

PRESENCE

Sermon by The Rev. Kathleen Hepler
First Parish in Framingham UU
September 13th, 2015

READING

“The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.”

Henry Miller

Is there any greater gift than the gift of close attention? Can you recall how you felt on an occasion when the person with whom you were engaged was totally focused on you, eager to know your thoughts, and genuinely interested?

I wonder if you have in such moments the same feeling that I have? When you pay close attention to me, I feel respected. And thus, respected, I will do my utmost to make what I am saying or what I am doing the very best it can be. Why? Because I know that you are really listening and taking me seriously.

Your attention calls forth my best efforts.

Close attention is one of the finest gifts we can give our children. It is to them as water and warm sun to a blooming flower. It calls forth their best.

But novelist Henry Miller is taking this a step further. He speaks of paying close attention to a blade of grass, and says that it too will respond by putting forth its best and becoming awesome and magnificent.

Why not? When you pay close attention to me you will see in me what might have remained hidden, even from me. So with a blade of grass: When you pay attention, you will see what has been there all along, but is now, with the gift of your close attention, revealed.

Pay close attention and open to an indescribably magnificent world. (author unknown)

SERMON

Happy New Year! In Judaism Rosh Hashanah begins today! And we begin again today, this our New Year, the 314th year of worship at First Parish in Framingham! Welcome beloveds! The theme for today's sermon, is also the spiritual growth theme for September in our community: "Presence".

If you are here please say Present when your name is called.

(Minister called out a few names and people answered "Present!" Then everyone said "Present!" together)

When we said "here" in grade school, we meant that we were physically present. We consider today the benefits of teaching ourselves to, more and more, be present in the present with body, mind and spirit.

Many religious traditions offer salvation if you follow their path. Stay the course and follow the rules and eternal life is yours. I came to Unitarian Universalism because I wanted to practice living this life right now more fully, more lovingly, more justly, more vitally. Whatever anyone here this morning believes about what happens after death, our tradition is eminently focused on this life. Mindfulness, or the practice of being fully present is one way to achieve this.

This story is called “When Shoes Were Invented”. A Buddhist monk asked his students how they might be able to better handle the distractions, the sufferings and the busyness of the world. One student came up with the idea that if we covered the world in soft cloth, it would not be so painful to walk upon it, to live upon it. The teacher listened and responded by saying that the world is not amenable to such control. We cannot change it or cover it in softness to make it less painful or confusing. Life swirls around us. Or, it flows along. We cannot stop that. We can, however, put cloth on each of our own two feet; tending to our own walking so that we are more able to walk with compassion and love. The monk teaches that we can impact how we relate to the world by changing the “shoes” of our minds.

I want to approach three points about “presence” here today. First, our minds have evolved to have wonderful thinking capabilities. We can remember the past and project into the future. But, as far as teaching our minds to settle down and be in the present moment, we have work to do! Second, there are many ways to practice being more present, and anyone can do it. Third, love (the purpose of our spiritual lives) flourishes only in such “presence”.

One...our evolving brains and presence: Mark Twain wrote that “he spent most of his life worrying, mostly about things that never happened”. It’s like this: Our bodies are present somewhere, but our minds are somewhere else. This morning we might be thinking about the interaction we had in the parking lot with someone. We might be thinking about our child who is in a crisis; and we are so very anxious about what will happen in the unknown future. We are thinking about how much we have to get accomplished today after the service is over, hoping that it won’t be a long one! We are wondering if anyone notices this or that about us. We are judging this or that about someone else.

We all know these mental meanderings. They are so common to us that we mostly don’t even know that we are not present in the present. We have accepted hanging out in the past or the future as, well, just how it is.

Yesterday I went out into my yard to pick raspberries. I love to do this and it can be a meditation for me...a way to love the present in all of its glory. I pick from the top of each branch the dark and juicy ones, the ones that are ready, the ones that if not picked will drop away before tomorrow. I focus on gently tugging, for if that does not release the berry, it is not ready. I am amazed at the bounty. Every step there is another cluster of delight. I eat a few as I go along. The bees are behaving and pleasure in the moment is mine.

And then I’m off to the races! I think, “This is a perfect example for the sermon I am writing on “Presence”. In my mind I am writing it, thinking about where it will go. These thoughts lead to others, and in a short time, I have visited and mulled over some things in the past, and I have planned or become anxious about things in the future. Most of where my mind goes has nothing at all to do with raspberries!

All the while I kept picking the raspberries, but I was absent.

We are distinguished from other living beings by our ability to remember the past and to project, to imagine, into the future. Over millennia we have developed this thinking brain. "But this way of thinking can be a double-edged sword. Consider, for example, that a zebra runs for its life when chased by a lion, but once the chase is over, it quickly returns to grazing on the savannah. But this is seldom the case for humans because we constantly think, analyze, fantasize, predict and anticipate. These new brain capacities can cause us to spend half of our day dwelling on how terrible it would have been if the lion had caught us. We might run all kinds of images and fantasies through our minds which terrify us. And then we worry about whether something similar might happen tomorrow-what if we don't spot it next time and what if the children go out. And what if and what if....this is the downside of our newer brain capacities."

Indeed we might be so caught up in our self-terrifying that the lion will have us as an easy pluck! Some time ago, I confess to you, I found myself on a very familiar and somewhat busy road going the wrong way. Cars were flashing their lights and beeping their horns, frantically trying to get me into the present. There was just enough of a pause in the traffic for me to do a U-turn, and, thankfully, no one was hurt. For the life of me, I do not know how that happened. I simply was not present when I turned on to the one-way street going the wrong way!

Listen! We are more than that which has happened in our past and/or our interpretations of it! We are so much more than our plans and anxieties about the future. Learning how much more we are requires that we experience ourselves in the present.

This is it. Right now. Take a breath in easy-like. Let it out. Let the breath remind you that you are more than the "humanah humanah" in your head. Notice the close-by environment. Your own hands, the luster of the wood on the pew, the presence of he or she who sits near. You are alive and here gathered. Give thanks for this precious moment.

Gratitude is a powerful vehicle for bringing the mind into a positive present state. What are some other ways?

Meditation is another tool that can train the mind to observe itself and to not get snared up in the automatic mind cycle of fear and dread or regret. We have two times here at First Parish every week when you can gather with others to meditate. Sitting with others is very powerful.

Meditation is not everyone's thing....but breathing is. Simply focusing on our breath can bring us more fully into the present moments of life.

Likewise we can all use predictable activities to teach ourselves to be present. Thich Nhat Hahn opens his book, "The Miracle of Mindfulness" with the suggestion of being present while washing the dishes. Brushing your teeth, combing your hair, walking from your house to your car. We can decide to notice those common activities, to hear and see and smell and touch what being there doing that in the present is like.

And the third point I want to make today: the creation of love on earth comes through presence. In her book called Love 2.0, Dr. Barbara Frederickson shares the results of research about love. The bottom line of that research is that love lives in small moments when people slow down enough and interact with others fully present. These moments are called "positivity resonance" and they are the core of how love can actually have positive and lasting impacts on people. And we can do this over and over all day long. It is a great practice!

We need this from one another, this loving resonance. Being with another without judgment or expectation...being there with the intent to see and hear them....being there to support their unfolding without agenda is the one of the most powerful gifts we can give one another.

In my opinion we experience the Sacred in these moments of “positivity resonance”.

William Blake wrote, “If the doors of the mind were cleansed everything that appears to humans would appear as it is, infinite.” This is the spiritual journey: to increasingly know ourselves as the conduits of that love which is eternal, which is in us but larger than us.

Children are busy these days with all of the lessons and sports and activities and homework we provide for them. Yet, what they need the most from us is our unadorned attention. The eyes of love beckoning them into their full flowering, the mirror of love reflecting to them the deepest truth of who they are. This is what every human being needs and can give.

Our new Director of Religious Exploration, Nate Sellers, has made “Presence” the main theme of the year in our Church School Program. More crucial than the information children might receive, beyond learning UU principles or what the Flaming Chalice means (not that this is insignificant) is the experience of being fully seen, heard, known and loved by the adults in their spiritual home.

I call for “Presence” to be the theme for our entire community. Full presence in love and acceptance with one another; the intentional practice of meeting one another without agenda and pre-conception, without judgment or preoccupation.

Nurturing church life and planning for its future, especially right now when churches are not necessarily something that younger people will gravitate toward creates anxiety among us. Whatever happened or will happen, we always have the power to transform our hearts and minds moment to moment together. In my opinion this is why we exist at all. And, whatever our age, this is the sacred living in us and between us.

“In truth, the more we let love flow, the more we have to love. This is the inner glow that sages and saints of all ages seem to share: the wash of their love over everything before them; not just people, but birds and rocks and flowers and air. Beneath the many choices we have to make, love, like water, flows back into the world through us. “ (from ‘Love Like Water’ Mark Nepo)

Here is a mantra to keep in mind as we go forth hoping to incarnate the call to love: “Have compassion for everyone you meet, even if they don’t want it. What seems conceit, bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone. “ (Miller Williams)

I invite you to know yourself as the conduit for a great and mighty love. May you greet the next person and the next and the next with your spacious and aware presence. Let this transform your sense of who you are. And, so may it be.

BENEDICTION

Right now, every moment, any moment, now
is the right time to bless others with a whisper about their goodness,

their worth and strength.
Right now in the neighborhood of our living
to bless them with your spacious attention.

Rev. Kathleen Hepler 9/13/2015