

Can We Have Our Lives Back Now?

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Readings

A Sikh *shabad* (devotional poem): from the Sikh scriptures attributed to Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion; he lived from 1469 – 1539: “I See No Stranger, I See No Enemy”

I have forgotten my envy of others
since I found my sacred company.
I see no enemy. I see no stranger. All of us belong to each other.
What the divine does, I accept as good. I have received this wisdom from the
holy.
The One pervades all. Gazing upon the One, beholding the One, Nanak blossoms
forth in happiness.

from *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, by Valarie Kaur

In the face of horrors visited upon our world daily, in the struggle to protect our loved ones, choosing to let in joy is a revolutionary act. Joy returns to us everything good and beautiful and worth fighting for. It gives us energy for the long labor...

Joy is the gift of love: It makes the labor an end in itself. I believe laboring in joy is the meaning of life. May we look up at the night sky. May we let joy in. For we will be somebody's ancestors one day. If we do this right, they will inherit not our fear but bravery born of joy.

Sermon

The short answer is “no.” If by “have our lives back” we mean to have our lives back the way they were a year and a half ago.

After all, even in the best of times, life is always changing... and this has not been the best of times.

In his poem “The Way,” the 20th century Scottish poet Edwin Muir offers a longer version of the same message:

Friend, I have lost the way.
The way leads on.
Is there another way?
The way is one.
I must retrace the track.

It's lost and gone.
Back, I must travel back!
None goes there, none.
Then I'll make here my place,
(The road leads on),
Stand still and set my face,
(The road leaps on),
Stay here, for ever stay.
None stays here, none.
I cannot find the way.
The way leads on.
Oh places I have passed!
That journey's done.
And what will come at last?
The road leads on.

Of course one thing we mean when we say we want our lives back is that we would like to once again go about our daily lives not having to worry about the virus. I'm all for that. In particular, we want to be able to freely be with family and friends without that worry. I'm really all for that! And church here with you in the pews – I'm all for that! Along with the simple comfort of daily life with few immediate worries, I do like that.

And it does seem as though that day is approaching, at least here in the United States for those of us of privilege.

But there are plenty of other things in my life and in the life we share that I do not want to go back to, even if we could.

To begin with: I feel as though my sense of the life we share has become enlarged this year; and I would not want to go back to a smaller sense of life.

For example. Right now I've got several books going:

For our Old Ship poetry class I'm immersed in *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle and Song* (ed. by Kevin Young). And with some colleagues I'm reading *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619-2019* (ed. Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain).

And I'm reading the book from which we heard earlier, Valarie Kaur's *See No Stranger*, a memoir and call to action rooted in her life as a Sikh woman in our country. She shares the beauties of her tradition and also shares the harsh realities of prejudice against Sikhs, more virulent than ever after 9/11, when turban became equated with terrorist in the eyes of all too many.

And *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, a poignant and powerful memoir by Cathy Park Hong.

Finally, I'm reading *Send a Runner*, by the Navaho runner Edison Keets, who in 2018 ran 330 miles in fifteen days (that's about a marathon each day) to honor the 150th anniversary of the

Long Walk, the forced removal of the Dine (Navaho) people to a military reservation. (An event about which I shamefully knew nothing.)

This just a portion of the sort of reading I've been doing during this year of pandemic. A year which has brought more starkly in view the inequities in our nation and more clearly in view the strands of racist, anti-immigrant, nativist, and white supremacist threads that are woven tightly into our history, yet so often ignored in mainstream (in other words white) triumphalist narratives of that history.

Not that I wasn't aware of any of this – but I haven't been as deeply aware as I ought to be and want to be. So my experience of the world is larger than it was, and that is a good thing.

I know many of you have been similarly enlarging your view of our nation's history and culture and current life. And, among other things, I hope you have been finding, as I have, that this enlarged view is not all about sorrow and pain, but is also about resilience and courage and hope and, as we heard from Valarie Kaur, joy – within all the marginalized communities that compose our nation and in every heart and soul, regardless of color or background, who seeks a better way, who strives to write a better story into our shared future. As the way leads on.

Here's another way in which I would not want my life, our life, back as it was.

Do you remember how clear the atmosphere was at this time last year, day after day after day? Do you remember the photos of Beijing and New Delhi and cities around the world without the haze of soot and smog? All because we humans were driving almost not at all, and because industry had slowed its pace.

It was a vision of how the world could be, indeed must be if we are to make a life of flourishing for the next generations.

We have, not surprisingly, already backtracked. Seems like even just here in Hingham there are more cars on the road than ever.

But I heard just the other day that airlines expect business travel to remain down by at least 20% into the foreseeable future; and we know that fewer people will be commuting in their cars every day.

Our nation has re-entered the Paris climate agreement – I surely don't want to go back to the time we had withdrawn.

Our town of Hingham just last week passed (overwhelmingly!) a Town Meeting warrant article creating a committee to design a Climate Action Plan to get our town to net-zero emissions by 2040. I surely don't want to go back to a time when that article would surely have been hotly contested leading quite possibly, if not likely, to a failed vote.

Are there plenty of things in the world and in our nation to be concerned about, even depressed about? Too much suffering, too much violence... polarization to the nth degree. Do I worry about the world we are leaving to our grandchildren, worry about what their lives will be like long after we're gone? You bet.

But there are harbingers and more than harbingers of hope. The books I've mentioned, along with many others, are books that are honest about our past and present lives. Yet they are also filled with hope, filled with the spirit of resilience, the spirit that knows "the way leads on."

They are also informed, implicitly or explicitly, by the knowledge rooted in all the wisdom traditions of humanity that our lives are deeply interwoven... as I preach each week.

As you know, I've studied the scriptures of many of the world's spiritual and religious traditions for my entire adult life. Yet one more way that my experience of the world has been enlarged this year is through my brand new acquaintance with the scriptures of the Sikh religion, from which we heard earlier.

When Susan and I travelled to India forty or so years ago, all we knew about the Sikhs is that most of the little three-wheeled cabs on the streets of New Delhi were driven by Sikh men, identifiable of course by their turbans. Why I was not more curious about their religion, I cannot say or excuse.

Now, though, all these years later, through this book by the young American Sikh woman Valarie Kaur – from a family that has lived in California's Central Valley for over 100 years – my eyes have been opened. If only by the title of her book, *See No Stranger*, which as you heard comes directly from Sikh scriptures, filled as they are with teachings of the oneness of all people, all life, the "One that pervades all."

Now I want to learn more, want to enlarge my experience of life yet further. No going back to a smaller life.

What else don't I know?

Goodness, simply learning more about hummingbirds this past week as they returned to our feeder after their yet again wondrous journey of thousands of miles, twenty-three miles a day (almost a marathon each day!)... enlarges my world.

What else don't I know?

So, as we gather today for our First Parish Old Ship Annual Meeting, let us do so not only to reflect on the year just past here at Old Ship, but with resolve to continue our journey forward in the year to come, a journey of educating our minds and hearts to the fullness of life, human life and all life interwoven in all its beautiful diversity and resilience, a journey with resolve to teach and preach justice rooted in the eternal message of interdependence, rooted in love... resolved to "see no stranger... see no enemy"... resolved to be more present each moment, each day, to each person... as the way leads on.

Because I don't know about you, but in the course of this year I have somehow come to feel more deeply than ever how much I treasure the beauty of a day and how much I love each dear one in my life – I do not want to go back to anything less...

Blessed be. Amen.