

What Endures?
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
October 13, 2019

Reading

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?

² My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;

⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;

⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;

⁸ the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

Sermon

Whether in the midst of national chaos or personal challenges, what endures?
What can we count on? How do we keep on?

It occurs to me that breathing might be a place to start.

I now own a watch that reminds me when to breathe.

I know – who could be so busy that they need a reminder to breathe?

Well, it's not that I ever forget. But I do sometimes neglect to breathe easily,
fully, in a relaxed way. I tighten up unconsciously. Maybe sometimes you do, too.

So, if I'm wearing this watch, a few times a day it will invite me to breathe –
easily, fully, relaxed. If I hit the button for the instructions, a little turquoise flower
pictured on the tiny screen will slowly blossom as the watch gently vibrates and I take an
in-breath. Then I gently breathe out. This repeats six times.

And you know what? It helps. If I had been for any reason tense, I become less
so with each breath. If I was already relaxed, I am even more so with each breath. It is
very pleasant!

You know what else? In the midst of whatever chaos, personal or political, our
breath endures for as long as we have life. Sometimes illness may make our breathing
more difficult. But still we have our breath, and a little attention to our breath can bring

us to a more relaxed, more centered, more present state of mind and heart, more able to carry on.

All the contemplative traditions know this. Whether Zen meditation, yoga, or Christian contemplative prayer, we are often invited in these traditions to place attention on our breathing either as prelude to some further practice or as the practice itself.

Attention as we breathe in... attention as we breathe out...

Breath, *ruah* in Hebrew, *spiritus* in Latin. It was the word used for God breathing life into Adam in the Genesis story. From the very start, breath. So, spirit... breathing as a spiritual practice; mind-body-spirit is after all who we are.

And isn't it lovely that our breath endures and is a tool at the ready, whether in times of anxiety, fear, or suffering of just about any kind, or at any old time. Breath endures. Breath can help us slow down and be fully present, so that we, like our breath, might better be able to endure, to keep on. It is at least a start – seemingly simple yet sometimes really helpful.

Our Bodhisattva Study Group is reading a book by the Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein titled *Happiness is a Inside Job*. She writes of a practice that includes breathing that she uses when she is feeling overwhelmed, confused, or suffering in any way. She says to herself "Sweetheart, you are in pain. Relax. Take a breath. Let's pay attention to what is happening. Then we'll figure out what to do."

She reports that she actually does use the word "sweetheart" as a reminder to be gentle with herself, not to be too hard on herself. Which is itself pretty good advice, and may itself help to lead to figuring out what to do and in what spirit to do it.

Which leads me to something else that endures. If breathing endures for each of us in the midst of whatever is going on, if breathing can be used to calm ourselves, center ourselves, bring us more fully into the present moment, it seems to me that kindness can play much the same role as we move through the world of relationships and encounters – after all, we are all breathing the same air, exchanging molecules with one another and with other living beings. And kindness and the opportunities for kindness endure too. Kindness because we are kin, because we do indeed share the breath of life.

Here's a poem by Danusha Laméris titled "Small Kindnesses":

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead—you first," "I like your hat."

Well, in addition to the enduring nature of and importance of kindness, this poem also reminds me that the mundane endures, the ordinary. I don't know about you, but for me this can be a very steady reminder.

I subscribe to a weekly on-line newsletter called "The Attic." Recently Bruce Watso, who I know a little bit, reported on a road trip from Tuscon to Boston, with stops along the way, including, for example, in Toad Sucks, Arkansas (yes, a real town). As he travelled Bruce came to realize that the so-called "real America" is not Interstate America, is not Airport America, and is surely not Television America. Rather, it is the America of the mundane, the ordinary daily relationships and kindnesses (as in the poem we've just heard) we share most often without even knowing one another's political affiliations, religion, or occupation.

...these brief moments of exchange.

What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead—you first," "I like your hat."

And yes, such brief moments, the mundane yet terribly important connections and kindnesses of such moments, endure – not of course the particular moments themselves, but that there are such moments.

But what about in the midst of truly unspeakable disaster and tragedy? Well, kindness endures, is often even evoked by tragedy. Then kindness takes the form of helping, which also endures.

In his book *Autumn Light*, Pico Iyer tells of being with a group accompanying the Dalai Lama as he visited a village in Japan that had been devastated eight months earlier by the tsunami. Imagine the scene if you can. Still utter ruin. People sobbing, reaching out to His Holiness. They exchanged words, the Dalai Lama offered blessings. Eventually he said this to the group:

Please, be brave. Please, change your hearts. You cannot change what happened. Please help everyone else, help others become okay. Too many people died. If you worry, it cannot help them. Please, work hard. This is the best offering you can make to the ones you lost.

Pico Iyer then reports that as the Dalai Lama turned and walked away, towards a temple that still stood amid the rubble, the he took off his glasses and wiped away a tear.

You see it wasn't that he was immune to the suffering or that he was recommending that the villagers harden their hearts in order to carry on. Not at all. He was, as Iyer wrote, living the Buddhist teaching that because suffering is a fact of life, "it's what we do with it that defines our lives."

Then we have the Psalm we heard earlier this morning. The Psalmist, as we heard in Psalm 121, cried out in the midst of suffering. The way I read the Psalm, that's what the opening line is, a cry from the heart: I look to the hills.... where does my help come from?

The Psalm goes on, as we heard, to affirm that help comes from “the Lord.” This might leave many of us here with the question unanswered: For who or what is “the Lord”?

“Higher power” as twelve-step groups put it, higher power however you understand or experience it?

Perhaps an experience of the larger wholeness in which we live and move and have our being, an experience that may come when we drop the pretense, the illusion, that we are in this mystery we call life all alone and can manage all alone...

Or perhaps, as Stephen Mitchell’s interpretation of the Psalm has it, the wisdom within that will guide us through our troubles.

Perhaps, simply: community, family, friends, neighbors... kin.

In any case, I find that when I remind myself, as I often remind you, that most religious language is metaphor, the Psalm works, the Psalm offers solace and comfort... comfort which means “brings strength”... to carry on... now remembering that we are not and have never been alone.

Maybe, then, it’s all very simple. Breathe, be kind, hold hands, help out, don’t spend too much time (as the Dalai Lama suggested) wishing things were other than they are, and remember that we are part of something way bigger than our small selves... that holds us.

Love (of course) might be another word for much of this. Love, whose companion is compassion (which means “feeling with”)... compassion for ourselves as well as for others.

Some of you may recall a sermon I preached years ago titled “Life is Short – Love is Long.”

Love – the verb – manifest in our kind words and in deeds large and small. As we cast the bread of love upon the waters of life, having little clue as to how the ripples will play out, because we can’t know. But we can be sure they will play out, have their rippling influence.

I still remember vividly the kind words a church member I did not know spoke to me, a nine-year-old, as we left my grandfather’s funeral service.

I have carried in my heart for decades words of encouragement from a professor during a difficult year in seminary on the edge of depression.

I could go on. So, I expect could you. Naming the ripples of kind words and gestures that changed our days or changed our lives. Reassuring us that our words and deeds – in our personal lives and also in our political lives as we speak up and speak out – likewise ripple, endure, as we play our part in weaving and re-weaving the fabric of community, civil society in these tumultuous times, each ordinary day, each ordinary encounter.

What endures? Yes, pretty simple: Family, friends, community, kindness, love, and the helping hands and encouraging words that grow from love.

But only if we nourish and nurture these qualities every day, with every proverbial breath we take.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.