

“Celebrate Life”

a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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Unitarian Universalist minister Sara York tells the story of a conversation she once had with a colleague:

“We know that all ministers really only have *one* sermon,” she begins, “so I asked my friend what *his* was.”

“Really just one word,” he replied: “Live.”

“Yeah,” Sara agreed, “I suppose that’s about what mine is, too – except that I would add ‘Live, *in spite of*...’ ”

“In spite of what?” her colleague asked.

“In spite of ... having to die, mainly. But there are other in-spite-of’s, too – like going to the dentist.”

“Get serious,” he said.

“I am serious,” she retorted. “As far as I’m concerned, every dentist is Dr. Partridge, my childhood dentist. He didn’t believe in novocaine. He liked to torture children. When I say ‘going to the dentist,’ it means having to confront Dr. Partridge. It means dealing with all the pain and heartache of life. It means *facing* what you’re afraid of.”

“And when,” her friend asked Sara “was the last time *you*, went to the dentist?”

“What difference does that make?” she replied, a bit too quickly.

“Well,” said the wise colleague, “if you live, as you say, in spite of the pain, in spite of the fear – if you live in *spite* of having to go to the dentist, what I’m asking is – does that mean that you go to the dentist, or that you *avoid* going to the dentist?”

I love that story. I think it carries so many layers of meaning – sort of like the little lesson Hollie shared this morning, about dandelions. Contained in this brief, real-life conversation, is just about all the theology I believe anyone could

ever need. For one thing, it challenges us to go to the dentist – to face our fears – to make damn certain that we do not, in Thoreau’s brilliant phrase, “when we come to die, discover that we have not lived.”

For another thing, this anecdote points to the idea that – as has been said many times before, but bears repeating today – religion is the human response to the fact that we are *alive*, yet one day, will die. Religion is the way human beings find meaning and purpose in a journey we did not ask to undertake – one filled with both indescribable joy, and sometimes unbearable sorrow. Religion is the human experience of a universe in which we are amazed, and all but mute with awe, that on a cinder, hurtling around the sun, there is *life* at all – and we – we are part of it.

Is it any wonder, then, that we would want to *celebrate* that miracle? That for as long as people can remember, we have gathered, around a fire, to express our amazement, our gratitude – and yes, our fear – at being part of life’s rich pageant?

To celebrate, to bask in, the fullness of life – that is religion.

There is a reading, in our hymnal, which says it well: “Therefore, we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage – when we wed, and when we die; when we are blessed with a child; when we depart, and when we return; when we plant, and when we harvest.”

That is why we are here. *That* is the purpose of religious community – to offer us an opportunity to share our amazement; to provide a touchstone on the circuitous and often confusing path of life; to create a time and a place, made sacred by intention, for us to be *mindful*, amid the otherwise mindless rush of time. In short, to celebrate life – and thus, to live it, more fully.

How often, do you stop, to *celebrate* life? How often, do you pause to look at the wonder that is a newborn baby – and to ponder the arc of that child’s journey into, through, and ultimately beyond this life? How often do you drink in the joy, and exuberance, of adolescence – thus reliving, your own youth? How often do you take the time, to simply sit, in silence, listening to your own breath, and to the vibration of life, all around you?

How often do you listen to someone *else* – whether that someone is telling you about a personal crisis they are facing, or is perfectly at peace – how often do you really listen to another human being, and recognize what a *blessing* it is, simply to be able to share the experience of being human, with another? How often do you look at the heart of a daisy – and know that it is heaven itself, to take what is given – to see what is plain – to notice what the sun, lights up willingly?

How often, do you really *celebrate* life?

If this were an easy thing to do – if this came as naturally as drawing breath – there would be no need for churches, or worship services; for ministers or

meditation classes. But we know that living this way, is not easy – far from it, in fact. And so, we come to religious community, in the hope that we can learn – together – to celebrate life. To do the miracle that is life, justice. To sing together, and to hear the voices of others. To laugh, and to cry – to give a hug, or teach a child. To be in silence. To honor the ceremonies of our passage – when we wed, and when we die, when we are blessed with a child, and when those children grow up. This is why we come here, week after week, year after year – in good times, and in bad – because Heritage Church is a spiritual home where we can *celebrate life, create community, and seek justice.*

Let me be the first to say that, those last two purposes – community, and justice – are no doubt equally well-served in most, or at least many, *other* churches, synagogues, and temples. But it is the *first* of the three reasons we come together at Heritage – the celebration of life – that I believe is what has *drawn us* to a Unitarian Universalist church – to this *particular* church, as opposed to any other. And I will submit to you today that it is our distinct, UU way of celebrating life, that *distinguishes* us, from other faith communities. Because as Unitarian Universalists, we put our faith, in this life. We celebrate *this* life. We do not avoid going to the dentist – nor do we focus our energy and attention on another life that we cannot even know.

Carl Jung once said that “life is a luminous pause, between two great mysteries.” The plain truth is, most religions – in one way or another – *denigrate*, rather than celebrate, this luminous pause. Some faiths teach that this life is somehow “fallen,” or stained by sin. Others, that it is merely an illusion. Most religions I know, look toward some “better life,” somewhere other than here.

But we – we are taught to see the miraculous, in the everyday. We believe that this life, is the only one of which we can be sure – the only place we have ever known or found beauty, and wonder. And the thing is, the more we human beings *study* this life, the more science tells us about the universe, about everything from the smallest atom, to the smallest ant – from the simplicity of a single-celled organism, to the complexity of the human brain – everywhere we look, we find even more reason for reverence.

One of my favorite passages in Daniel Quinn’s amazing novel “The Story of B” – one of my favorite passages in all of literature – is a conversation between Jared Osborne, a Roman Catholic priest, and a mysterious woman named Shirin, a spiritual leader not unlike the Inuit priestess Uvavnuk, whom I have quoted at the top of your order of service this morning.

In that conversation, Shirin is attempting to explain her theology to Father Osborne, whose imagination has been limited by the dualistic thinking and anthropocentric cosmology he has been taught. She says:

“Here, I’ll tell you a story. When the gods set out to make the universe, they said to themselves, ‘Let us make of it a manifestation of our unending abundance, and a sign to be read by those who have eyes to [see]. Let us lavish care without stint on *every* thing – no less upon the most fragile blade of grass, [than] on the mightiest of stars; no less upon the gnat that sings for an hour, than upon the mountain that stands for a millennium; no less upon a flake of mica, than upon a river of gold.

“ ‘Let us make no two leaves the same, from one branch to the next; no two branches the same, from one tree to the next; no two trees the same, from one land to the next; no two lands the same, from one world to the next – and no two worlds the same, from one star to the next. In this way, the Law of Life will be plain to all who have eyes to [see]...’

“And this was how it was done, from first to last – no two things alike, in all the mighty universe – no single thing made with less care than any other thing, throughout generations of species more numerous than the stars. And those who had eyes to see, read the sign, and followed the Law of Life.”

I ask you, my friends: Is such intricacy, such beauty, such wonder – is this *life* – not worthy of celebrating? Is this life not worthy, of our reverence? Why would anyone call it “fallen” – why would anyone turn their eyes away from such magnificence, to look toward some supposed better life, somewhere else?

I do not deny that there is always Dr. Partridge. I do not disparage the reality of death. And I will be the first to admit that in the 52 years I have been given so far, my life has been, by any objective standard, a very comfortable, privileged, and very *blessed* existence. So I won’t ask you to take *my* word for it – but instead will offer you the thoughts of two others – one of them nameless – who have inspired *me*, to celebrate life.

In a poetry collection titled “Peking Spring,” Chinese dissident Kuo Lu-Seng writes:

While I am imprisoned in a cage of pitch darkness,
Still able to endure the pain from torture,
I will struggle to rise – bite open my fingers,
And with my blood, write on the wall –
“Believe in life!”

And the following poem was found in the Terezin concentration camp, following the Nazi occupation of what is now the Czech Republic. Its author is anonymous, and presumably died in the concentration camp.

He doesn't know the world at all,
Who stays in his nest and doesn't go out.
He doesn't know what birds know best,
Nor what I want to sing about –
That the world is full of loveliness.

When dewdrops sparkle in the grass
And earth's aflood with morning light,
A blackbird sings upon a bush
To greet the dawning after night –
And then I know how fine it is to live.

Hey! Try to open up your heart
To beauty. Go to the woods someday
And weave a wreath of memory there.
Then, if the tears obscure your way,
You'll know how wonderful it is,
To be alive.

... I am left, for a moment, without words – which is, I suspect, the best way of all, to celebrate life. When the victim of the concentration camp writes “He doesn't know the world at all, who stays in his nest and doesn't go out,” I return to Sara York's story, and our colleague who asked her pointedly, “Do you go to the dentist, or do you *avoid* going to the dentist?” When the Chinese prisoner writes, in his own blood, “Believe in life” – how can I not do the same?

And so, I have happily cast my lot with the kind of communities that choose to *celebrate life*. This life. And I consider myself deeply blessed to have found such a community, here. I hope you feel blessed to have found it, as well.

May we never take for granted either this remarkable place, or this all-too-limited time we have, here together. May we never forget, *why* we are here. Though I will preach in the next two weeks on the other two pillars of our Heritage Church mission – creating community, and seeking justice – *this*, is my one sermon: Not just “Live” – and not “Live, in spite of” – but “Celebrate Life”!

May it be so. Amen!