

**Poetry for Our Lives**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
April 3, 2022

**Readings**

"The Place Where We Are Right" by Yehuda Amichai:

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.

The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.

"Imagine" by John Lennon

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us, only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Livin' for today

Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion, too  
Imagine all the people  
Livin' life in peace

You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world

You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one

“For the Children” by Gary Snyder

The rising hills, the slopes,  
of statistics  
lie before us,  
the steep climb  
of everything, going up,  
up, as we all  
go down.

In the next century  
or the one beyond that,  
they say,  
are valleys, pastures,  
we can meet there in peace  
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests  
one word to you, to  
you and your children:

*stay together*  
*learn the flowers*  
*go light*

## Sermon

I begin with a poem by Billy Collins, titled “Introduction to Poetry”:

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

In our poetry classes over the years here at Old Ship, Elizabeth and I do not encourage tying poems to chairs to torture the meaning out of them. We prefer, with Billy Collins, to invite holding a poem to the light, walking inside it, letting the poem speak to us in whatever way we hear it.

This is certainly the way I read poetry. And this is why certain poems or just a line or two from a poem stay with me: as poetry for my life. Not just decoration (though there’s nothing wrong with a beautiful turn of phrase giving delight). But the poems and lines that stay with me go deeper than the beautiful turn of phrase.

And they stay with me with particular power and often solace during hard times, whether personal or global.

So this morning I’d like to share some of these lines and short poems – perhaps one or two will stay with you – or perhaps may already be with you in the midst of your own journeys through poetry and through life.

For I hope that this will also serve as an invitation during these challenging, worrisome, even fearful times, to return to poetry for solace and guidance. Poetry for our lives.

If you’ve been listening to me for years, you will not be surprised that I begin with Walt Whitman, and these lines you’ve heard from me before:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then.  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;  
I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by God's name...  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually come forever and ever.

Why do these lines stay with me, have stayed with me since I first read them fifty or so years ago? Not because they somehow serve as a proof of "God," because they do not. Rather, for me they affirm that whatever meaning, ultimate or otherwise, we are going to find in this life, it will be found in each moment, in the look of each other's eyes – these days certainly including in the eyes of Ukrainian children.

So these lines, like so much of the early Whitman, are a sort of wake-up call, a splash of fresh water to rinse the sleep out of our eyes so that we can see and feel the sacred in the midst of the so-called ordinary.

But Walt didn't end his career as a poet with only exuberant lines such as those. During his years of offering succor to the wounded in Civil War hospitals he wrote this ("Reconciliation"):

Word over all, beautiful as the sky!  
Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be utterly lost;  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly, softly wash  
again, and ever again, this soiled world.  
For my enemy is dead--a man divine as myself is dead.  
I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin--I draw near;  
I bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

It is, you see, the universalism, the inclusiveness of Whitman's vision in the midst of our lives of joy *and* woe woven fine (as another poet, William Blake put it) that keeps me returning to Whitman's poetry.

Whitman's contemporary, Emily Dickinson, conveyed a similar universalist spirit, though through very different poetic form:

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –  
  
Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –  
  
Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

It is the image in the final lines that stays with me – Emily spreading her hands to “gather Paradise.” Here and now, wherever we are. And she, too, expressed the universal experience of sorrow as well as joy and everything in between.

For example:

They say that “Time assuages.” –  
Time never did assuage –  
An actual suffering strengthens  
As sinews do, with Age –

Time is a Test of Trouble –  
But not a Remedy -  
If such it prove, it prove too  
There was no Malady –

Well, moving forward in time by a century... there is much that I could share from Robert Frost that stays with me – including his two most often quoted poems, “Stopping by Woods” and “The Road Not Taken.” But today I’m thinking of his poem “Birches,” which begins with his evocative description of a boy climbing a birch to the top and swinging down, all of it leading to the wonderful last line: “One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.”

Hard for me to articulate why that line sticks with me – but I think it has something to do with living a little wildly or differently from the usual down-to-earth ways the culture expects... perhaps this related to taking the road less traveled, but with more spirit. Yes, about the spirit of living.

Maybe not all that different from Mary Oliver’s oft-quoted line at the end of her poem “The Summer Day,” following her description of carefully observing a grasshopper while laying in the grass, then this

I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Yes, and again yes, to the power and importance of attention. Whether it is the invitation of Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, or Mary Oliver calling us to attention. And doesn’t everything flow from attention, genuine attentiveness to one another, to the moment, to the beauty of a summer’s day... or to the suffering of another human being, whether our neighbor down the street or our neighbor in Ukraine or Afghanistan or wherever.

And doesn’t attention as a touchstone for how we live “one wild and precious life” lead beyond attention to what we choose to do in the midst of the beauty and suffering around us?

Our poets are helpful in this regard as well. Not only calling us to attention, but imploring us to action, or at least to the spirit with which we should act.

We heard Gary Snyder's recommendation in the reading:

*stay together  
learn the flowers  
go light*

Elsewhere Snyder wrote this: ("Steady, They Say):

Clambering up the rocks of a dry wash gully,  
Warped sandstone, by the San Juan River,

look north to stony mountains  
shifting clouds and sun

– despair at how the human world goes down

Consult my old advisers

"steady," they say

"today"

Who are these "old advisers" the poet consults? Well, we had some very interesting conversation about that in our Gary Snyder class a few years ago. The advisers? Perhaps the mountains to begin with, but also one suspects, for Snyder the Buddhist, the old spiritual masters. And, I would add, how about the poets?

And "steady" does not, cannot, mean inactive. I read it as something like this: stay balanced in the midst of doing what needs to be done (as you have to stay balanced "clambering up the rocks") – so, act wisely as best you can, and don't give in to despair.

Further, with our National Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo:

Be kind to all you meet along the way...  
Don't forget: hold somebody's hand through the dark...  
*(from "Going Home")*

And maybe dancing, this poet also suggests, so that:

After dancing all night in a circle we realize that we are a part of a  
larger sense of stars and planets dancing with us overhead...  
...So that we all remember, the sacredness of life.  
*(from "Talking with the Sun")*

Remembering, too, with the poet we heard earlier, Yehuda Amichai, that peace in this sacred life we share may more likely come not from "the place where we are right" – you know, holier than thou and all that, judging with no budging from our views, where "flowers will never grow / In the spring".... but rather from a place open to love and doubts, you know, Sufi poet Rumi's field beyond rightdoing and wrongdoing.

Finally, then, this also from Joy Harjo – prose, not a poem, but from a poet:

Everyone comes into the world with a job to do – I don't mean working for a company, a corporation – we all were given gifts to share, even the animals, even the plants, minerals, clouds... all beings.

So... “poetry for our lives”: Maybe poets are not among everyone's “old advisers,” but they are among mine, and maybe some of yours too. Bringing condensed wisdom, poetry managing to engage both heart and mind in ways that can awaken us to the preciousness of life, the sacredness of every being... and then moving us to contribute our unique, one of a kind, gifts, whatever our “job” in the world might be as we “stay together” and seek, in the spirit of Whitman and of another of Joy Harjo poem, to make of our enemies friends.

“Imagine” the possibility. That, after all, is where to start. Even or especially in these most worrisome of times.

Imagine the possibility.

Then as best we can, steadily live towards the possibility.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.