

"Your Best Self"
Rev. Caitlin O'Brien
All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation
September 24, 2017

Choral Anthem: "Imagine" by John Lennon

Reading: "The Journey" by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voice behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,

that kept you company
 as you strode deeper and deeper
 into the world,
 determined to do
 the only thing you could do --
 determined to save
 the only life that you could save.

Sermon:

It's true...that yours is really the only life you can save.

We often apply our first Unitarian Universalist principle, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," to our concern for *others*. But as Reverend Carolyn shared last week, it is just as much an invitation to care for *our own* worth and dignity. This is a sacred responsibility that is lifted up by *many* world religions and philosophies.

Paul's letter to the Christian community in Corinth says "do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?"¹

Plato says "give your first and greatest care to the improvement of your souls"²

In the Bagavad Gita, Krisna says "A man of discipline...should elevate himself by the self, not degrade himself."³

Muhammed says "***Be keen to do what is beneficial to you; Store up enough health to draw on during...illness;***"⁴

In other words, you are carrying precious cargo. Take good care.

¹ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version. (ESV® Permanent Text Edition, 2016)

1 Corinthians 6:19

² Plato, *Apology*. Trans., Church, F.J. (Pearson Library of Liberal Arts, 1987) 30a-b.

³ Miller, Barbara Stoler, Trans. *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986) 6:5

⁴ leaman, oliver p., ed. *The Qur'an, an encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006) p. 255.

And, to quote every airline attendant you've ever met, "put on your own oxygen mask before trying to assist others."

Honor thyself.

Do we do this by staying safe, feeding our body and not letting anybody mess with us? Yes. But what I've been chewing on lately is the idea that the best way to honor your sacredness is at least partly...to get over yourself. Yeah, this feel good sermon just took a turn for the worse, right?

What I mean by yourself is the concerns of your mind (like your irritating coworker, your spouse's selective hearing, your relative who let you down big-time, or the parent at school you've decided doesn't like you) none of these preoccupations are in service of the Sacred You. And indulging them too much is a way of not caring for yourself....a way of turning the lights off in the Temple that is your Best Self.

I mean, imagine that we're taking a tour of the Temple within you. In that sacred space, would you hang resentments on the wall like paintings to admire? Would you tenderly light a candle next to your critique of so-and-so's really bad idea at that meeting or prayerfully whisper your fantasy rant at your cousin for how things went south at last week's reunion? No. These are getting in the way. You're tripping over them on the way to the altar that is your Best Self...and we all do it all the time.

You can't stop these thoughts and feelings from coming, but we CAN take steps to *hold them more lightly*. To expect more of yourself **because you have inherent worth and dignity to protect**. (it's yours to lose) I think we threaten our dignity when we operate beneath it.

This Sunday, we stand within the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, the days of awe where Jewish people of faith consider their mistakes and imagine a path forward. Rabbi Irving Greenberg says that "shaking people out of their routines, shattering the crusts of arrogance and complacency, these days of awe lead to fundamental self renewal."⁵ **To saving yourself.**

I remember where I was when I fell in love with Judaism. I was leaving the library on a Saturday night in college with my friend, Jim. We were on our way to a party, but I asked him to stop and let me read to him from Rabbi Greenberg's book. We sat on the front library steps and I read out loud about the idea of co-creation (our responsibility to create, alongside the divine, through our way of living). The weekly Sabbath and High Holy days were a time to ask yourself if you were keeping up your end of the deal. I loved that.

⁵ Greenberg, Rabbi Irving. *The Jewish Way*. (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 28.

I love that.

And so I ask, are you keeping up your end of the deal, taking care of your precious piece of this universe as best you can from day to day? I would suggest that it starts and ends with **the supreme dignity of simply being present.**

Let's take a moment to be present.

Rest your eyes, either closed or relaxed and take a deep breath in...and exhale.

And another deep breath in...and exhale

Take an inventory of your body, what sensations are there, just notice them.

And another deep breath in...and exhale.

And now experience this room. Its sounds or its sights. Just witness them.

In 25 seconds, you just gave yourself a chance to be present, which gives your Best Self the best chance at showing up.

Eckhart Tolle, who wrote the famous book, The Power of Now, says that the best way to live in your sacred self is to live in the present moment.

This..This...This...and now this...⁶

And the more you time you spend in the Temple of your Best Self and not swimming in the thoughts and worries that busy you, the more you will be at peace. *And that peace is good for the world.*

Imagine all the people living for today...

Living for today. Living in this moment. Tolle says, "What a liberation to realize that the 'voice in my head' is not who I am. Who am I then? *The one who sees that.*"⁷ The observer. Some call this attitude "the witness stance."⁸

Let's say someone we'll call "Difficult Dan" is coming toward you. You could react by thinking, "Oh great, here he comes. I'm sure he's gonna say something rude to me. I'm freaking out here. I'm gonna brace myself for the worst."

⁶ Toll, Eckhart. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999)

⁷ Tolle, Eckhart. *A New Earth, Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. (London England: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 22.

⁸ Cannato, Judy. *Fields of Compassion: How the New Cosmology is Transforming Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame Indiana: Sorin Books, 2010), p. 104.

Or you could experience this moment as more of a witness. “I notice I’m getting nervous as Difficult Dan approaches. Oh look at that: I just assumed what kind of thing he’s gonna say. Hmmm, I feel my heart racing. I’m gonna take this one breath at a time.”

That’s an example of mindfulness, and the way to give your Best Self a shot at showing up for this challenging moment. See the space you gave yourself in that second example?

All those feelings and thoughts you witnessed from a little distance – they aren’t the core of you. They weren’t with you when you were born and they won’t (one hopes) be with you when you die. You will, though. *You will be there. And you’re the one I care about.*

Imagine all the people living life in peace...

The more your best self is at the table, the more peace you will experience. So, with a sense of urgent duty, I encourage you to build or maintain some practice in your life that breathes some space in between your judgments and fears and the Sacred You, the one filled with inherent worth and dignity. Many of you have such a practice that helps you loosen your grip on the stuff of life and rest in something that’s just mysteriously *more*. If you’re like me, though, you may need reminding of how important this is:

You were handed with your announcements today an image of contemplative practices from the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.⁹ When you take a look at it, you see that there are many branches to the same tree of practice. Each is a way to clear your head, release and renew. Whether it’s centering prayer, writing, meditation, or a 5 mile run, do something most days to stretch some distance in between “capital Y you” and the thoughts and fears you carry. So that when a difficult situation presents itself, you’ll be better able to rest just a couple inches away from it, observing it from your Best Self.

An engineer helped bring mindfulness workshops to Google, through a program called “Search Inside Yourself” (get it? Google - Search Inside yourself). Well, he does this presentation where he leads you in a brief mindfulness moment like I did, and he says some of you might be thinking “that was nice, but really what good is that going to do me?” And he compares it to a personal trainer showing you to do one arm curl, and you do it, and say well, I don’t feel any stronger yet. I don’t see what’s so great about this!

⁹ www.contemplativemind.org

*Right. It's about repetition and conditioning. Back to Muhammad's words: **Store up enough health to draw on...***

The more you slow down, stay in the moment, breathe yourself some more room, the more gracefully you will move through this life. You do what you need to do with a dose of non-attachment and it has a way of making things go more easily for you than it would if your grip were tighter.

In Taoism, this is called “doing-not doing.”¹⁰ You’re in this world, seeing and feeling it for what it is, but you also have a home in some other part of yourself that gives you freedom, maybe that wider view. Some call it Grace, a word that is impossible to define, but so fun to explore. For this sermon, I watched physically graceful people like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. And I studied the career of tennis pro, Roger Federer, who is said to be one of the most graceful athletes of all time. Let’s take a look.

Video (0:06-0:39) “Roger Federer, Slow Motion Ballet”¹¹

Some say it’s as though his feet don’t fully touch the ground. A journalist wrote a piece called “Roger Federer As Religious Experience,” saying “He is never hurried or off-balance. The approaching ball hangs, for him, a split-second longer than it ought to. [He’s] a creature whose body is both flesh and, somehow, light.”¹²

There’s a famous rivalry between Federer and Rafael Nadal, whose style is thought to be more power than grace. Over the years, they’ve taken turns winning and losing. Federer has 19 majors titles, while Nadal has 16.

But it’s interesting to note that Nadal has had significantly more injuries and has missed more tournaments than Federer because of it. I wonder if Federer’s mastery of “doing-not doing”, the grace he works toward on the court, has preserved his body more effectively.

Federer had the first major injury of his career last year, and it wasn’t on the tennis court. He twisted his knee while giving his daughter a bath.

I watched some Federer interviews and it turns out he was quite the “hot head” when he was coming up in the juniors. He had to find his own way to work at the

¹⁰ Mitchell, Stephen. Translation. *tao te ching* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988) p. vii.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuwHiPARW6E>

¹² Wallace, David Foster, “Roger Federer As Religious Experience,” *New York Times* (August 20, 2006).

serenity that he now brings to the court. It's a discipline every day. And you and I have to find ours...

Many of you already have, and many of you, like me, slip in and out of it. For now, I've added 5 minutes of quiet mindful breathing and 20 minutes of exercise to most of my days. Though I'm not without my less graceful moments, I have noticed that I'm more at peace since I've been doing this. I'd love to hear from some of you – about what you do to create that space for your Best Self to be in the driver's seat of your life.

And, listen: if all this talk of SELF sounds a little too, well, *selfish*, let me suggest that the inner grace I'm talking about has a way of caring for those around you. I'd say this is especially true in parenting. Your grace creates space for others to be at their best as well.

A podcast on gracefulness reminded me of the moment in the Great Gatsby, where Nick describes his first encounter with Gatsby, who's known for his social grace:¹³

*He had one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced, or seemed to face, the whole external world for an instant and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself.*¹⁴

We should remember this as we pass the peace on Sunday mornings. This is how grace becomes contagious – and life-saving connections are born of this.

And lastly, lest you think that you need to surrender what you care about or what you're fighting for, in order to drop into your Best Self, fear not! The work you do for what is right – your *co-creative power* in this world – is made stronger and more impactful when you are your most poised, most alert self. Google did not bring mindfulness workshops to its employees just because they wanted them to be happy or nice. They did it because **we now know** that we are most effective at what we do when we do it from just a couple steps removed from our Ego.

So if what you want to do is save the world, or your corner of it, please try to do it from your Best Self. The only one you can actually save...you'll end up with more to give.

Imagine all the people (join me!) sharing all the world

¹³ "The Art and Effort of Personal Grace," *WBUR On Point with Tom Ashbrook*. November 13, 2015.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. (New York: Scribner, 1925)

***You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope some day
you'll join us, and the world will live as one.***

Tonight when the long day closes, when the stuff of life has been tended to, and you rest your head on that pillow, it's only you there in the space between consciousness and unconsciousness. Only you whose feet touch the floor of your inner temple. May it be spacious and rich with the serenity that we all seek.

Each day, we make this choice. Each moment of each day.

Let us say amen.