

Looking Ahead
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
May 29, 2022

Readings

“Without Hate”
from the Buddhist tradition

May every creature abound in well-being and peace.

May every living being, weak or strong, the long and the small, the short and the medium-sized, the mean and the great,

May every living being, seen or unseen, those dwelling far off, those living near by, those already born those waiting to be born,

May all attain inward peace.

Let no one deceive another. Let no one despise another in any situation.
Let no one, from antipathy or hatred, wish evil to anyone at all.

Just as a mother, with her own life, protects her only child from hurt, so within yourself foster a limitless concern for every living creature.

Display a heart of boundless love for all the world in all its height and depth and broad extent, love unrestrained, without hate or enmity.

Then, as you stand or walk, sit or lie, until overcome by drowsiness, devote your mind entirely to this: It is known as living the life divine.

“We lift up our hearts in thanks”
by Rev. Richard Fewkes

For the sun and the dawn, which we did not create;
for the moon and the evening, which we did not make;
for food which we plant but cannot grow;
for friends and loved ones we have not earned and cannot buy;
for this gathered company, which welcomes us as we are from wherever we have come;
for all our free churches that keep us human and encourage us in our quest for beauty, truth, and love;
for all things which come to us as gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves, gifts of life and love and friendship:
we lift up our hearts in thanks this day.

Sermon

As I begin this sermon titled “Looking Ahead” I have in mind the wisdom of Yogi Berra, who said, “It’s tough to make predictions. Especially about the future.”

So, I’m not going to try to predict the future of Old Ship. Instead, I plan to offer some thoughts that might be helpful as we all look ahead to the future here at Old Ship... in the context of these turbulent and challenging times... including of course most recently yet another terrible beyond imagining shooting in a school – nineteen beautiful children murdered, two wonderful teachers... and as we observe politicians who are unwilling to do what must, what must be done to change our gun laws to make us all safer... most especially our children.

For the future of Old Ship will be in the context of this and whatever else is going on in the wider world for good or ill.

With this in mind, it seems to me that as a general guide to whatever the future holds, we could do worse than to heed the spirit of the words we sometimes speak as our call to worship, words attributed to the ancient Hindu poet Kalidasa, which conclude:

...yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
But today well-lived, makes
Yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day.

It seems to me that we must – whether as individuals or as a congregation – look well to *this* day, each day, if we expect tomorrow to have a chance of being a vision of hope: hope for the flourishing of our own lives and the lives of our families, hope for the flourishing of our congregation.

And since do not live in isolation from the wider world, these hopes for our personal and congregational lives are nested in and must be related to hopes for the flourishing of our democracy, which must include hope for securing voting rights, reproductive rights, and of course the safety of our children and communities from the violence of guns...; further, hopes for our personal, congregational, and national lives must include hope for the flourishing of all life on the planet, which must include hope for climate justice and for peace.

It is a lot! But, then, we are part of a larger community of Unitarian Universalists along with the huge community of people seeking to heal the world. We are not alone with such hopes or with this work.

So all we have to do is... what *we* can do with the gifts that are *ours* to give. One day at a time: look well to *this* day.

If we do, then the lives of our generation’s grandchildren and theirs will more likely be lived in a more just and peaceful and kinder world.

All this said thus far, when it comes to our congregation – how might *we/you* live the life of our Old Ship Church each day so that we can look ahead with the sort of vision and hopes I’ve suggested thus far?

Well, to begin with, it seems to me we could surely do worse than to live life in our church each day by striving to do so in the spirit of the reading from the Buddhist tradition we heard earlier, the reading from the *metta sutta*, the sutra on compassion.

My own compressed version of the sutra goes something like this: “May all beings be well, may all beings be happy, may all beings be at ease, may all beings be at peace.”

Then we can bring to mind particular beings – people to begin with: family members, friends, parishioners – who may, as it is sometimes put in the Christian tradition, be standing in the need of prayer.

You see... if the spirit of such words were to continue to infuse the life of this Old Ship congregation, and to do so ever more deeply, your mutual caring for one another will grow ever deeper, your bonds of community will become stronger, and your reaching out to serve others will become ever more effective.

This is already a congregation of rich mutual caring ... but in the midst of busyness and much that needs to be done, particularly during this time of many transitions, the spirit of caring will need tending. So I invite you to keep the vision of a community of care before you, using whatever words work for you to inspire this vision and to make more likely daily acts within a community of mutual care. Making the call, sending the email, cooking the casserole for someone who is ill or in crisis... or just because.

Further, though this is already a congregation filled with caring for the wider world, if the spirit of such words as the *metta sutta* were to continue to infuse the life of this Old Ship congregation... wouldn't it help to sustain this work for social justice – anti-racism, dismantling white supremacy, widening the circle of concern and welcome, climate justice, safety from gun violence, and much else – sustain it all for the long haul? The long haul. Which is a very good thing, since the promised land of the beloved community, including most broadly more sustainable and just ways of living on our Earth home, does not appear to be just around the corner. Even so, in words attributed to the great-souled one, Gandhi, we can all strive to be the change we wish to see.

But all this sort of thing (which thus far has to do with our Old Ship ministries of “Nurturing Community” and “Serving Others”) begins a step back, doesn't it, with the first of our five Old Ship ministries, “Nourishing the Spirit.” And my hope and vision for Old Ship's future is grounded there, just as my entire ministry among you has been grounded there: In nourishing the spirit, whether in worship, meditation groups, classes (our ministry of “Educating Our Minds and Hearts”), conversations (you know the sort of conversations I'm talking about)... all of which one way or another remind us of who we truly are. Use whatever language you like. You've heard my words for this many times. Who are we? Individual manifestations of the whole, of cosmos, of the divine, the interdependent web of life... and of love.

So my vision and hope for Old Ship includes your continuing to ground all that you are and all that you do in this recognition and experience of who we are as human beings: not individual egos out to get our little piece of the pie, but beings woven into the fabric of all life, held by the fabric and spirit of life and of love.

As for things like growing in numbers, attracting young families with kids, becoming more financially secure (our ministry of “Stewarding Our Resources”)... all of which I do hope for you as we look ahead... well, I go back to the line from the film “Field of Dreams”: If you build it, they will come.

And I'm not talking about building a new Parish House, which you will do and I'm sure will do beautifully and net-zero to boot.

No, I'm talking about building (or more accurately continuing to build on the foundation you already have) a congregation that nourishes the spirit of each person who walks through the door. I'm talking about a congregation committed to educating mind and heart. I'm talking about a congregation filled with mutual care and with care and commitment to healing and

helping in the wider world, seeking together to bring more peace and justice to our nation and the world.

If you continue to build on this foundation, working closely with and supporting your interim minister and then your new settled minister... people will come. Why? Because more than ever, we human beings need to nourish our spirits, need communities of care, need to be of use in our lives, in a world which needs the gifts of each one of us. And, our Old Ship Church is, and may it always be, a community that can meet these needs, these yearnings of the soul.

Finally, I want to add a word about the place of gratitude in all this, in the spirit of that beautiful second reading penned by my good friend Dick Fewkes (who, as many of you will recall, has preached here on several occasions).

Simply put, gratitude is good for the soul and enlivening for the spirit.

It can be all too easy in our lives – including in our congregations – to focus only on the problems and challenges, to focus on the to-do list – to the neglect of naming and taking moments to appreciate all that is right with our lives, all that is right with our congregation. Which actually is another way of nurturing the spirit. So – when it comes to our Old Ship congregation, however imperfect we have been and are and always will be, it can only be to the good to name our gratitude for the gifts that are ours: gratitude for all who have come before so that we, too, could be here... gratitude for this beautiful Meeting House, home for our spirits... gratitude for our Unitarian Universalist tradition, our free faith which inspires and guides us and opens our minds and hearts to wisdom and truth from whatever source... and above all gratitude for each person who enters these doors or logs-in to these screens, each person with unique gifts to give to our community of love and faith, unique gifts with which to serve others as we seek to heal and help this troubled world in whatever ways we can.

Yes, let us be grateful and frequently name our gratitude. It is indeed good for the soul, enlivening to the spirit.

And then, together, in the spirit of all that I've shared, to look to this day, remembering that:

...today well-lived, makes
Yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day.

So may it always be.