

Three Questions
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

As we re-gather in this season of new beginnings and renewed activity...
As we re-gather just as so many shift from the slow gear of summer to the high gear of autumn...

May we pause... enter a deeper and quieter place within...
Find the peace that is always in our hearts, would we but pause, slow, catch our hurried breath...

And from this centeredness, this quiet, may our prayers radiate outwards to any we know who are in need of healing or peace, to all those in our troubled world in need of healing or peace...

And from this centeredness, may our thoughts and prayers be especially with all those in the paths of this season's devastating storms, those made homeless in Haiti and Cuba and elsewhere, those on the Gulf Coast once again struggling in a storm's aftermath... many others...

May we find renewal and peace within our time of shared silence...

Reading – from *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, by Thich Nhat Hanh

There is a story in Zen circles about a man and a horse. The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, "Where are you going?" and the first man replies, "I don't know! Ask the horse!" This is also our story. We are riding a horse, we don't know where we are going, and we can't stop. The horse is our habit energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit. We struggle all the time, even during our sleep. We are at war within ourselves, and we can easily start a war with others.

We have to learn the art of stopping – stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us. When an emotion runs through us like a storm, we have no peace. We turn on the TV and then we turn it off. We pick up a book and then we put it down. How can we stop this state of agitation? How can we stop our fear, despair, anger, and craving? We can stop by practicing mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling, and deep looking in order to understand. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy.

Sermon

Perhaps many of you already know of Leo Tolstoy's short story, "Three Questions." It has been adapted and re-told in many ways, including as a children's story. I came across reference to it once again this summer in a book of stories and reflections by the Buddhist monk Ajahn Brahm (his book is titled *Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?*)

The original story (I've abbreviated and adapted Tolstoy's original) goes something like this:

A great king determined for himself that if he could have the answers to three questions "he would never fail in anything he would undertake." What were the three questions? His were wordier, but they come down to this:

What is the most important time?
Who is the most important person?
What is the most important thing to do?

You might want to think about these questions for yourself as I continue the story.

What is the most important time?
Who is the most important person?
What is the most important thing to do?

The king began his quest by asking his royal advisors for their answers. They gave long, detailed, complex answers to each question; and they didn't even agree with one another – except perhaps on the point that the most important person for the king to consult on any matter was... one of his advisors.

The king was deeply dissatisfied with all of this. He wanted something simpler, more direct, and at the same time more profound to guide his life.

Well, he had heard of a wise hermit who lived deep in the woods. The hermit, it was said, never left the woods and would only entertain common people. So, the king dressed in ordinary clothes and approached the hermit's dwelling, leaving his personal body guard some distance off and well out of sight.

The hermit was digging in his garden. The king asked his three questions, but the hermit would not respond. He kept digging. And the old man looked so tired and feeble that the king took the spade from him and worked in his stead. This he did for hours.

Then, as the sun was setting, the king asked his questions again, saying that if the hermit had no response he would leave and return to his home.

At this moment a man came running out of the woods, clutching his stomach – seriously wounded and bleeding. Without a moment's thought or hesitation the king and the hermit went to his aid, the king binding and dressing the wound and carrying the man into the hermit's hut. The king himself then fell into a deep sleep.

When the king awoke the next morning, the wounded man by his side opened his own eyes too with a look of fear and surprise, and with trepidation he asked the king for forgiveness.

The king didn't understand. But the man went on to say that the king had executed his brother for some crime and, having learned of the king's visit to the hermit, the man had set out to kill the him. But as he approached, the bodyguard had leapt up from his hiding place and

struck and wounded him. “I wished to kill you,” the man said, “and now you have saved my life.” He vowed to serve the king from that time forth in any way he could.

It of course pleased the king to have made peace with his former enemy in this way; but he still wanted answers to his questions. As he prepared to leave, he asked the hermit once again.

This time the hermit told the king that he had already been answered.

The king didn’t know what he meant.

The hermit said that the afternoon before, as he had helped the hermit with his digging, the most important time was that time, the most important person was the hermit, and the most important thing to do was to help him. And, as it turned out, in doing this, the king had avoided the ambush that his enemy had planned.

Then, the most important time was the time with the wounded man; the most important person was the wounded man; and the most important thing to do was to care for him. And, as it turned out, this meant that the man and the king could make peace with one another.

The answers to the three questions more simply?

The most important time is now.

The most important person – for this moment – is the one you are with.

The most important thing to do is to care for that person.

A long story with a simple, but potentially transformative message. At the very least, a useful daily guide.

I have found that since I came across Ajahn Brahm’s reflection on the story this summer, when I feel myself carried away from the present moment by worries or by my daily to-do list, or by thinking about what I did earlier or what I will be doing later, and this means carried away also from the person I’m with (even if that person is just me!), and carried away from whatever I’m doing... I use as a kind of mantra those three questions. They bring me right back. Now. This person. Caring... for this person. Doing what I’m doing now.

We heard earlier the Zen story of the man on the runaway horse, a man entirely out of control of his own life – the way surely all of us feel at least from time to time. Perhaps the way the ancient king with his three questions had been feeling. What *is* important and not so important? How can I tell the difference as my life speeds on blindly as it sometimes seems?

Thich Nhat Hanh’s method is hardly his alone. It is the method of mindfulness, of the *practice* of mindfulness (“practice” because we never get it right once and for all): “mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling, deep looking in order to understand.” This, Nhat Hanh says, returns us to the present moment – the only time, after all, that there is. He goes on: “When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy.” Care.

It is not necessarily easy. Thich Nhat Hanh says “*deep* looking in order to understand.” Effort is often required to understand another person or a social or political situation in which one is immersed. This is not just about smiling your way through the day. We bring all that we are – head and heart – to bear on the moments of our lives.

But neither is this a burden, yet another heavy-laden task. “I’ve got all these things to do... and I’ve got to be mindful too!!??” No, the contrary. When our attention returns to now, to this person, to this task – putting worries and regrets aside – there can come an ease. You can’t do everything at once. Can’t solve all the problems of the world yourself. Can’t solve the problems of your life all at once either. Enter this time with this person and this task. Enter this world as it is.

Now... this person... caring...

Returning to Tolstoy for a moment. Tolstoy came to believe that most of what we call religion is not religion at all, but rather extraneous ritual and unfounded belief. So Tolstoy asserted – as many others rightly assert – that religion is about living in harmony with the infinite, with the universe, with God, and that the way to do that is through the Golden Rule, expressed after all, one way or another, in all the religions of the world.

There have been and are many exemplars of Golden Rule living.

Jesus was the primary such exemplar and teacher for Tolstoy. And didn’t Jesus, as we reflect on the stories of his life, *live* the answers to those three questions? You can hardly read the gospel stories without getting a very clear impression that here was a man completely in the present moment, complete attention given to the person in front of him, healing, teaching, caring about that person in that moment.

So, with all this in mind, *here* we are, *now*, with each other. And what better place to practice our answers to the three questions than this Old Ship Unitarian Universalist congregation? In community with one another, striving to be present to one another, to help one another, and to be present as well to those outside our community – for sometimes the person you are with is the person you have in your heart at a distance, the person suffering in the midst of war, poverty, oppression, injustice.

Yes, in the midst of our sometimes too-full lives, in the midst of political rancor, in the midst of global crises... may we each do our best to answer the three questions with our lives: As Ajahn Brahm puts it in his reflection on “The Three Questions,” whether with a loved one in our personal relationships, with a client or customer or patient or whomever in our daily lives, and with those at a distance who we may not know but with fellow feeling about whom we also care.

And may our Old Ship community, rooted firmly in almost four centuries of a tradition of faith and care, rooted firmly in our Unitarian Universalist Principles, nurture our quest to live the answers to the three questions.

So may it be.

Benediction

May we know that with each kind word,
With each generous gift of time,
With each selfless deed of love,
We help to create the beloved community of peace and justice
for which all yearn.

So may it be.