

“How it is we live forever”
Worship Service
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
April 24, 2011

First Reading “Messenger” by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird —
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

Second Reading “A Vision” by Wendell Berry

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
if we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,
then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
there, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides, fields and gardens
rich in the windows. The river will run
clear, as we will never know it,
and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
On the levels of the hills will be
green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.
On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music
risen out of the ground. They will take

nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisaal dream.
Its hardship is its possibility

Sermon "How it is we live forever"

In countless places of worship this morning, all across the world, people are shouting: He is risen!

These words sung into the air claiming a promise fulfilled and a promise renewed. He is risen! In Christian churches everywhere today, people come to praise miracles, and hope, and the great abundance of life.

As Unitarian Universalists, we too worship in praise of miracles, in all the many places we see them. And what is a miracle but something more beautiful than we ever imagined happening – actually happening? As liberals most of all in our love, liberal in our willingness to be astonished – we praise all those unexpected, unforeseeable gifts of life with great shouts of awe and holy surprise. And aren't miracles just everywhere when you think of them in this way?

He is risen! His friend, Mary Magdalene knew it first, we are told. And so she shouted it from every hillside, all along the road. He is risen! My friend, my teacher, my light, the light for us all. They tried to bring him to his end, but he lives on! He is alive!

Haven't we all wanted to make such a declaration? Haven't we all lost someone, someone great, someone who changed our life? Someone who gave our life hope and meaning?

In those early moments, when their absence seems to be everywhere – you cling to their graveside awaiting some sign that it was all a dream, and you call out in praise of the possibility, that gut feeling, that faith, that they either they never really left, or at least they will return and stay, and stay, and stay.

I don't just mean, death, though of course, that too. No also, those other losses. Those other endings, marriages, or friendships. Children grow up and leave, which is supposed to be a good thing. And before long, grandchildren, too. And parents are all of a sudden, just, small, and scared. Roles reverse, and we lead where once we followed.

It's not just people, either. It's our own bodies, and the way parts stop working the way they used to. And it's places, too. The plains once filled with prairie dogs – well they are still filled with prairie dogs, but also now filled with houses (which are really filled with life). A church too can disappear, as if suddenly – become not the church you fell in love with, the church you held in your heart as just right. We're all, always, losing something.

And so you fight these losses, these endings, with all your might, and believe things will just stay, and stay.

They say it takes three years for the brain to adjust to a new reality after a big loss or ending. After you lose a spouse, or a longtime friend, three years for the brain to make new connections, literally create new nodes in your brain.

When I worked as a Chaplain last summer, I'd sit with families after they'd learned their loved one was dying. They'd look right at me, and tell me the whole story, the way their whole world had been remade in a flash – and even as they told me, I could tell it wasn't really real. My mom is dying, their words would say. She'll live forever, their bodies would say.

Some of them could even feel this discrepancy themselves. They'd get so annoyed at their own brains, for failing to accept what they knew rationally was true. They were relieved when I'd tell them there was good scientific reason for their resistance. Your brain takes three years, I'd say.

I imagine that's how the women were that morning around Jesus' grave. Past the initial state of shock, past that explicit denial. I mean, they brought spices and oils, stuff to mourn and mark the dead. They knew – rationally – he was gone. But they didn't *really* know. Somewhere, somehow, he was not in that grave, he was alive. He felt alive.

Roll back the stone, he'll live forever.

Most of us know this story, more or less – right? No matter our religious upbringing, most of us know something about the Christian Easter story. About this man, this teacher, Jesus dying, and then rising from the dead, three days later.

And perhaps we even remember that it was indeed women who were first to bear witness to this resurrection, this transformation. It's actually one of the most radical parts of the Jesus story – that *women* were the witnesses. Scholars are pretty convinced that this part of the story is historically accurate since no religion that wanted to have any influence at all would invent their own narrative such that *women* were such central figures.

But never mind that. Never mind that historical test. Nevermind a scientific lens. For this morning, set aside all that. Set aside this whole idea of belief, or disbelief, fact or fiction.

For this morning, whatever your feelings about this story might be, let's imagine this Easter story simply as a heart story. A story of these women first believing the best person they ever knew was gone – and then discovering, imagining the possibility, that he wasn't really gone at all. That he continued in some meaningful way. That he might live on, forever.

How is it that one might live forever?

First we come to know that we don't. That this life does end. That all life ends. First we bring the spices to the grave, and the oils, and we live with the reality that what we love, we will lose. What we know today as real, will fade silently into the air, like dust.

I'm not sure how often it happens, but this year, Earth Day falls during the Christian Holy Week. I was telling one of my friends that a calendar like that is a UU Minister's dream!

Actually Earth Day coincided this year with Good Friday. The day Jesus died. The day of death. I think this overlap in holy days asks us to stay with the possibility of the earth's death. To really consider the way it is dying. The way we are killing it, innocent though it may be. Life giver though it may be.

And so we dig our hands into the dirt, and remember, our source. And we feel the winter's bitter cold overcome us, and understand exactly what it is we risk in all these politically imprisoned conversations about the air we breathe, the fuel we consume, the animals we fail to protect. We feel the danger in our sense of entitlement to use up that which offers itself to us again, and again, in grace.

It is dark here. In this kind of knowing. But know there is no meaning in rebirth if we do not truly know, and accept what it is we have lost, what it is we are always losing.

How is it that we live, forever?

About a year ago now, my mom called me to tell me the news about her buddy. Her buddy – that's her best friend since kindergarten. Going on sixty years later, they still lived within blocks of each other. Each with three daughters, with lasting and happy marriages. My mom's news – well, her buddy had cancer. Bad cancer, fast cancer. She maybe had 3, or 6 months. One minute, she was living a kind of ideal life – friends, children, grandchildren, a beautiful home, world travel. And then the next minute, she was dying.

Our reason fails us in moments like this. We learn quickly just how ridiculous the brain can be, how slow to understand that the world has been suddenly remade. 3 years? That's probably optimistic.

And sometimes our faith fails us, too. My parents are committed, life-long Catholics, but a promise of seeing her buddy in some other life wasn't much help to my mom on that day, or any of the days that followed. In the depths of aggressive chemo, hair loss, with her body just disappearing as if by the second, all she could say was: no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Over those months, my mom would call me, angry, and heartbroken. And little by little, we began to talk about forgiveness.

I know, usually when we say forgiveness, we mean, people. But in this case, we meant, forgiveness of time. Forgiveness of the moment. And forgiveness of the universe for being so unfair, and cruel.

Because I could see, the other option, if not a life of forgiveness, well it wasn't *life*.

I mean, those few moments of life she had left with her buddy, they wouldn't be lived. They'd be avoided, and lost, and over, and there would be no getting them back. Living forever starts by living now. In this real moment. Letting go of what you wanted today to be and bring, and instead, just being here, as it is, already.

I forgive you, time, universe, life.

We usually talk acceptance. But acceptance can feel like you just have to incorporate in the new reality, rationally, using your brain. But I already told you how unreliable your brain can be! But to start with forgiveness. Well that's a practice that can make space in your heart for acceptance to come, eventually. And forgiveness *is* a practice of the heart.

Our brains can fail us, and our faith might fail us, but our hearts. Our hearts can hold us in these moments. Our hearts know some things, if let them guide us, and teach us.

Forgive them, we're told Jesus said as some of his last words before dying. Hanging on the cross, tortured, and innocent. Forgive them. Forgive this moment, for being something other than what you had in mind. Forgive this world for being not some kind of straight line from pain to pleasure, but a crazy mixed up mess of all of it, all at once. I forgive you, we might imagine the earth saying to us, over and over again, making space to hold us, whole.

How is it that we live forever?

We forgive, and accept the way life ends, and our brains start to build these new nodes. But then, something else happens. Like Mary Magdalene, suddenly we imagine something else.

We stand on this earth so resilient and responsive, we look up at that sun, we stare down that mountain, I mean *that* one, and we remember, constancy, and transformation.

We watch those tulips coming up yet again, I planted them years ago now, but they keep on coming, and somehow there's more of them every year, and they are in somewhat new places, and we remember, staring at those tulips, with astonishment, renewal, and rebirth.

And we know – and here's that praise worthy miracle again – our universe is filled with both limits and possibilities. What we think of as the end is filled with so much mystery, and we do not yet know what is to come. What new thing is being born, in the midst of all this rubble?

Last summer, I remember I told one woman, just moments before she was to go in for open heart surgery – her chest was to be opened up, and she was terrified. I said, the caterpillar is pretty sure it will always be a caterpillar, until one day, it's not.

How is it that we live *forever*?

I know the last time I was here, I said, I didn't think it mattered all that much, what happens after this life. Remember, the story of John Murray, and Thomas Potter? And the big religious question of their time had to do with who goes where, and why, after they die? And I said – that was their question. Not mine.

Oh, I haven't changed my mind since I was here last month. I still don't think the central religious question of today has to do with whether one's "Soul" goes to heaven, or hell, or how one ends up where, as if life is some kind of singular, one track line, as if life doesn't shoot out in all directions, all at once, forming and transforming, ending, and beginning, renewing and resurrecting, in one big beautiful entangled bloom.

As if.

We know better, of course. We who live in these bodies, who travel in real time. Life does – go everywhere – all the time – in many directions, stops, and then starts, begins and then ends, and begins again. We know, there is a unity that makes all life, one – all at once, one.

We stand here in this little room, just a few of us in such a small corner of the world, in such a small and limited moment in the history of the universe - and we know that somehow this air we breathe is somehow, mysteriously inherited from the multitude of breaths taken by those who stood here many generations before, and somehow, maybe even more mysteriously, connected to the oxygen, and nitrogen, and carbon dioxide taken in and set free by people a few time zones away from us, right this very moment.

{Breaths}

At one sudden and difficult death I was witness to last summer, in the middle of the shock and the pain of the loss, one of the nurses said to the family: I guess God needed an angel.

As she said it, I got this lump in my throat and I tried to breathe my way through the awful theology that statement represents to me, and instead back to the loving presence I hoped to embody for those now intimate strangers.

I didn't know their religious beliefs, actually. I had just met them, a few hours before. Maybe they were *all about* God needing an angel. But the son. He looked at me right then. Lost, and scared. And not at all consoled by the nurse and the idea that his father might now be an angel. And I took him by the hand, and I said: I don't know what happens, when we die. But I guess I imagine that somehow, he's less contained now, he's everywhere. He can be with you, everywhere. All the time.

Oh I know, it's not enough to overcome the body – the loss of that body, and the ways words form from their lips, and their unique breath, and the dawning reality that all that is over. But it is something to imagine – that rather than ending, we transform.

How is it that we *live* forever?

Or really, how is it that we *live* - at all? Whether forever, or for a day – and I hope you're hearing me say these questions are one, and the same. Just: How do we live? Eternally, temporally. How is it that we live?

Last December, a few days before she died, I wrote to my mom's buddy, to say thank you for being the friend she was to my parents, especially to my mom. I could imagine all the ways people were telling her to make sense of her life, and making promises about seeing her again, someday.

I'm not sure about heaven, I said. I am not sure it's even an appealing idea.

But I do know, my mom was a better person because of the way you loved her. And I know I am a better person because my mom was so loved, for so long, and so well. And so I know your life will go on, and on. And this is the best kind of immortality that I know.

What we give to others becomes our life today, and our life, like Wendell Berry says: "A long time after we are dead." The love we give the world. The hope we embody. What we teach. What we grow. What we plant, and what we sow.

Or what we don't.

As Rebecca Parker says: "Your gifts whatever you discover them to be can be used to bless or curse the world."

How is it we live forever?

Our lives are a promise, a promise we fulfill every new day, with every new beginning, and each new ending. And a promise that reaches its fullest potential at our end. Once our bodies end, and our breaths stop. Our lives continue. Living on and on, reverberating in the lives of those we have loved, in the places we have traveled, the worlds we have created.

As Wendell Berry proclaims, we "stand like slow-growing trees on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it," and so there is life "a long time after we are dead...the lives our lives prepare will live there."

The lives our lives prepare. The promises our lives are making.

How is it...?

I better tell you, I misled you earlier. At least in the story we've been given, those women - let's name them: Mary, Mary Magdalene, Salome, maybe others - they didn't actually go shouting - he is risen. I think they must've wanted to, though. I believe they felt it was true, in their hearts. But they were too afraid. Too afraid of claiming the possibility that their greatest hopes could be true. Too afraid to claim that rather than ending, life continues, on, and on, so abundantly, transformed, in love.

Let's not be afraid to claim this much life. All this life! It's right here. It's everywhere.

Our poet says: "This is no paradisaal dream." Forgiving and forgiven, we accept it all. We hold all the universe in our hearts. All the limits and possibilities, the terrifying and beautiful mystery of it all. Knowing we cannot know what new life will emerge out of this day. Out of the earth, out of the air, out of our love. Knowing it is all a gift. And we mostly just get to be grateful. Letting our hearts guide us, giving love to all we can, trembling and praising, with the best of ourselves, and so we become together a vision, of life - abundant life! - everlasting.

Amen, and Blessed Be.