

Hymn # 95 ,

“There Is More Love Somewhere”

Reading

Our reading this morning is “The Peace of Wild Things”, by the poet, essayist, environmental activist Wendell Berry.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Sermon: Impermanence and Still Waters,
by Rev. Dr. Nina D. Grey
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman, MT
November 16, 2014

Wendell Berry also wrote, “We clasp the hands of those that go before us, and the hands of those who come after us. We enter the little circle of each other’s arms, and the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance, and the larger circle of all creatures passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it, except in fragments.”

Wendell Berry is not only a poet, essayist and environmental activist, he is also a farmer. The life and death of plants and animals is his daily portion. He is also a husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. His legacy to me is his understanding that our lives are rooted in relationship. Like another writer, the late Rev. Forrest Church, who was minister of All Souls Church, a UU congregation in New York City on the upper east side for 30 years, it was his only congregation until he died in 2009, like Forrest Church, Berry found deepest meaning in those connections. One lived in the city, New York, the other in rural Kentucky but they both knew that love, of self, neighbor, family, nature and of that ultimate mystery that some call God, some call life, some call ground of being and have no names for, these are the essentials. These ways of loving are what sustain us. In times of change, of sorrow, of loss expected or unexpected, abiding friendships also hold and sustain me, and perhaps many of you.

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron writes about how we want to hold on, to people, to things as they are if we like how they are, and sometimes even if we don’t, fearing the devil in what we don’t know, more than the devil in what we know. But we can’t just hold on. Everything changes. We do not, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus put it, step in the same river twice. All is movement, sometimes gentle and sometimes rough, and sometimes very scary, something we fear, and sometimes heartbreaking.

What some call the last change, the change of death, is often, though not always, the hardest to bear. After a long life and perhaps after a particularly hard illness, it can be welcomed as a gift, or as a homecoming, or as an ending that brings relief. Or sometimes as an opening to a different level of being. Often though we fear our own death, or that of a loved one. We fear loss, the unknown, perhaps the pain we think we may face.

The writer the Rev. George Odell reminds us that in this part of life, facing our own death, or that of someone we love, as in all of life, we need one another. We need one another. This Fellowship is a community of love. We remind ourselves that love is the spirit of this church, we gather in a large circle holding hands, remembering that we give to one another, we receive from one another. In facing the impermanence of life, we need one another.

In his book, *Love and Death*, written just two years before he died from a recurrence of esophageal cancer, the Rev. Forrest Church wrote of the day he learned he had apparently inoperable cancer. He described such sudden pivotal moments when everything changes as open trapdoors that we did not foresee, when everything we know is falling away or we ourselves are falling through a dark hole into the unknown.

There is a cartoon where a woman is watering a plant on a windowsill, and there is a cat on the sill or under the sill. The woman is also on the phone and doesn't notice that the water can is aimed directly at the cat. But the cat finds out soon enough! The cat experiences a "trapdoor" when suddenly things change. The cartoon caption reads "Life is what happens when you are planning something else." We can plan our lives, and we do try to plan some of our life, and we even carry through with some plans but often life gets in the way.

My mother fell through the trapdoor when she got the phone call that my father had an accident, was at the hospital, one or both legs amputated, I don't remember which, and not expected to live. I fell through the trapdoor then too. That was a devastating shaking lesson of impermanence. But what also stays with me until today is that the Sherman family held us kids in their family embrace, and other neighbors quickly responded to help. I had to deal with feelings of abandonment and denial protected me from some of the devastation, and I also had a teacher, Mrs. Jantzen, who helped me to feel normal in that time of dreadful sudden loss. And my maternal grandparents showed up, traveling from Connecticut to Chicago, and they helped us know that we were not alone.

That trapdoor feeling can happen even if we know a person is dying for a long time. Maybe we realize that they were the ones who in our very soul we depended on even if they were most recently depending on us. Perhaps we do not feel as safe or as grounded as we did. And we are lonelier.

My daughter's partner's father died a month ago. The other day my daughter said to me that when her father or I die, she will probably feel devastated. I don't think we can know exactly what we will feel. And perhaps we will feel nothing for a time, a kind of

protective layer of numbness. But at such a loss, even if our relationships weren't perfect, and none of them are perfect, even if they were complicated, and many of them are complicated, even if we have a hard time locating feelings of love, still we will grieve, each in our own way. Our grief, Rev. Forrest Church wrote, is a measure of our love. Once we are born, he reminds us, we are fated to die, though how and when remains a mystery, and once we learn to love, we are fated to experience loss.

But he also reminds us of this. That if we allow ourselves to be open to the love that existed, even in imperfect relations, even in complicated relations, though we and others will die, the love that was will not die. Love transcends death.

Church urges us to be less afraid of whatever we fear, to take a chance on living, to let in love for it is our salvation in an impermanent world. He writes that however long a life, if we will live it with less fear and more love, we will develop a greater gratitude for the gift that both life and love are. If we show up to our lives, if we are present to our loves, then life will be a gift worth having.

When the planes hit the twin towers at the World Trade Center. I was having coffee with a colleague prior to going to our once monthly collegial gathering in Oak Park, IL, and we were just paying our bill at the counter when we saw the TV on the counter, and the picture of the tower with the first airplane sticking out of it. And we saw the second plane hit. And we both said "Oh My God" not only for the tragedy it was for others but because we each remembered that we had children in New York City!

In his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, one of my teachers, Scott Peck wrote, "Life is difficult." I remember thinking, 'Oh! So it is not just my life that is difficult? It is normal that life is hard?' Being a positive thinker, and in some denial about hard things, whenever I ran into an obstacle, I tended to be surprised. Isn't life supposed to be a breeze? But it isn't.

The Buddha taught so many centuries ago that life is suffering. Forrest Church repeats that lesson, and I realize that finally I have come to accept its truth. That day, when the planes hit the tower, life was hard for our whole nation, and especially hard for the people of New York City and Washington DC and most especially for those who were in the towers or the Pentagon or who had families and friends who died. I responded with fear and with dread. I was afraid for my child and my grandchild.

I was afraid in something like that way, for myself and then for my young daughter during the decades of the cold war, when the air raid alarms went off. I wanted to be with her no matter where she was. And I am afraid for them now, when our nation

is getting more polarized, when there is so much climate change denial, and when the stakes surrounding so many decisions are so high.

Wendell Berry wrote, “When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

Perhaps the wood drake and the heron have no forethought of death or grief. And when we lay down in their presence, in the presence of still water, with the canopy of our birthplace stars above us, we can feel our oneness with all creation, we can remember the truth of the unity of all being, that our world is both many-splendored as well as multi-fractured. We can find some moments of peace.

But we are human, and being human we are the ones for whom, as the Rev. Forrest Church preached so often, “Religion is the human response to the dual reality of being born and having to die.” We are ones who know we will die. We are the ones who can expect change. Impermanence. Which is not to say we will not be shaken by it. But if we will be aware of our fears, if we will breathe out fear and breathe in love, if we will join hands remembering that from you I receive, to you I give, then our love can be something like a healing salve.

The book of First Corinthians in the Christian bible reminds us that though faith, hope and love, abide, the greatest of these is love. Sometimes anger, hurt and other emotions block us from the truth of love, and so we need to work those through. We need to recognize that we all love imperfectly well, our parents, our children, our loved ones, ourselves, we all love imperfectly well, we need to recognize that we don't always understand ourselves let alone each other, and so sometimes we need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation when it is possible, to offer forgiveness and reconciliation when it is possible.

I had to work such things through with my dad, even after he died. Sometimes that is when we do that work. Children and parents often have stuff between them and hopefully can take time while both are still alive and able to work things out, allowing the love that is there, however imperfectly expressed, to flow beyond death and bring healing to our hearts.

Because we know that life is fragile, that we only have each other for a time, we can know the truth that each day is precious. We can choose to show up to our own lives, and show up to the lives of those we love.

When my daughter was a young adult, she was my teacher. She taught me that the way I responded to her when she was troubled did not feel like showing up to her. I tried to give her advice, but what she wanted, what she needed was for me to just listen. Every now and then I forget still, but mostly now I remember. I had to let go of the fear of my own helplessness. I had to let go of thinking I had to fix everything for her. I am better able to just show up now.

A lady at an adult summer camp was my teacher. I am talking about my teachers because you have teachers too, people who have taught you something about how to face impermanence. That lady at an adult summer camp was my teacher. She drove me crazy. I avoided her whenever I could. Mysteriously she ended up in all the same groups I was in. Finally I wondered, what can I learn from her? I saw that the things bothering me about her were true of me, too. I began to see myself more clearly and accept those parts of me and then also of her. And I began to let go of being so readily judgmental.

Letting go of fear and judgment is a way to make more room for acceptance and the love that grows between and among us. And it is love that is essential.

We do not step in the same river twice. The pace of change multiplies. And love and loss are ever with us. When despair grows in us, when we worry about the future of ourselves and our children, when we struggle with wanting to hold on to what may slip and slid away, we can go down to where the wood drake and the heron feed, we can go up to the hills, and we can also take a chance on loving.

“We clasp the hands of those that go before us and the hands of those that come after us, we enter into the little circle of each other’s arms, and the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance, and the larger circle of all creatures moving also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it, except in fragments.” When someone moves out of the circle, when a loved one dies, we grieve the loss each in our own way.

Let us grieve still encircled in the dance, still holding hands, helping each other grieve, helping each other remember love, helping each other remember that love transcends death. Love Abides. Amen.