

**Touchstones**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**From the order of worship**

from the Bhagavad Gita (Hindu):

You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work.  
You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for  
inaction. Perform work in this world as one established within oneself –  
without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat.

from the Dhammapada (Buddhist):

Hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can.  
This is an unalterable law. People forget that their lives will end soon.  
For those who remember, quarrels come to an end.

from Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.  
I'll meet you there.  
When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other doesn't make any sense.

**Call to Worship**

from the poem "Santos: New Mexico" by May Sarton:

Return to the most human, nothing less  
Will teach the angry spirit, the bewildered heart,  
The torn mind, to accept the whole of its duress,  
And pierced with anguish, at last act for love.

**Introduction to meditation**

from the writing of Willa Cather:

Where there is great love there are always miracles. Miracles rest not so much  
upon faces or voices or healing power coming to us from afar off, but on our  
perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears  
can hear what is there about us always.

## Readings

Matthew 6:19-21; 25-34

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

from *Walden*, from the chapter “Where I lived and what I lived for”  
Henry David Thoreau

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

## Sermon

In this morning’s reading from Henry Thoreau’s *Walden*, we heard a passage from his chapter “Where I Lived and What I Lived.” It began:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear...

In effect, Thoreau was saying that his two years by Walden Pond were themselves intended to be a touchstone for his living.

Before I go any further, though, just what is a touchstone?

Well, the word came to me for a particular purpose earlier this year during my sabbatical time. I had found myself moved to begin collecting passages from ancient scripture as well as more contemporary prose and poetry from wise souls. Not just any old passages, but passages and quotes that I have found myself returning to over and over again over the years – in my life as well as in my preaching and teaching (you would recognize many of them for just this reason – and you’ve been hearing some of them throughout this morning’s service and seeing a few others in your printed program). In short, these are passages and sometimes single lines that have for me been grounding or inspiring or healing, words that in one way or another have been helpful companions on my life journey.

And it seemed to me that “touchstones” was somehow the right word to describe these words I was collecting.

But only this week did I look up the word “touchstone” on-line in Merriam Webster and Wikipedia. I discovered that originally a touchstone was (or I suppose still is) an actual dark-colored stone of some sort (fieldstone, slate, etc.) used to test the purity of a precious metal such as gold or silver. As for the metaphorical use, a touchstone (according to Wikipedia) “refers to any physical or intellectual measure by which the validity or merit of a concept can be tested.”

Works for me! But note this: If we follow the metaphor, the touchstone is not itself the precious metal. When it comes not to geology but to life, I suppose the “precious metal” is the truth, truth beyond words. For, as another of my touchstones has it, the opening words of the *Tao Te Ching*: “The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.”

Okay then, back to those few sentences from Thoreau. It seems to me that they are a particularly good example of a touchstone passage, and here’s why: Thoreau was writing here in what for me are touchstone lines about his own quest for touchstones, hoping that by reducing his daily life to its simplest terms he might discover what his life and life in general was all about. And of course Thoreau was quite aware that by naming his own effort to see what life had to teach, he was inviting his readers to do the same. About fifty years ago I was one of those readers – as perhaps many of you have been – drawn into a similar search or quest by the young Thoreau’s declaration.

Now I’ve never lived for two years or even two weeks in a small cabin by the side of a pond. Instead I’ve lived with books by my side, books purporting to hold life wisdom, books and passages within books – touchstones – that I’ve measured against my own experience. And Thoreau did this too, not only during those two years by Walden Pond; for throughout his life he was a voracious reader, indeed a scholar. But in the third

chapter of *Walden*, titled “Reading,” Thoreau wrote specifically of his reading by the Pond:

My residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world.

He meant the classics, and not only Greek and Roman, but also Hindu and Persian and Buddhist. Of all these sorts of texts, he wrote later in the same chapter, “By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last.”

Dismissing what we might call reading for pleasure or worldly purpose, he further wrote:

...this only is reading, in a high sense, not that which lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we have to stand on tip-top to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.

And then this:

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book!

Yes, this is precisely what I’m talking about this morning. And it is in this spirit I’m implicitly – well, now explicitly – addressing a question for you to ponder at your leisure: What have been your touchstone words or passages or books? What such touchstones have even “dated a new era” in your life?

And though I’m mostly talking about words this morning, your touchstones don’t have to be words. Might instead be a piece of music or work of art, or might be a place in nature or a building, some architectural gem – anything which reminds you of who you are, or who we all are, of what life is about – anything which is one way or another a sort of measuring rod (touchstone) for our lives, something we can measure our own words and deeds against to see if they seem true to who we are or who we wish to be or to what we think life is all about, what we think life is for, what we think our particular life is for.

This said, mostly this morning I am talking about words as touchstones.

Now, one of the interesting things for me about this still-expanding collection of mine is that it originated not through some grand intention to assemble meaningful bits of wisdom, but rather organically over the course of decades.

Forty and fifty years ago, for example, I’d be reading...

Emerson: ...within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

or, again, Thoreau: Only that day dawns to which we are awake.

or Whitman: I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars....

or Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount": Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.... ask and you shall receive...

or the Hindu Upanishads: Perennial joy or passing pleasure?  
This is the choice one is to make always.

or, in more recent decades....

Rumi: *Lo, I am with you always* means when you look for God, God is in the look of your eyes...

or Mary Oliver: Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

or Denise Levertov: We have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life. So much is in bud.

And so many, many more... and a passage or a line like the ones I've just shared would simply and powerfully strike me so deeply that it would, without any particular effort on my part, stay with me, become part of the warp and weave of my life, my musings on the meaning of life, on what this mystery we call life might be all about.

Then came a question I eventually started pondering as this collection took shape was: Is this just a random collection of stuff I like? Or do the passages taken together suggest some threads of meaning?

Let me begin by asking you. You've now heard a few (just a few – I have over 10,000 words of touchstones so far...) of my touchstones. Do you discern any threads or even a single thread here?

Here's my first effort at naming threads:

Life includes suffering and sorrow, and life is short. But love is long. Be kind. Seek justice and peace.

The goal of life is not (or ought not to be) getting and spending, fame and fortune and power, but rather presence, wisdom, compassion.

We enter the “kingdom of heaven”... “nirvana”... with every kind word or helpful, healing deed.

Stay awake... pay attention...

We are individual manifestations of the divine/cosmos/universe.

And we can choose to journey toward wakefulness and awareness of this more fundamental identity through personal practice and selfless service... remaining unattached to the fruits and outcomes.

Our seemingly small deeds on behalf of goodness and right will ripple in ways we may never see or suspect, but our deeds and words do matter.

There is more to life than meets the eye.

And patience. As Jesus reminded us, don't worry too much. And as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote among his “Letters to a Young Poet” – words that I carried in my wallet for many years:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Well, all this is only a beginning of, to mix metaphors, discerning threads among the touchstones. Yes after all these years and with all these words, I've only begun to plumb the connections among my touchstones, not to mention the depths of meanings to be had in them... in the end beyond words, as we've said.

And good news: the journey continues as I continue my journey of living at the side of books – yes reading sometimes simply for entertainment (I don't take Thoreau too literally on that point), but most every morning also in Thoreau's high sense... for who knows when I may yet encounter some fresh, whether ancient or recent, book or passage or line, that will date yet another new era in my life... or perhaps find yet fresh meaning in something I've read a hundred times.

May you, too, continue on your journeys of exploration, perhaps guided by your touchstones of words... or of music or art or mountain or sea... whatever guides you, helps you, heals you, inspires you on your way.

So may it be.

**Benediction** from “Leaves of Grass” by Walt Whitman

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at last,  
In things best known to you finding the best or as good as the best,  
In folks nearest to you finding also the sweetest and  
strongest and lovingest,  
Happiness not in another place, but this place...  
not for another hour, but this hour.

So may it be.