

“Worth the While”
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Tao Te Ching, chapter 11
translated by Ursula LeGuin

Thirty spokes
meet in the hub.
Where the wheel isn't
is where it's useful.

Hollowed out,
clay makes a pot.
Where the pot's not
is where it's useful.

Cut doors and windows
to make a room.
Where the room isn't,
there's room for you.

So the profit in what is
is in the use of what isn't.

“To Be of Use” by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Sermon

You will eventually as I go on hear echoes of this thought of E.B. White's:

I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

The phrase "worth the while" that has given me my sermon title comes from the writing of good old Henry David Thoreau. But I hadn't paid particular notice to this phrase until recently reading an essay by Thoreau scholar Geoff Wisner in a collection titled *Now Comes Good Sailing: Writers Reflect on Henry David Thoreau*.

Wisner shares occurrences of this phrase "worth the while" in *Walden* as well as in the journal that Thoreau kept for most of his adult life. And Wisner notes, importantly, that the "ideas, projects, or experiences" that Thoreau deems to be "worth the while"... "are the things whose value measure up to the amount of life they cost."

Those ideas, projects or experiences that are worth the while "are the things whose value measure up to the amount of life they cost."

Ponder that for a moment – or longer – for yourself, in your own life. What sorts of things have been and are "worth the while" for you in terms of the amount of life they cost?

As you are pondering, here are a few of the things Thoreau affirmed were worth the while to him:

It would be worth the while to tell why a swamp pleases us – what kind pleases us – also what weather, etc. etc. – analyze our impressions. Why the moaning of the storm gives me pleasure.

It might be worth the while where possible to flood a cranberry meadow as soon as they are ripe and before the frosts and so preserve them plump and sound till spring.

"Frustrated at going to a menagerie and finding no useful information about the animals on display" (Wisner wrote) Thoreau commented in his journal:

Would it not be worth the while to learn something? To have some information imparted?

And just a few more examples:

It is worth the while to have our faith restored by seeing where a river swells and eddies about a half buried rock. Dimples on the surface of the water.

It is worth the while to walk in wet weather – the earth and leaves are strown with pearls.

If by watching all day & all night – I may detect some trace of the Ineffable – then will it not be worth the while to watch?

It would be worth the while to attend more to the different notes of the blackbirds. Methinks I may have seen the female red wing within a *day or two* – or what are these purely black ones without the red shoulder?

There are plenty more examples where those came from.

And, importantly, I could talk a long time about how Thoreau found it worth the while not only be present in nature and to learn from nature, to notice things... but worth the while to spend a night in jail after refusing to pay taxes which supported slavery and an unjust war... and worth the while to help run a stop on the underground railroad and to speak up against slavery over and over again.

But enough of Henry for this morning.

Rather, inspired by Henry, I've been finding it worth the while to reflect on what has been worth the while to me in my life and ministry, what I imagine might be worth the while in the next chapter of my life... *and* what I might suggest could be worth the while for our beloved Old Ship congregation in your next chapter.

First a few things I've found worth the while in my life and ministry:

It is and has always been and always will be worth the while in my personal life to hug those I love. Often. And to tell them I love them.

It has been worth the while in my life and ministry to do my best to give my full attention to whomever I am with – dear one, friend, parishioner, store clerk.

It has been worth the while to listen to the stories and life reflections of others – such as you and your stories.

It has been worth the while to read books – to learn from ancient wisdom and history, to reflect on current issues in the world, to be healed by the beauty of a poem, or simply to be transported by a novel to another world of experience and perspective.

It was worth the while to learn to play the guitar and banjo, not only for my own enjoyment, but so I could lead singing – here with you, with young kids, with elders in nursing homes, anywhere. And singing together is always worth the while, lifting our spirits, good for the soul.

It has been worth the while to engage in conversations about things that matter – as you've heard me say innumerable times. The richness and moments of illumination that arise when a dozen or more folks begin to think and reflect together, almost as one mind, never ceases to astound me – and never fails to inspire me.

I have found it and I expect always will find it worth the while to rise early and appreciate the dawn of a new day – each sunrise unique, a free show for all who rise to see it.

Just as it is worth the while, is it not, to pause as the sun sets and enjoy that soft, dimming light at the close of day.

Indeed, after all, it is worth the while to pause at just about any time and notice... birdsong... the play of light and shadow... or the falling rain, whether gentle or fierce. Sometimes not *do* much of anything, as it might seem, in the spirit of the reading from the *Tao Te Ching*.

And it has been worth the while for over five decades to get myself moving just about each day, often first thing in the morning, and particularly worth the while to run through the woods (what is these days called forest bathing)... sharing my carbon dioxide with the trees, as they share their oxygen with me – what a beautiful exchange. Worth the while, too, as I run along to spot the occasional deer or even more occasional fox or coyote – or a spider’s web amid branches, the web sparkling with dew.

And as much as it is worth the while to savor the beauty of our earth home, it is surely also worth the while – individually and together to do what we can, and also in the spirit of Thoreau – “to be of use” in the words of our second reading – to help to save this beauty in the midst of the climate crisis, to save the lives of others, to speak up for voting rights, reproductive rights, the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

So I have found it worth the while, as many of you have, to march and rally for a good cause... worth the while to support and vote for candidates I believe will make a difference for the better... worth the while to speak up and to speak out. On this, our Pride Sunday, I affirm that it has been worth the while for us for years – actually for decades – together to be speaking up and speaking out for LGBTQ+ rights and people, that it was worth the while to work together for equal marriage rights, and eminently worth the while again, today, to side with love on this day, to side with love in the face of hate, knowing, too, that we are not alone, but that others of many faiths are with us, supporting us as we all support one another.

For it is, you see (and as I know you know), worth the while to remember and affirm over and over again that love is stronger than hate.

These are challenging times in which we live – we hardly need reminding of this.

But let me affirm as I draw toward a conclusion that it is worth the while to embrace the challenges of our times – including right here at Old Ship in this time of many transitions. Not to wish to return to a previous time we might remember as more settled. Rather, seeing that it is worth the while to seek the opportunities in the midst of what might sometimes feel like disordered chaos, to be open to discovering opportunities waiting to be seized in the midst of the disorder, so that you will grow into a new and beautiful era for this ancient parish.

And... in the midst of many transitions, even a certain degree of disorder, it will still and always be worth the while – of course! – in the spirit of much that I’ve been saying today – to pay attention to each other, to support each another, to have those conversations about things that matter (you don’t need me for that), to pay attention to the beauty, the downright miracle of the world, this earth and all that’s in it, and also to continue to put your heads and hearts and hands together to help heal the wider world in whatever ways you can...

But you know all that.

I just thought it might be worth the while to say it out loud one more time.

May we each, then, in our own lives and in our shared lives, be encouraged and inspired by Henry David Thoreau’s reflections to consider what things are and are not worth the while in terms of the amount of life they cost.

So may it be.