the riddle, we might consider life in those three stages. Billy Collins in his poem "Aristotle" – another bow to ancient wisdom – offers this:

This is the beginning. □ Almost anything can happen... □ □

This is the middle. □ Things have had time to get complicated, □ messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore... □ □

And this is the end... □ It is me hitting the period □ and you closing the book... □ what we have all been waiting for, □ what everything comes down to...ⁱⁱⁱ □

So many babies come to us from a place of wholeness, almost of perfection. Doesn't every parent – not to mention every grandparent – experience a kind of wonder at the birth of an infant? Two my interfaith study companions have just

returned from being with their children to witness the birth of their second grandchild, one in Tel Aviv, one in Baltimore, and they can't be stopped from burbling over and sharing an infinity of photos.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we deny the doctrine of original sin and we believe that every infant is whole, and holy, and a being with inherent worth and dignity. But how quickly the wonder of that newborn innocence gives way to the realities of parenting a young animal whose needs must take priority over our own and who all too quickly must take on their first balancing act: learning to adjust to the reality that the outside world cannot be made to conform in every respect to the wishes of their own will. In some ways, this is the fundamental challenge for parents – teaching enough discipline to make living in the world possible without squelching all sense of freedom, helping to nurture and allow the emergence of potential in the context of the limitations imposed by the fact that there are other people in the family, the neighborhood, and the world – a first training in balance.

This past week's revelations of the corrupt ways that wealthy parents attempted to get their children admitted to elite schools encapsulate as well as anything the kinds of pressures felt by parents and their children to achieve advantages at any cost. They also testify to the overall corruption of systems in which wealth can be used to perpetuate privilege for a lifetime. The tasks of childhood ought not to include the pressures that come soon enough in

adulthood, the endless striving that leads to elite colleges – but also too often to lives empty of real friendship and meaning and community. And parents ought not to set an example of so cherishing the future of their own children that they are willing to mow down all barriers of fairness and decency.

Then comes the middle, the part where, as Billy Collins puts it, “Things have had time to get complicated, □ messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore...” The cautionary tale that I started with is a reminder of how easy it can be to become separated from oneself in the midst of too much striving. And yet the lives of many families are becoming more and more difficult as economic pressures intensify and as the burdens of raising children are discouraging many millennials in particular from starting families. We have shifted the burden of education onto the backs of young people in the form of loans that burden them for many years, and the Great Recession set back the careers of many just entering the labor force in the past decade. But the response of complete devotion to work can hardly be the answer either. The “success” literature I referred to at the beginning leads to the disease of “workism” in which only the work we do really matters. Of this danger Jenny Anderson’s revelation is a reminder that in the middle of life as well there is a need for balance. Balance between work and family, between private life and community, between achieving security and success and remembering that there is a time for every

purpose under heaven – and being as productive and successful as possible is not the sum of all good.

So there must be time in the midst of striving to stand back, to meditate, to breathe, so that we don't forget that we are creating our lives as well as our projects. This is a good time to meditate on this wisdom from Albert Schweitzer: “The path of awakening is not about becoming who you are, but about unbecoming who you are not.”

And then there comes the time when we step back and let others bear the biggest burdens. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* explores the process of what he calls “eldering” – learning to be sages as we take the time to broaden our horizons beyond the pressures and stresses of the middle of our lives and to harvest the insights we have gained along the way. There's also more time to look outward toward the needs of those beyond our immediate families, perhaps to reflect on the privileges from which we have benefited and to use our time and treasure to make the world more equal and whole and fair.

This is a time reflect on our lives and especially to reflect on the balancing of our joys and our sorrows, our accomplishments and our regrets.

This is the time for considering what legacy we want to leave, whether for our families, our churches, or our communities. And of course it is a time for planning and deciding how we wish to face the end of our lives. We'll again be

offering the “Five Wishes” program here, a structured way of thinking about the medical decisions that will be necessary at the end of our lives and especially about how we wish to be remembered. If we are wise, we can approach the end of our lives with serenity, assured that we have done the best we could have with what we were given, returning again to completion, to wholeness at the end of our living.

And there is joy in this time of standing back, as reflected in the poem “Having Come This Far” by James Broughton:

I've been through what my through was to be

I did what I could and couldn't

I was never sure how I would get there

I nourished an ardor for thresholds

for stepping stones and for ladders

I discovered detour and ditch

I swam in the high tides of greed

I built sandcastles to house my dreams

I survived the sunburns of love

No longer do I hunt for targets

I've climbed all the summits I need to

and I've eaten my share of lotus

Now I give praise and thanks

for what could not be avoided

and for every foolhardy choice

I cherish my wounds and their cures
and the sweet enervations of bliss
My book is an open life

I wave goodbye to the absolutes
and send my regards to infinity
I'd rather be blithe than correct

Until something transcendent turns up
I splash in my poetry puddle
and try to keep God amused.

AMEN

ⁱ "The only metric of success that really matters is the one we ignore," Jenny Anderson, Quartz, March 12, 2019, https://qz.com/1570179/how-to-make-friends-build-a-community-and-create-the-life-you-want/?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ "Aristotle," Billy Collins, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46706/aristotle>