

My Will Be Done
Worship Service – May 22, 2011
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist

Responsive Reading #568 Connections are Made Slowly by Marge Piercy

Leader: Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
All: You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.
Leader: More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.
All: Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.
Leader: Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.
All: Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.
Leader: Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar.
All: Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Leader: Live a life you can endure: make love that is loving.
All: Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.
Leader: Live as if you like yourself, and it may happen:
All: Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.
Leader: This is how we are going to live for a long time, not always,
All: For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

Sermon – My Will Be Done by Gretchen Haley

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done...

I was on my yoga mat when it first came back to me. I was sitting there, between poses, and in it crept. *Thy will be done*, as I inhaled. And as I exhaled, *thy will be done*.

Whether you called it the Lord's Prayer, or the Our Father, I'd guess a bunch of you know these words. And I'd guess most of you wouldn't expect to hear them at the opening of a Unitarian Universalist sermon. Even if you've prayed them regularly in the past, I'm guessing most here set it aside long ago – for its language, or what you feel are its underlying ideas, all of which feel maybe irrelevant or even nonsensical.

Like, the idea of God that comes up for most of us when we say “thy will.” Thy - it’s so formal, especially following the whole “Father” business. It sounds like, you know, big man in the sky, a single being, beyond us, above us, *thy*. And “will,” makes us think there’s some kind of plan, some kind of clear, pre-determined plan that someone out there has for us, for our lives, and we’d all be set if we just let that plan happen.

I’m with you, believe me. For all the journey I’ve been on over these last four years, the Our Father – that’s what we called it - is not something I’ve even thought to reclaim or re-imagine.

But still, on that day on my mat, struggling to stay present and give into the pose, give myself over to the practice, all I could hear in my mind were those words: *thy will be done*. And every day since, these words, *thy will be done* keep coming to me, as I breathe.

And yet, I confess most of the time, I don’t really understand them. Thy will be done. *Thy will*. What about *my will*? I mean, I get my will. *My will* makes sense. We Unitarian Universalists have always had a good sense about humans and our will, believing we have at least part, if not the whole job, in determining our own fate. We are traditionally, a willful people, and proudly so. As Galen Guengerich, the minister from All Souls Unitarian Universalist in New York City has said, even if God *does* exist, we are God’s hands, and if anything is going to happen in this life, then it depends on our action, our will.

And why not? We have great ideas afterall, great dreams for our lives, for our kids, for our friends, our communities. Our visions are often things of beauty, and together we believe, and we encourage each other - to *will* them into existence.

And most everything in our culture tells us that this is our job, as humans – to create for ourselves a grand and worthy vision, and then apply the hard work and tenacity it takes to turn these visions into a reality. In our politics, our schools, in our jobs, our marriages, our families, even in – sometimes especially in – our churches. Every step of the way, the person or community with the loudest voice, with the most passion and drive, for better or for worse, with the most tenacious presence almost always wins the day.

And actually, this kind of attitude, it’s served many of us well, in many ways. Just as an example, before seminary, the business I built – and I built it big – it was possible almost entirely because I stuck to this kind of philosophy, this kind of tenacious, driven will that capitalism loves so much.

But maybe you can guess something else about my business, something I’ll freely admit was one source of my journey to seminary, and definitely one source that brings me to my yoga mat, and even a source I could trace back to this prayer I’m offering to you as a kind of question. *Thy will be done...*

See, I had a couple great, consistent partners in making that business happen, and I certainly didn’t do it alone. But along the way, in those seven years, I didn’t make a lot of friends. It just

wasn't the point. And actually, for the most part, I took this in stride, like it was proof I had what it took, had the emotional and mental toughness to get the job done, no matter what. Especially as a woman in business, we should never underestimate the pressures to prove you won't let the squishiness of human feelings get in the way of the objective goal.

The goal is everything, and the people along the way, they are – I cringe to say it now, but I know it was true for me then just as I know it is true for so many business leaders and workers out there right now, working so hard – the people, they are important, but also, they are a means to an end.

I had a lot of success. A lot of success, and a sinking feeling in my gut that I was not at all practicing the kind of life I meant to be practicing. Not at all living the kind of life I mean to be living.

Philosopher Eugen Herrigel had been in Japan for over a year when he started to think back on his own questioning, his own decision about the kind of practice he meant to be having.¹

See, he came to Japan to study Zen Buddhism, and there had been many options by which to study this ancient wisdom, and of those he ultimately decided to choose the art of archery. He chose archery because he thought it would be like shooting a rifle, and he had some experience and training in rifle shooting, and so he thought he'd pick up archery more easily based on this experience. But as he quickly learned, this assumption was terribly wrong. Archery, at least when practiced in the way the Zen Master intended, had nothing at all to do with shooting a rifle.

A year in, Herrigel was feeling frustrated, to say the least. Not only did Zen remain elusive, his archery skills, were actually worse than when he started.

“What stands in your way,” said the great Zen master to Herrigel one day, over tea, “is that you have a much too willful will.”

At this stage in his training, Herrigel was just trying to release the bow.

He had figured out how to pull it back, now he just had to release it. He'd watched the Master do it, studied him very closely. He saw his right hand open, and release. And he saw how when it released, it took on all the tension of the release so that his body didn't move, at all. Which meant that the arrow could stay on course, and hit the target right there in the center, which was the point, afterall.

He'd been trying for months to move his body in just the right way, keep relaxed in all the right places. Release the arrow, without tension, so that he could hit the target, so that he could finally understand Zen.

¹ This story is adapted from Eugen Herrigel's book, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and direct quotes are referenced with page numbers accordingly.

And so he “practiced diligently and conscientiously according to the Master’s instructions,” knowing in his mind exactly what he needed to do, the right way to do it (28). And yet, as he admits, “all his efforts were in vain.”

And so when the Master responded to all his dutiful efforts, all his good responsible studying by telling him, “You have a much too willful will,” it must’ve been so irritating.

I mean, when you’re trying to do something, what else are you supposed to do – but try? Isn’t all effort, all aiming, all about having a determined will? Isn’t that the point of effort?

In exasperation, Herrigal pushed the Master – it sounds like you are telling me to try by not trying. I don’t understand. Isn’t the drawing of the bow, a means to an end? “I can’t lose sight of the connection. The two things cannot be disconnected” (31).

The Master pushed back: “The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen. You must learn to wait properly” (31).

See I think, in the midst of all our wills, good though they may be, everything comes down to what kind of practice we mean to be having, what kind of life we mean to be having. Are we shooting a rifle - or releasing a bow? In both, there’s a clear goal, a clear aim, of course, and with both, the aim matters. And yet these practices, they couldn’t be more different.

You know, I’ve had so many good conversations, with so many of you this year. Some funny, some sad, a few difficult, some curious, mostly hopeful, and thoughtful. It’s been a privilege to be in conversation with you this year. And mostly, I feel just so grateful. We have so much to celebrate.

Across all these conversations, it’s interesting. Though there’s quite a bit of diversity (as you’d expect), there’s also one great consistency, that is, what I’d describe as desire. And I think that desire can be categorized in three ways, that actually it turns out are common for so many who go seeking a church community.

First, desire for *belonging* – to feel really a part of a community, at its center, to know and be known by others in a really meaningful way. Second, a desire to experience *transcendence* – that is, to be a part of something bigger than yourself. And finally, a desire for *significance*, to feel like your time, your energy, your resources – that all of it matters. Not just for yourself individually, or even just for your family and friends - though these kind of desires are there too – but more, something that matters for the larger world.

And in all these desires – for *belonging*, *transcendence*, *significance*, in my conversations, I’ve heard you imagining the possibility that all these desires might be interconnected, they might all overlap, into a single embodied institution, something we call our Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist congregation. Not just for you, but for generations beyond you.

There's so much great desire here among you, and so much good, loving will. So much willful will.

And we know it *is* so Unitarian Universalist of us to be filled with this much will, these aims, that we want so badly for our arrows to hit just right. Whether individually, or together, we all pray, in words and in actions, "my will be done." Sometimes this year, I think we've even gotten to "*our* will be done. We get a vision of that shared will. When I was here the last time, for Easter, after the service, I looked around at all the life just blossoming everywhere, all the goodness, and I thought, it's happening.

This vision of intergenerational community, this sense of belonging, of transcendence, of significance. Our will be done, and our will, it turns out, can be so beautiful.

And still, we'd better all just admit to each other, that even when our aim is true and good – even when it's called "justice," or "community," or "truth," or "democracy," or whatever else we have decided takes ultimate precedence – whatever else we've decided is our aim - and it is truly important to have an aim, don't mishear me on that – but no matter what that aim is, we still have to remember – what kind of practice we mean to be having, what kind of life we mean to be having.

You might remember last I was here we talked about – how it is we live forever, and at the end, how it all comes down to the love we give each other – it all just comes down to that love, no matter what else we achieve or will, life is finally all a matter of how well we love.

In this life, despite what our culture might say, we aren't shooting a pistol, we're seeking transcendence. We aren't just getting good at a sport, we're yearning for belonging. We aren't taking all these steps just as a means to an end - the steps themselves, and how we take them, they matter. Which is to say, even if we never hit that end, the steps today, they still matter. Even if we never make our dreams a reality, the drawing of the bow today, it still matters.

This is not target practice – this life, or this church. None of this is supposed to be target practice.

It's an ancient art, that all of us are just learning. It's an ancient art – not a science, this life – it's not a machine, or a clock or any of those other ideas from the Enlightenment that make us believe that there's some way to control or predict all of it – or any of it. It's an art, and a dance, that we are discovering, that we are creating together – with our breath, with our presence, with our love.

And our breath holds this promise of connecting us with this ancient wisdom – found in Zen Buddhism, and in Hinduism, in Christianity and in Islam – it is this promise we enact in our covenant, this promise we practice again and again in our faith – where LOVE is the spirit, and service – to each other – is the law.

This is the life we're meant to be having, this is the kind of human life we are all meant to be having. Not rifle shooting, but the art of archery, and the two couldn't be more different. Not my will, but thine.

Which I'm starting to get, means that despite all our belief that what we do not do ourselves does not happen, there is maybe more going on here than what our individual or even collective will can make happen or explain. And yes I mean here in this religious community, and yes I mean here in our lives. Like Marge Piercy reminds us, "You cannot tell always by looking what is happening. More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet."

And so sometimes our job is just to find the ways our desire for the end, it might actually be getting in the way, and to learn to wait properly. And sometimes, our job is to release that arrow, not so we can hit the target, but just for the sake of release. For the sake of breath, for the sake of this great partnership, this great collaborative creation – me, you, we, thy. *Thy will be done.*

I don't pretend to understand it completely, but I think it has something to do with all of this – being open to this great partnership, something to do with giving into the gift that we don't have to do it all ourselves, that just as we didn't make this day, a new creation is always arriving, and sometimes our job is just to be present to the mysterious possibilities available in this miraculous universe.

And so we say this prayer that maybe still feels foreign but also curious, this prayer that imagines our job as a people who have these hopes, this will, to bring to this world just a little more salvation for us all – rather than living just for that ends out there, that aim, our job is to stay right here, to cultivate right here in front of us, always more compassion for everyone we meet - everyone.

To adjust and breathe, and to remember – to help each other remember – what kind of life we mean to be having, what kind of practice we mean to be having.

And it is all, after all, a practice, with all the freeing opportunity that word implies. There's no rule, it's all an experiment, a life where we just get to keep showing up, and breathe together, and love each other, love this moment, for all its limitations, for all its possibilities.

And so we look inside ourselves, individually, communally, and find the places we are in knots, find the places we're stuck, the ways our old patterns are holding us captive, and we practice together, setting ourselves, setting the world free. Practice together, making room for something new. And together, in this space of openness and self-reflection, in this place of letting go, hitting the target becomes right then that much more possible, our vision becomes that much more likely.

And so let us pray, not my will be done, or that your will be done, or even that our will be done, but *thy* will be done, and in doing so, we open ourselves up to this great partnership, this great collaboration called creation, this great practice called life.