

Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, California
Sunday, June 25, 2006

Wild and Precious Life Service

Reading “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

Introduction to Reflections – The Rev. Vail Weller

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild & precious life?”

This evocative phrase, written by poet Mary Oliver, reminds us of our personal visions, our dreams, and what matters most to us. We are reminded as we hear varied individuals respond to the question that we continually have the opportunity to decide how it is we want to make the most of our wild and precious life.

This morning, we have the opportunity to hear reflections on this question from six remarkable individuals from within our congregation: They offer their words as a gift to our community.

Lauren Penniman

What do I plan to do with my one wild and precious life? I don't know! There are so many options, that I just haven't made up my mind. I figure that if I did, I'd change it over time anyway. One idea/daydream/fantasy I have is of living Walden-like, but in a warmer, very sunny climate. I would live sustainably and spend leisure time in the sun, appreciating my surroundings. I would work in my organic garden, do yoga, and be my own gourmet vegan chef.

In another fantasy, I would live a radically civically engaged life – increasing my communities’ environmental sustainability, undermining consumerism, and/or fostering feelings of self-worth, efficacy and joy in life among children and adults.

Alternatively, I might be a nutritionist, a yoga instructor, an occupational therapist, an educational therapist, a naturalist, an environmental educator, a vegan chef, a school psychologist, or the founder of a successful, life-changing after school program.

But I guess the poem we’re talking about today is more about savoring the world than saving it. It doesn’t seem to ask “what will you accomplish?” but “how will you spend your time?” maybe, “what will you take away?” When I read the poem this most recent time, the speaker’s assertion that she knows how to be “idle and blessed” jumped out at me. It is idle time, leisure time, when I most notice life’s blessings. There are a lot of things in life I love to savor: for example, the feel of sunshine and a pleasant breeze, the sounds and beauty of my outdoor surroundings, fresh food, moving to music, conversing with loved ones who amuse, humor, push and intrigue me, the rush of air as I jump, run or fly, and being silly with fellow silly people – cartwheeling, spinning, jumping on trampolines, maybe.

What I realized as I thought about Mary Oliver’s question, is that in order to really enjoy and savor all these moments in my one wild and precious life, I need leisure time, and it needs to feel like leisure time –I need to be awake, present and relaxed, and free from “to do” lists running through my head. Otherwise, my experiences don’t really sink in, or they feel like work. Sometimes I’m in that present and awake groove – but often I’m not. And so, in order to ensure that I spend more time being idle and blessed, this is my new plan: I plan (even as I begin my first year of teaching elementary school, so we’ll see), to get enough sleep, eat food that makes me feel good, exercise outdoors, do yoga, and set aside frequent leisure time. Time will tell how successful I am at this and where I go generally as I hopefully find ways to both save and savor the world in as integrated a fashion as I can. (I hope teaching is one activity that will allow for both!) I’m sure my eventual path will be different from any that I have planned or imagined!

Mike Glish

Paul Twitchell in his book *The Flute of God* writes: “The reason that many people do not achieve success in prayers or affirmatives is that they believe that they, themselves, are the receptacles of the channel. If we really trust Spirit to provide us with whatever we need, no matter how difficult it may seem to acquire, we won’t worry about holding on to what we have in order to get more. You cannot close the channel at the outgoing end and keep it going at the in-going end. If you close one, both close.”

The term “channel” refers to the distribution of the creative force of the universe or the power of the Spirit. In Twitchell’s concept the channel is the soul and the entity that can consciously act on the creative force channeled through the soul is the human mind and body. I want to come back to this idea, but first I need to explain why I happened to come across this book.

I came to UUSM at a time when my old paradigms of God and religion had fallen away like the molting skin of a snake or the cocoon of the butterfly. I came across this book last fall as I began a search for a new paradigm that suited where I found myself in my life. I must say that the old paradigms of dogma and sin and the anthropomorphic character of the Biblical God had not worked for me. *The Flute of God* is a book a friend of mine who is an adherent of Eckankar recommended to help me in my search.

The New Testament says that “God is love” but somehow the Christian tradition that I had been raised in had helped me translate this idea into “Mike is love”. So I began to open myself up for a wider search for something new and vital. Twichell’s book has been one source of new awareness that has profoundly influenced how I see myself in relationship to the creative force –“the Ultimacy” as Michael Dowd puts it – and my relationship to other people.

The metaphor of “the flute of God” came to me after reading the passage I began with. If I think of the Spirit as a wind or breath, it has energy and even some direction. If it is directed through a long tube, it can have even more energy and direction. However in Twichell’s words, “You cannot close the channel at the outgoing end and keep it at the in-going end. If you do, both close.” That says to me that I can’t somehow bottle up the energy of the Spirit as it is channeled into that tube. I have to let it flow – through me and outwardly toward others.

Directing wind or breath through a tube is only so useful. This is where the metaphor of the flute gets more interesting. If the source of the wind or breath is Spirit, the part I can play is to write some music and to use my hands on the keys of the flute the right way so that the force and direction of the breath of the Spirit becomes something that I have added to and creates music that others can hear and be moved by.

“The flute of God” is a metaphor I use daily. Whenever I start to feel “what about me?” I try to think of myself as keeping the outgoing end of my “flute” open and to be the conveyor of music to others rather than focus on myself. If I can master my flute, I think others will experience it as love.

Betsy Taub

There are still some gaps around what I want to be doing with my one *non-wild* and precious life. But gaps and ambiguities are par for the course.

However, here’s what I do know about how I want to be and what I want to do with my life:

- I want to continue to have a loving relationship with my spouse, with our extended family, and with our small but growing circle of friends.
- I want my partner and I to be able to continue to look at each other as we’re waking up in the morning, and say “It’s a new day!” And genuinely look forward to it with great anticipation.
- I want to continue the decadence of getting up very early some mornings—like between 4 – 5 a.m., listening to the birds and enjoying the solitude of our home.
- I want to be a kind, giving, and loving person.
- I want to be of help to others—to even anticipate their needs.
- I want to continue to have humor & playfulness at the very core of my life.
- I want to laugh for fun and laugh for therapy and just plain laugh for no reason at all.
- I want to remember to not take things too seriously and to put things in perspective.
- I want to lead a productive life—though not so productive that I don’t have a life!

- I want to always be growing and learning and open to change.
- I want to live my life more mindfully—live my life in the moment—constantly reminding myself how precious it truly is.
- I want to be a happy, well-adjusted individual giving back to those around me. Though these might seem, on the surface, like modest goals, I consider being happy, productive, and well adjusted in our society as major feats in themselves!

A late bloomer am I, I look forward to continuing to blossom as part of this congregation—and to experience the blossoming of all of you as well.

Pat Wilkinson – text not available for posting

Dori Wheeler – text not available for posting

Jerry Motto

What is it I plan to do with my one wild and precious life? This is not an easy question given my usually planning for shorter term goals. It also brings to mind some observations from the past, such as "It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it," "Dream as though you'll live forever--live as though you'll die today," "Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth."

On reflection, I believe my previously unexpressed and even unrealized plan is the same as it has always been--to engage to the best of my ability in each of the many roles life has blessed me with, whether it be as a student, an adult, a friend, a husband, a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a health care professional, or just a responsible citizen. This effort will be in the service of an overarching plan, which is to strive for the ultimate idealistic goal--to leave this world a better place for my having been here.

To carry out this admittedly ambitious effort, I plan to take each wild and precious day as it comes, and strive to make the best of it, by living it to its fullest.