

**“Lift Every Voice”**  
Rev. Ken Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
May 2, 2021

**Readings**

*A Small Needful Fact*, by Ross Gay

Is that Eric Garner worked  
for some time for the Parks and Rec.  
Horticultural Department, which means,  
perhaps, that with his very large hands,  
perhaps, in all likelihood,  
he put gently into the earth  
some plants which, most likely,  
some of them, in all likelihood,  
continue to grow, continue  
to do what such plants do, like house  
and feed small and necessary creatures,  
like being pleasant to touch and smell,  
like converting sunlight  
into food, like making it easier  
for us to breathe.

*Ars Poetica #100 – I Believe*, by Elizabeth Alexander

Poetry, I tell my students,  
is idiosyncratic. Poetry  
  
is where we are ourselves  
(though Sterling Brown said  
  
“Every ‘I’ is a dramatic ‘I’”),  
digging in the clam flats  
  
for the shell that snaps,  
emptying the proverbial pocketbook.  
  
Poetry is what you find  
in the dirt in the corner,  
  
overhear on the bus, God  
in the details, the only way  
  
to get from here to there.  
Poetry (and now my voice is rising)

is not all love, love, love,  
and I'm sorry the dog died.

Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)  
is the human voice,

and are we not of interest to each other?

## SERMON

We heard Elizabeth Alexander affirm that:

Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)  
is the human voice,

and are we not of interest to each other?

“Are we not of interest to each other?” I love that line. Particularly arriving in our ears as it does after we have also heard that:

Poetry is what you find  
in the dirt in the corner,

overhear on the bus, God  
in the details...

“Are we not of interest to each other?”

Which opens the door to other poems, such as the one we heard earlier from Ross Gay drawing our attention to the life... as well as the death, the killing, of Eric Garner. For we learn not only about his horrific death at the hands of police, but of his life and “A Small Needful Fact” about his life, that he once worked for the Parks and Rec. Horticultural Department... so we are invited to hold Eric Garner in our hearts not only or even primarily as he lay on the ground straining for breath, but, perhaps, planting as so many of us do at this time of year. A fellow human being being human.

Are we not of interest to each other?

I've been reading dozens and dozens of poems by Black American poets spanning “250 Years of Struggle and Song” (which is the subtitle of the new anthology of *African American Poetry*, edited by poet and scholar Kevin Young). It is the book from which Elizabeth Torrey and I will be drawing for this year's spring poetry class, “Lift Every Voice.”

The poems are filled to overflowing with every dimension of Black life in America: enslavement, Jim Crow, lynching, police killing, prisons, blues and jazz, meals and celebrations... sorrow, fear, love, joy, hope...

Some of it is brutally graphic. Some is deeply poignant. Some is exuberantly joyous. All of it is filled with life, Black life to be sure, but this means American life.

And reading these poems has brought home freshly to me how poetry speaks from and to the heart more than most prose of whatever kind – history, fiction, essays. Though goodness, we do need all of this.

I know I need it all as a white man in our nation with all the unearned privilege that this represents. So, during this year of renewed rising for racial justice, all the reading I've been doing has been immensely valuable, often illuminating, eye-opening. Yet the unique role of poetry in all of this reading is to be heart-opening.

There are indeed things poetry can say or has ways of saying that prose cannot.

The white poet, Robert Frost, was once asked about the meaning of one of his poems, and his response was something like this: If I could tell you the meaning of the poem, I wouldn't have had to write the poem.

Exactly.

Another way of putting it is that if we are indeed of interest to each other, then we ought to use whatever forms and ways we have to deeply listen to each other, understand each other as well as one can without being inside another's skin.

In his talk for us at Old Ship this past week, Prof. Ashok Gangadean was asked by one of you how we can move – individually and as a society, as humans – from polarization, us and them, separate and opposed to one another, toward unity, a “more perfect union”. The first step, he said, is really listening, stepping back and allowing the other person's reality and perspective to be what it is, so that we become more likely to be able to enter into genuine dialogue with one another, rather than just talking at one another.

Ashok said this applies to everything from a marriage or any personal relationship to the world of political parties and nations. Further, has to do with the essential maturation of the human species, as he puts it – the “awakening of the global mind.”

Isn't it the case that all too often we unconsciously contribute to polarization and separation, to begin with simply and sadly by labelling instead of listening, labelling other people, other parties, other ethnic groups, and so on, as if the label is all they are – we even label other beings, other forms of life in the natural world, as if the label captures all their complexity.

In that regard, the American Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron tells the story of two Tibetan Buddhist teachers, Trungpa Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, sitting together outdoors...

...simply happy to be there with each other. Then Khyentse Rinpoche pointed and said, “They call that a ‘tree’” and both of them roared with laughter.

As Pema Chodron went on to reflect:

The two enlightened teachers thought it was a riot that this complex, changing phenomenon, with all its leaves and bark and fragrance, could be thought of merely as a “tree.”

She could of course have gone on to name not only the beautiful complexity of that tree, of any tree, but of all the ways in which the life of the so-called tree is interwoven with our own, breathing out so that we can breathe in, offering shade, and so much more not only for us who are human, but interwoven with all life.

Would we be facing the climate crisis as we are if we had learned a long time ago to consciously and appreciatively breathe together with the so-called trees – rather than seeing them simply for the wood that builds our houses and fuels our fires?

Well, as I've said, we do this sort of labelling and categorizing with people all the time, labeling someone a Republican or Democrat, conservative or progressive, Black or white... as if such categories tell the whole story of who we each are, or even much of the story whatsoever.

Rather, then... whether it's through poetry or simply listening to each other, hearing another's story, we must, we must learn to enter more fully into the wholeness and fullness of one another's lives. Our lives do depend on it, the flourishing of life depends on it. Yes, we are different from one another, each unique – but no label captures that; listening can.

And it can start pretty close to home.

Some of you may remember that a few years ago, when we had first hung our Black Lives Matter banner, a neighbor showed up and stood at the foot of the Meeting House driveway each Sunday morning for several weeks holding a sign that read "All Lives Matter."

Well, eventually one of you had the wisdom and kindness to invite him to our fellowship hour. Over coffee many of us got to know him a little bit as a human being, not just as someone with a sign and a contrary opinion.

Are we not of interest to each other?

Whether through personal connection or poetry or prose, not only *can* we listen to one another (Jesus said the kingdom is spread before us if we have eyes to see and ears to hear – maybe he meant to see and hear one another to begin with), to listen and thereby enter into deeper relationship with one another... not only *can* we, we *must* – at least if we ourselves are interested in growing into greater wholeness, fullness of life. For it seems to me that we, individually, are not whole and healed unless we are contributing to and part of the wholeness and healing of others, indeed of the fabric of our shared lives – contributing first simply by listening and learning.

In another of Elizabeth Alexander's poems, *Praise Song for the Day*, given at the first inauguration of Barack Obama, she begins:

Each day we go about our business,  
walking past each other, catching each other's  
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is  
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each  
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

She goes on to imagine the variety and diversity of our lives as we go about our days, alluding along the way to histories of struggle and hardship and suffering. Then she concludes with these lines:

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.  
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,  
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,  
*others by first do no harm or take no more*  
*than you need*. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
love that casts a widening pool of light,  
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,  
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.  
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

May we, then, be among those who are walking, rolling, moving one way or another in the shining beautiful light of one another's lives, listening one another into fuller life – because we are of interest to each other, can and must be ever more present with and for one another, as well as for every tree and flower, bird and beast, awakening ever more into the beloved unpolarized community of love.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.