

Touchstones

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Unitarian Universalist
May 1, 2022

Call to Worship

From “Santos: New Mexico” by the Unitarian Universalist poet 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.

Words for 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

from Matthew chapter 6

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?

from *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau,

from the chapter “Where I Lived and What I Lived For”

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

What is a touchstone?

Well, for the last several years many of you have heard me use the word to describe those passages and quotes, from whatever source, ancient or modern, that I have found myself returning to over and over again. 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 in my ministry.

More technically, the word “touchstone” is a dark-colored stone of some sort (fieldstone, slate, etc.) used to test the purity of a precious metal such as gold or silver. Metaphorically, Wikipedia tells us that a touchstone “refers to any physical or intellectual measure by which the validity or merit of a concept can be tested.”

If we follow the metaphor, the touchstone is not itself the precious metal... or concept. So when it comes not to geology but to life, I suppose the “precious metal” is the truth, truth which may often be beyond words. For, as one 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: In this morning’s reading from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, we heard one of my touchstone passage, lines no doubt familiar to many of you, from his chapter “Where I Lived and What I Lived For.” 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...

It seems to me that Thoreau was saying that his two years by Walden Pond were themselves intended to be a touchstone for his living, a place and a time to test, so to speak, the meaning of life.

My father, a surgeon, once told me that he considered the operating room to have been his Walden Pond. For me it has been here, in this Meeting House, in the Parish House, among you, the Old Ship congregation. Quite a different setting from Thoreau’s cabin by the side of Walden Pond, a cabin that had, as Thoreau wrote, one chair for solitude, two for company, and three for society.

(Yet... by the way, in spite of his reputation, and though Henry appreciated and needed solitude, he was also a quite social guy – even during his two years at Walden often walking into town, dinner back home or with the Emersons; and he was known for leading huckleberry expeditions and was part of skating parties – he loved skating!. And his daily walks were frequently with another, often his good friend Ellery Channing.)

But back to that quote: It seems to me that this is a particularly good example of a touchstone passage. Here’s why: Thoreau was writing 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. At the same time, 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. A little over 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, many of them purporting to hold life wisdom, books and passages within books – touchstones – that I’ve measured against my own experience. Thoreau did this too, not only during those two years by Walden Pond; for throughout his life he was a voracious reader. 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.” He went on:

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!

This is precisely what I’m talking about this morning. For me... but also as an invitation to you to consider what your touchstones are and have been – and they might not be words only, could also be a piece of music or a work of visual art – some of which may even have “dated a new era” in your life.

Further, for us at Old Ship, I’m wondering if there are touchstone ideas, principles that we share, that have guided us and will guide Old Ship into the next era of Old Ship life. I’ll get to that later

But first... all this said, here are just a few more tastes of my pages and pages of touchstone texts, gathered over the decades not through some grand ambition to create a library of wisdom, but organically as passages or quotes came to me and have stayed with me:

Emerson: ...within (us) 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 from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount”: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. And: Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

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

Or the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*: 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.

Or the Buddhist *Dhammapada*: 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.

Or the Sufi poet Rumi: Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there. And this: I go into the Muslim mosque and the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church and I see *one* altar.

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... lines such as these that have become part of the warp and weave of my life, informing my musings, many of which I've shared with you over the years, on what this mystery we call life might be all about.

And over time I have come to realize that my collection of touchstones is not just a random collection of stuff I like. There are threads of meaning. Threads that I believe stand the test even of the times in which we are now living, with democracy threatened at home and abroad, with the ongoing brutality and cruelty of war, the crisis of climate, and more.

So, here are some threads I've discerned from my touchstones that I find to be if anything more important than ever in times such as these. I don't believe they are trivial affirmations or wishful thinking, but, rather, are bits of essential wisdom gleaned from souls wiser than I. But here, in my own words some of the threads:

First, as best we can stay awake... and pay attention...

And notice, among other things, that though we might wish it otherwise, life includes not only beauty and wonder, but also suffering and sorrow, including too often meanness and what can only be called evil... *and* at the same time notice life is short... but love is long! So: Be kind – it really matters... and spreads. Seek justice and peace – that really matters too.

And good news: I would affirm that we enter the “kingdom of heaven”... “nirvana”... with every kind word or helpful, healing deed.

The goal of a truly meaningful life is not getting and spending, fame and fortune and power, but rather presence, wisdom, compassion.

And we are able to manifest such qualities because we are, you see, individual manifestations of the whole, of cosmos, of universe, of the divine.

More good news: We can choose to journey toward wakefulness and awareness of this fundamental identity. There are well-worn paths which we can make our own, through personal practice and selfless service... by remaining unattached to the fruits and outcomes... with faith that our seemingly small deeds on behalf of goodness and right do matter and will indeed ripple in ways we may never see or suspect.

Finally (for now), lest much of this feel out of reach... there is deep virtue in patience. This means, among other things, that there is no need to worry too much about things we cannot

control. As Rainer Maria Rilke wrote among his “Letters to a Young Poet” – touchstone 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.

Good advice, it seems to me, for each of us. Perhaps for our beloved Old Ship congregation as well, navigating many transitional waters.

In any case, all this is only a beginning of, to mix metaphors, discerning threads among my touchstones.

And surely if any of these affirmations are shared among us at Old Ship, and might help carry Old Ship into the future, it seems to me that these are: The call to wake up to beauty, kindness, and love; the call to wake up to our common humanity; all of this leading to the call to do what we can in the direction of peace, of justice, and of living sustainably on our Earth home.

Well... my journey with texts ancient and modern, my journey of conversation about things that matter... so that we might better lead lives that matter... will continue... as does yours, each of you and all of you together in this rich and wonderful Old Ship Unitarian Universalist community of kindness and love... a community of faith that does and will continue to make a difference on behalf of the flourishing of all life in this world of joy and woe woven fine.

So may it long 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.