

What's Going On?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from the opening lines of "History" by Ralph Waldo Emerson
published about 175 years ago:

There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent.

Of the works of this mind, history is the record. Its genius is illustrated by the entire series of days. Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history.

from *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and the Art of Living*, by Krista Tippett, host of public radio's "On Being":

...change has always happened in the margins, across human history, and it's happening there now. Seismic shifts in common life, as in geophysical reality, begin in spaces and cracks.

...our world is abundant with beauty and courage and grace. I'm aware of a growing aspiration to attend, with all the tools we have at hand, to the human change that makes social change possible... Spiritual life is evolving, and its sources of nourishment are becoming more broadly accessible.

Our global crises, the magnitude of the stakes for which we are playing, could signal the end of civilization as we've known it. Or they might be precisely the impetus human beings perversely need to do the real work at hand: to directly and wisely address the human condition and begin to grow it up.

Sermon

I sit on one of the old wrought iron chairs in my back yard on a late-summer's morning.

There is much to see. The still rich palette of green, from maple and oak, to the varieties of brush and weeds, the blue sky, sunlight, squirrels, the occasional chipmunk, occasional butterfly.

And much to hear. The gentle rush of breeze through the leaves, birdsong, squirrels rushing here and there, branch to branch, chipmunk chirping.

But for all that I can see and hear there is so much more that I cannot see or hear, but that *is* very much going on:

The underground root systems of the trees, drawing nourishment from deep below the surface, the flow of energy into the leaves of those trees and all the cellular transformations going on in those leaves... and in every living being, flora and fauna, in my line of sight and far, far beyond.

Sound waves beyond the limited range of my human hearing.

The neuronal activity, whether relatively simple or complex, within the brains of every squirrel, chipmunk, bird, insect.

The invisible radiating energy from the sun beyond the visible spectrum of light, all showering upon us.

The turning of our Earth, the revolving of our Earth around the sun, solar system around the galaxy, galaxy spinning among and away from other galaxies and clusters of galaxies in the continuing expansion which began 15 billion years ago.

All of which I know about – sort of – but which I can't see with my naked eye or experience directly in any way.

Not to mention everything going on in my own body and brain of which I have no consciousness whatsoever – digesting food, circulating blood, death and replacement of cells, chattering synapses in my brain, the random thoughts flitting through my mind only manifesting the surface activity of that brain.

So what's going on in what we call the natural world? Plenty, only the barest surface of which I am able to see or hear or be aware of in any way.

In find it humbling to remember this.

As I find it humbling or sobering to realize that this is also true of the social and political worlds in which we live.

As with my backyard view, we all mostly just see the surface of what's going on politically and socially and culturally; we see what is presented to us in the daily newspaper or newscast or on-line newsfeed – mostly what we would call bad news – and then maybe think we know what's going on.

But given the size of our world, the two hundred or so nations and over six billion human beings... we would do well to be realistic about what we know and what we don't know concerning what's going on.

After all, could we possibly really know anywhere near all that's going on, almost no matter how many newspapers we read or how many web sites we check?

The answer is of course no, any more than I can see all that's going on in by own backyard – or inside my own body.

What then are we to do?

First, there is the often lamented reality that the “news” mostly highlights only the bad news, the crisis of the day and so on. So the first step to knowing more of what's going on would be to be told or to seek out more of the *good* news, thereby giving us a more balanced view of the world. In this spirit, it is great to see a magazine such as “Yes!” which does just this, highlights the good news, the news of people working one way and another for a better world; and wonderful to see WBUR's series “Kind World” which shares really remarkable stories of kindness, which carry the subliminal reminder that there is actually lots of kindness in the world.

Here's one story from “Kind World”. It is the story of Joe, an Afghan war vet, lone survivor of a bomb that shattered his armored truck and killed three of his buddies, leaving him struggling with post traumatic stress, leading to alcohol, repeated DUI's, and

finally a failed urine test while on probation which brought a sentence of one day in jail from a judge who was himself a veteran.

The story of Joe, who arrived at the jail, shaking, sweating, with flashbacks to that night in the truck... at about which time the door to his cell opened, and there was the judge, Lou Olivera, smiling, with a tray of food, sitting down next to Joe on the bed in this tiny cell, then sharing the meal, talking, and then the judge staying the night, sleeping on a mat on the floor.

The next morning, Lou drove Joe home before heading straight back to the courthouse.

“When I walked out of the cell, it felt like a clean slate,” Joe says. “I was talking to one of the jailers. I’m like, ‘Have you ever seen that?’ He said, ‘No. Don’t disappoint him.’”

Since that day, Joe reports his confidence has renewed, along with his trust in people, “shifted my whole mindset.”

The WBUR report ends with this: “In this case, it took 12 hours – and a judge in jail – to give new direction. How will you spend your next 12?”

We are indeed reminded by such a story that the reality of what’s going on in our world is that there are actually plenty of Judge Olivera’s out there, plenty of acts of kindness that go unreported in the news, along with thousands upon thousands of groups all over the planet, mostly small, each in one way or another seeking to make a better, more just, more peaceful, more ecologically sustainable world – one act, one community at a time.

We just can’t and don’t see all this going on... but it is. And I find it heartening to be reminded that it is. Not to mention to be reminded that actually there is less violence overall on the planet than at almost any time in history, and that we are globally actually making progress when it comes to measures of poverty and hunger and disease. Even though nothing assures the future.... this is part of what is presently going on.

But one more step: It seems to me that it is also critically important to be reminded that there is, as I believe there is, a reality even deeper than all of this goodness and kindness among individuals and organizations and groups seeking to make a better world, a reality that is and always has been “going on” – and from which the goodness and kindness grow (like grass and trees from those hidden below the surface root systems).

Emerson named this reality in a variety of ways in his essays and lectures. In “Nature” he wrote:

As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power.

And in “The Over-Soul” he wrote this of “the soul” in us:

Within (us) is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.

He goes on to affirm that this deep power is “all accessible to us.” And:

When it breathes through (our) intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through (our) will, it is virtue; when it flows through (our) affections, it is love.

Further as we heard in the first reading, Emerson affirmed that all of history is the record of the soul – yes, including, we would have to say, our human failures to live and act from this depth of soul, yet also including acts of genius, virtue, and love from this depth of soul.

In the second reading, Krista Tippett notes that humanity’s “sources of spiritual nourishment” (soul nourishment we could say just as well) “are more broadly accessible” than perhaps ever before:

All the wisdom of the world’s spiritual traditions available in the library, bookstore, or with a few keystrokes; and it is wisdom (not in the headlines, but present in our lives, in our world, very much part of what’s going on)... wisdom if we choose to learn from it and practice it, that just might help us, as Krista Tippett wrote, “to do the real work at hand: to directly and wisely address the human condition and begin to grow it up.”

Well then... bringing all this closer to home:

In our own Unitarian Universalist congregations, including right here, there is typically a good deal of social service and social issue activism. Which is great! I am proud of the work we are doing in relation to hunger and homelessness, proud that the South Shore Chapter of 350MA, the local arm of the climate change movement, meets in our parish house and is led by members of our congregation, proud of the thousands of dollars we raise each year for a variety of social change and social service groups, including our own Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and UU Urban Ministry.

And I’m proud – and often in awe – of all the individual ways in which I see you live lives of kindness and service.

All good, very good – and part of what is, blessedly, going on in this larger world of ours.

But what sustains all of this and grows all of this is the deeper work we might call continuing spiritual transformation, the work of learning to discern the promptings of what Emerson called the “over-soul” – what we can call conscience, the still small voice, and thereby learning – maybe through some of those ancient texts as well – to experience with astonishment (one of Emerson’s favorite words) the reality that each of us *is* part and particle of the whole of life... and then to live as if we knew it.

So - what’s going on? Well, everything that we see and hear in the news is indeed going on, for good and ill. And no question that things can look pretty grim sometimes, whether in the midst of the presidential campaign, terrorism, racism, or climate change.

But so much more is also going on: among all the groups and individuals working for better communities and a better world... and so much is also going on even deeper below the surface, as we seek, each of us and in community, to tap those deeper wellsprings of kindness and love, rooted in the oneness and interdependence of all that is – as I said, not unlike the trees around us tapping their below the surface deep wellsprings of nourishment.

And it just might be – who’s to say? – that enough of this is going on that we could be justified in holding a little more hope for the future of our children and grandchildren and on to the seventh generation than if all we paid attention to was the daily news.

A personal coda: Most days I turn my attention inward for a little while in the afternoon. My meditation, as I’ve shared with you before, usually includes the prayer of St. Francis, beginning “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...” and then moves to saying inwardly an adapted version of the ancient Buddhist sutra on compassion:

“May all beings be at peace, be well, be happy, be at ease” as I bring to mind particular dear ones I know who are struggling one way or another, bring you to mind and heart, my family... all beings.

Now I don’t know if these meditations and prayers have any *direct* influence amidst the interdependent web in which we live and move and have our being. But I do hope that they change me a little bit, help me to stay a little more connected to deeper wellsprings of kindness and love.

And I do suspect that the more of us who practiced in similar ways, not necessarily with meditation or prayer, maybe even with just a little more mindful intention in the direction of kindness, the more hope we might have to change “what’s going on” in the direction of more peace, justice, harmony... and of course love.

So may it be.