

**First Things First**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
May 17, 2015

**Reading**

from the Buddhist “Metta Sutta”

Let us cultivate boundless goodwill. Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state. Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm. Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings. Radiating friendliness over the whole world, above, below, and all around, without limit.

**Sermon**

In his 1994 still relevant book, *First Things First*, management guru Stephen Covey relates a conversation with his daughter who had recently given birth to her third child. He says that she was feeling overwhelmed. She said:

“You know how much I love this baby, but she is literally taking all my time. I’m just not getting anything else done...”

Well, in conversation, Stephen Covey helped his daughter remember what she actually already knew but had for the moment forgotten, that “in the short run, her life was going to be imbalanced... and it should be” – that “for now, only one thing was needful – enjoying that baby.”

Of course, as the baby would become a child, then a youth, then a young adult, she would still be of highest priority for her mother. But as the growing person would become increasingly self-sufficient, other concerns and pursuits would also again have their rightful place.

“First Things First”.

Easy enough to say; not always so easy to put into practice in our lives, particularly during the different stages of our lives as the “first thing” might seem to change.

So the “first thing” might be clear enough for most of us most of the time if we have a new baby in our lives.

But at other times, with swirling competing responsibilities and demands, maybe not so clear, not at all.

Elsewhere in Covey’s book he offers this exercise. To demonstrate the “first things first” principle, you start with a big jar and you ask the group how many large rocks can be fit in the jar. Then you pile in however many rocks you can. Question: is the jar full? Many say “yes.” But then you pull out a bucket of gravel and pour the gravel into the jar, filling the spaces between the rocks. Full? Actually not yet. You pull

out a bucket of sand and fill the spaces still remaining. Full? Still not full. You pull out a bucket of water and pour that into the jar as well.

The lesson? If you started with the water or the sand, you'd never fit the gravel, much less the big rocks.

But if you put the rocks in first... then there's likely room left for most everything else, and if not quite, at least you made sure there was room for the rocks... what Covey calls the tasks in our lives that are important but not urgent.

And is he talking only about the mundane "to do" lists of our work and our households? Well, he *is* talking about those lists, but he goes deeper as well. Because for the sake of our spiritual health and sanity, we must ask ourselves the question: What *really* are the most important of the big rocks?

You see, when it comes to our work lives, the big rocks may be clear enough, may be about some long term vision, some overarching project that will enable all the smaller matters, the gravel and sand and water, to fall into place.

And when it comes to our households, the big rocks may pretty clearly be about long-term maintenance of the house, or about putting away retirement and/or college savings; and certainly about our intimate relationships.

But what about the *whole* of our lives? After all, as whole human beings, we are not only workers, and we are more even than householders... more even than our relationships with our dear ones.

What then are the rocks of our *lives* that transcend even the most important matters of work and home and relationship – and that in the end just might give life to those important matters of work and home and relationship?

And how can we manage to put *those* first things first?

Here is the beginning of one sort of answer:

A Buddhist teacher from Thailand, Ajahn Brahm, tells the story of an emperor who sought "a philosophy of life... wisdom to guide his rule and govern himself."

He believed he would find this wisdom if he could have the answers to three questions:

When is the most important moment?

Who is the most important person?

What is the most important thing to do?

Finally, from a hermit, he received the answers to these three questions, and thus the wisdom he had sought:

When is the most important moment?

"The most important moment is 'now' of course."

Who is the most important person?

"...the one you are with."

What is the most important thing to do?

"To care."

First things first? So here's one answer:

This moment with the person you are with... carefully caring.

To put it in the spirit of the reading this morning, caring for the person in front of you in this moment with the same boundless good will and love as a mother – or father – has for her or his child. Another way of putting it: If Stephen Covey’s daughter – or any mother, any father, or any of us – can, over time, take the natural utterly attentive love we have for our child, or any special child in our lives, into all of our relationships, into the world... maybe we have truly put first things first.

In practice, our lives lived in such a spirit will of course look different for each of us.

For though most of the time for most of us, this caring for the person in front of us here and now will be quite immediate, even intimate, it is at the same time true that as we move into the larger circles of our lives this first things first big rock will take different shapes in our lives at work or addressing some issue of social justice, peace, environmental sustainability.

First things first in these larger circles?

Work that serves some larger good in the world.

Black lives matter as much as any life; so, speak out and speak up to address racism and inequality.

Feed the hungry and house the homeless; lobby the statehouse for policies that more adequately address the needs of the hungry and the homeless.

Change those light bulbs, drive less, travel less, change those politicians, block those pipelines, support solar and wind... as we address climate change.

All this said, though, a deeper question. How do we sustain our energy for whatever seems to rise to the level of “first things first” in our lives?

Well... maybe there is yet one more layer of “first thing.”

For it seems to me, as I suggested a bit last week as well, that one way or another we each need some practice – call it a spiritual life, a prayer life, a reflective life... doesn’t matter what you call it – but something that returns us to the source of our lives and of love, that reminds us of who we – each and all of us – truly are: precious individuals held within the interwoven fabric of life.

As I said last week, this might for some mean a practice of meditation or prayer; might mean the reading of wisdom texts or poetry; might mean time in the world of trees and flowers and birds, what we call the world of nature. And it might mean (seems to mean for all of us here gathered) coming to worship on Sunday morning, attending a class or study group during the week, singing in the choir, working together for larger goals.

All of which can help us maintain our compass heading to the true north of our lives. In a way, the deepest first thing first that makes the more practical first things firsts sustainable.

Which suggests a brief annual meeting thought: For as we debate and discuss today practical matters of what is sometimes called “institutional maintenance,” or stewardship, we must keep our eyes focused on the true north of our shared lives here at Old Ship. To put it succinctly and bluntly, if we believe that Old Ship is essential to our

spiritual lives, that Old Ship helps us keep focused on first things first as we live the days of our lives in our work and homes, well then... we are obliged to support Old Ship with our time, our creativity, our energy, and our personal financial resources, all of which to whatever extent we are able.

First things first.

A bit of my story in this regard:

During the last months of my mother's life, when I was visiting her once and often twice a day at Harbor House Nursing Home here in Hingham, there were a number of ways in which, in retrospect, I kept – most of the time – my spiritual balance. Day to day, my mother was my “first thing first” to be sure. But in order to be able to maintain my energy for that caring day to day for the person in front of me, my mother, I needed to be nourished in other ways: time with the other dear ones in my life, my daily run in the woods, my daily reading and writing and meditation, and... not least... my daily and weekly connections, classes, worship, here at Old Ship.

To put it another way: though in terms of relationships my mother, along with Susan and our children, were always first; it was essential to the health of those relationships, including my ability to care for my mother, that I put spiritual first things first – daily in my idiosyncratic ways, and also together with you, here, in this Old Ship community. Thank you!

One more brief thought with which to close: Jesus taught that we should not be overly concerned with what we shall wear, what we shall eat, and so forth. Natural enough and necessary to have such cares and needs. But, he said, seek *first* the kingdom of heaven, what he named the pearl of great price.

The “kingdom of heaven”? All that I've been talking about today.

The first things first wrapped in our deep spiritual lives, wrapped in this moment, this person, this way of caring. Then in ever wider circles, wherever our unique caring heart leads us. For, unique and precious as each person is, we are at the same time, as I concluded last week, one family, all neighbors.

So it is. So may it ever be.