

As If Our Lives Depended On It

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February 3, 2019

*“This world is like a symphony,
and we each have a part to play.”*

--Swami Paramananda

Readings

adapted from Matthew and Luke:

Blessed are you poor. The realm of God is yours.
Blessed are you who hunger for righteousness. You shall be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep today. You shall laugh.
Blessed are the humble. They will inherit the earth.
Blessed are the merciful. They will find mercy.
Blessed are the peacemakers. They will be called children of God.

You are the salt of the earth. And if salt becomes tasteless, how is its saltiness to be restored? It is good for nothing.

You are the light of the world. When a lamp is lit, it is not put under a bushel, but on the lampstand, where it gives light to everyone in the house.

“Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Sermon

A couple of weeks ago Krista Tippet replayed an interview from a few years ago with poet Mary Oliver. Among much else, we learn that the calling of poetry came to her early.

There was of course no guarantee, none whatsoever, that Mary Oliver would eventually become “Mary Oliver” one of the most beloved American poets of our time. To become *that* Mary Oliver, she needed to apply, as becomes apparent in the interview, dedication and discipline.

That discipline, as it evolved, meant she began most days by rising early to walk in the woods and fields or by the shore near her Provincetown home, where she lived most of her adult life. During her walks she would gather not only nuts and berries to eat, but also nuggets of inspiration that might become poems. For this purpose she carried a notebook and a pencil; and for this purpose she paid attention – empathetic attention, which she experienced as an integral part of her work in the world.

Back home from her walks, she wrote, and she wrote some more... crumpling up, she said, far more efforts than keeping.

She did use the word “discipline” in the interview. We should not be surprised. Any good work requires discipline. Work is, after all... work – which is not to say without joy, not at all. But it is work.

And she named it so. In the interview she shared the story that like other Provincetown residents, she would visit the town dump every week or two – on which expedition she might run into, for example, the local plumber. “How’s your work coming?” he might ask. “Fine,” she might respond, “how about yours?”

The point being that everyone has his or her work in the world, work that – if it is to be good work – requires discipline.

And so the years of discipline and persistent dedication brought a Pulitzer and other recognitions and awards and the sale of countless books. In short, Mary Oliver did become “Mary Oliver” one of the most beloved American poets of our time. (Certainly beloved among those of us who call ourselves Unitarian Universalists. Indeed, a recent “New Yorker” appreciation of Mary Oliver described her as a sort of poet laureate for Unitarian Universalists. Not that she was a UU, but that she was so appreciated, loved, among us.)

Well, all this said, what I mean to talk about today is “stewardship” – stewardship which begins with each of us as stewards of our own lives and in particular of the unique gifts of our lives.

For one way of naming what I’ve been saying about Mary Oliver’s life and her approach to her work as a poet is that she was throughout her life tending her poetic gift, she was being a good steward of her life and her life’s gift – a gift to be able to create poetry that awakened her readers to some of the same empathetic attention to this world that was over and over awakened in her.

But of course you don’t have to be famous... or a poet... to be a steward of your life. After all, if everyone were famous, no one would actually be famous; and if

everyone were a full-time poet, there would be plenty in the world that wouldn't get done – including the plumbing.

This brings me to someone else who recently died, a fellow named Charlie Federico, who Boston Globe columnist Kevin Cullen called “the hub of Southie.”

As Cullen wrote in a recent column, Charlie's father had a bike shop, and when Charlie retired early, after thirty years as an engineer at GE, he took over the shop. Well, that was forty years ago – years during which Charlie fended off developers who would have paid a pretty price for his shop and the land it occupied.

But, Cullen wrote: “Charlie would sit on his stool, fold his arms, and wave them away. He wasn't going anywhere.” Why? Because he loved the work; and I guess with a decent GE pension he didn't need to get rich.

As Cullen put it:

Charlie Federico would talk to anybody and everybody. He lived for human interaction, trading stories, gossip, bad jokes. He loved seeing kids get their first bike.

Cullen shared one story in particular. How thirty years ago ten-year-old Kevin Colvin showed up at the store with a twisted bike chain and asked Charlie if he could fix it. Charlie said “no” – but after a pause said he would show the boy how he could fix it himself, which he did – at no charge.

Fast forward thirty years later. When Kevin Colvin's own son had a bike in need of repair, they packed the bike into the car and drove an hour from the suburbs where Colvin now lived with his family. The same story replayed.

Well, I expect there are hundreds more stories about Charlie Federico and his bike shop. But I share this much because it seems to me that he, like Mary Oliver, though a very different person with very different gifts, also was a steward of his life as he shaped his love of people, talk, stories, along with his mechanical skills into a life that made a difference.

To introduce a Sanskrit word that one can imagine Mary Oliver using, but maybe not Charlie Federico (though who knows), they had each discovered their “dharma” – their particular purpose or work in the world that was their way of being of service to others.

More than that, they were each stewards of their *dharma*, their purpose, their work, their gifts. Mary Oliver had her daily discipline of walking and paying attention and writing. As for Charlie Federico, as Kevin Cullen wrote: “For all his quirks, Charlie took his business seriously. He was at the shop nine hours a day, six days a week.”

Now, there is plenty to do in the world, many ways to contribute, mostly without becoming famous. And though we may sometimes think we have to find some grand purpose, ancient wisdom from the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* can pull us back from this delusion that only with big things can we make a difference. In the final chapter of the

Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna quite simply: “It is better to do your own *dharma* even imperfectly, than someone else’s *dharma* however perfectly.”

Or as we might put it, gnaw your own bone, not someone else’s.

Or we could go back to Emerson, centuries after the *Gita* but echoing that ancient text (which he had read). In “Self Reliance” Emerson wrote:

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession.

Emerson too was a steward of his life’s gifts. He was smart enough as a young man to leave parish ministry when it turned out he wasn’t very good at it, and he then, in fits and starts, discovered his actual *dharma*, his gift as lecturer and writer of essays – all, just like that other writer, Mary Oliver, the fruit of daily discipline.

Finding our *dharma* and then stewarding it? Note this: We may, not incidentally, particularly if we put aside inflated dreams, one day realize that we have been living our *dharma* all along, tending our gifts all along. And with this realization we might then be moved to be even better stewards of the gifts we have been using all along – not necessarily talents and skills only, but also gifts of the heart or gifts from wisdom that has grown from our wounds, sometimes gifts others might see more clearly than we... and gifts that might or might not be primarily through the work we are paid to do.

With this in mind, back to Charlie Federico: yes, he had mechanical skill and talent and through those earned his keep, but his deeper gift, as far as I can discern from Kevin Cullen’s column, had to do with his love of people and his caring for kids in particular.

Okay then, to use a bicycle metaphor, I want to shift gears a bit by naming that just as we are stewards of our own lives, seeking as best we can, however imperfectly, with whatever fits and starts, seeking to align ourselves with our *dharma*, whether through our work or often more fundamentally simply in the midst of our daily living, so too can we be stewards of the larger circles in which we live:

Our circles of family and friends to begin with, as we use our gifts to care for and nurture – be stewards of – the gift of these relationships of love and mutual care and concern.

Our circle of community here at Old Ship, as we each use our unique gifts (in the various forms and amounts of time, talent, and treasure, as we sometimes put it) to care for and nurture – be stewards of – the unique gifts of our congregation.

The circles of our democratic institutions, the gift of democracy, from town meetings to state and national politics. In this regard we could ask a stewardship question: Will we just add to the anger and vitriol and divisiveness of our time? Or will we be stewards of the gift of our democracy by engaging in heartfelt participation, debate, yes sometimes even protest, but not hate and dismissiveness?

And finally, the widest circle of our lives, the circle of life on Earth. Asking a stewardship question here too: In this time of climate crisis will we use our unique gifts in ways that add to care of the gift of the creation, of life, all of life?

Well, in regard to all these circles of our living, the words printed at the top of your order of worship from Swami Paramananda apply:

This world is like a symphony,
and we each have a part to play.

Almost finally, then, a sort of practical thought occurs to me: We could, if we like, choose to think of the entirety our lives, amidst all the circles of life – as a form of yoga. For the word *yoga* most simply means discipline, but with a particular, helpful nuance - for the root comes from the idea of yoking oneself, like a cart to an ox, yoking oneself to some noble purpose, to some high value, to love, to God, to Tao, to Brahman or Buddha-nature...

So – life itself as yoga.

And if all that sounds too high-falutin' I'll conclude with a more down-to-earth message. Another poet, Marge Piercy, wrote at the end of her poem "To Be of Use":

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Amen to that.

May we each find and be stewards, as best we can, of our unique work in the world, our part to play in the symphony of life, our place in the family of things.

May we let the light of our lamp shine.

So may it be.