

Priorities

December 30, 2018

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev Paul Beckel

WELCOME

Ahhh...they're still coming in. Make Room!

Make room for the joyous, those hoping to share some good news with a receptive listener.

Make room for the frightened, those who need time to sit and reconsider their place in life.

Make room for the angry, caught between the desire to act on their anger,

and the desire to let it fade.

Make room for the hungry. Those whose needs have gone unmet for too long.

Make room. Make room. Make room for the winners, whether they deserved it or not.

Make room for the losers, whether they deserved it or not.

Make room for the great and the small...the agile and the awkward.

Make room for the latecomers, the badgered, the careless, the carefree, and the oblivious. Make way for their rush, their frivolity, their sweetness, their regret.

Why make room? Because there's a chance that there are still more who share in what draws us here today – which, according to Annie Dillard – well, let's read together her own words from the hymnal, #420:

“We are here to abet creation and to witness to it, to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.”

Today let's consider priorities. Take time to step back, to reflect ... to be still, now, before a new year is thrust upon us.

GATHERING SONG *Abide with Me* #101

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

MILESTONES

READING “The Woodcarver” by Chuang Tzu

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand

Of precious wood.

When it was finished,

All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be

The work of spirits.

The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:

“What is your secret?”

Khing replied

“I have no secret. There is only this:

When I began to think about the work you commanded

I guarded my spirit, did not expend it
On trifles, that were not to the point.

“I fasted in order to set
My heart at rest.
After three days fasting, I had forgotten gain and
Success.
After five days
I had forgotten praise or criticism.
After seven days
I had forgotten my body
With all its limbs.

“By this time all thought of your Highness
and of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.

“Then I went to the forest
to see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond
Doubt.
All I had to do was to put forth my hand
And begin.

“If I had not met this particular tree
there would have been
no bell stand at all.

“What happened?
My own collected thought
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits.”

MEDITATION / SILENCE (5:00)

MESSAGE, PART 1

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand
Of precious wood. When it was finished,
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be the work of spirits.

What does it mean, “master” carver? Could this story apply to any of us? Or is Khing unique in his capacity to focus, and create? Does he become master carver before, or after, the bell stand is completed?

The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:

“What is your secret?”

Khing replied: “...When I began to think about the work you commanded ... I went to the forest.”

“The work you commanded...” So wait, is this a master carver, or a slave?

Of these two, who is most free? The commander or the one commanded? (Can either of them be self-transcendent if one is subordinate to the other?)

How have *you* been commanded ... or “called?” I like the part in the story where Khing speaks of having *forgotten even His Highness*, it being *essential* to forget even the one who had commanded him, in order to focus instead on the creative act to which he was called. I like that because I most assuredly recognize that *I have been called* into my life project, but I’m easily distracted into speculation about where or who that call came from ... instead of diving into the work itself.

Those of us who are atheists may be resistant to the notion that our lives have purpose -- because we can’t accept the possibility that someone or a particular *something* has dictated that purpose.

Those of us who are theists may become fearful of the heaviness of the command, or stymied by perfectionism, or reduced to gibberish.

Can we instead, simply go into the forest ... see the trees in their own natural state.

When the right tree appears before your eyes,

put forth your hand

And begin.

Several years ago I received a fortune cookie with a similar message. It said, “There was nothing left to do but begin.” I wonder if that cookie and this story arose from the same source. In any case, I remember it because I kept that fortune in my wallet for a long time. It was a regular reminder to me about my tendency to procrastinate.

Still, these are gentle words. They do not convey pressure, or urgency. “Nothing left to do but to put forth my hand, and begin.”

==

“If I had not met this particular tree

there would have been

no bell stand at all.

Some of us, perhaps, are not yet ready to begin, not yet having met our particular tree. Some of us may have already carved an extraordinary bell stand, or we started on the wrong tree. In either case, today, we could be between trees.

==

I opened myself and I encountered the hidden potential in the wood; from this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits.”

This is the process of creative diminishment.

The master carver has applied to himself the same process
that he has applied to the tree
Stripping away the excess
To reveal the whole

I imagine that that is what you do too, whether you are preparing a lesson plan or a legal case, repairing an engine, snaking a toilet, or writing a love letter.

Stripping away the excess to reveal the whole.

==

Where does this ancient story intersect
With your spirit
At this point in your life?

Does it represent a call to divest yourself of excess baggage?
To let go of some fear?
To allow yourself vision?
To embark on a long-delayed project or exploration?

==

What should I do today?
Is this already determined? Does the past dictate what I will think, what I will choose, who I will be today?

How shall I live today?

Don't ask the question if you're not prepared to be uncomfortable.
Because you may discover answers that you didn't expect.
New paths
Dead ends
And paths that call you in new directions
Paths that will require resources which you don't yet realize you already have.
And any path we choose will be a path of loss.

Toward that

Away from this.

Let's take a short break for quiet reflection. Go now into the forest to see the trees in their own natural state.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

MESSAGE, PART 2

To properly tell the story of the woodcarver, I should have included some very long pauses. For example, right before the line "when the right tree appeared...."

Because, for many of us, there may be a very long pause before the right tree appears.

A story is told of some 19th century first world explorers who conscripted aboriginal people to carry baggage for them on a long expedition. After traveling hard, day after day, the porters stopped. They did not seem begrudging. They were not being obstinate. But they would not proceed. The explorers were dumbfounded, but finally received an interpretation: "The porters say that they have come so far so fast that they must stop to wait for their souls to catch up with them."

2018 felt kind of like that. Sometimes it feels like that when we're making progress: we come so far so fast that we need time for our souls to catch up. Sometimes it feels like that when we're on a long course of decline. Sometimes it's a flurry of change. A blur of internal mayhem, resulting, in the end, in little discernable movement from there to here. And nonetheless, we need to stop to wait for our souls, our hearts, our executive function, our ethical equilibrium

==

There is a time for every purpose under heaven.

The growing cycle of the North American temperate zone has now passed through the seasons of planting, tending, and harvesting. Within that particular cycle, it is now fallow time.

Fallow time is not dead time. During rest, and sleep, there is still much going on beneath the surface: regeneration / reconsideration.

Fallow time comes to earth. Fallow time comes to individuals. It comes to families as well, work groups, organizations.

==

What should I do today?

What are my priorities? YES!

Yes, sometimes overwhelming yes.

In the future, in this moment, some intriguing alternatives. Some worthy of exploration, some irrelevant. Many leading nowhere.

==

It is 2018, closing in on '19. Swiftly flow the years ... and the milestones we have shared, births and deaths, celebrations and loss. Last week we committed ourselves to the wellbeing of a toddler taking her first steps here, on toward the swiftly passing years of childhood. Looking forward, knowing how quickly these years will pass, we might worry: How can we possibly keep up?

==

My high school cross country coach always reminded us to pay attention to priorities. Cross country was important. But homework was more important, our families were more important than schoolwork, and our relationship with God always came first.

I resented that. Who was he, I wondered, to tell me what my priorities must be? And anyway, who could imagine a simple hierarchy like that? If I took that scheme seriously did it mean that I could never do anything on the lower rungs because the higher rungs were always more important?

How about the woodcarver?
Did he carve just ONE bell stand?
Is this an allegory for an entire life's work?
a single pass/fail test for salvation?

I don't see priorities that way – as all or nothing or strictly hierarchical. I take the story of the woodcarver as *a reflection upon any and every act of mindful focus* to which we are called.

Opportunities to save the world
Opportunities to savor it

Opportunities to which we will appropriately say, "No."
Or "not yet"

==

May we take time today to forget success and failure, praise and criticism ... May we take time tomorrow, just five minutes here and there, to forget success and failure, praise and criticism.

And in the new year
through cycles of sowing, tending, harvest, and rest,
sowing, tending, harvest, and rest...
may we accept, adapt, witness, and live so as to be alive

SHARING OUR GIFTS

I'll Begin Again

CLOSING SONG

I Know this Rose will Open #396

CIRCLE 'ROUND