

While I'm Here

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

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Rod Richards

Opening Words (#419, attributed to Kalidasa)

Look to this day!

For it is life, the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the verities

and realities of your existence:

The bliss of growth

The glory of action

The splendor of beauty;

For yesterday is but a dream,

And tomorrow is only a vision;

But today, well lived, makes every yesterday

A dream of happiness

And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.

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Readings

A monk once asked Jo Ju, "I have just entered the monastery. Please teach me, Master."

Jo Ju said, "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes, I have," replied the monk.

"Then," said Jo Ju, "wash your bowls."

The monk was enlightened.

--Zen Story

It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenges. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem.

But I arise in the morning torn by the twin desires to reform the world and to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

--E.B. White

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Song

There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone

And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone

And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't feel the flowing of the time when I'm gone

All the pleasures of love will not be mine when I'm gone

My pen won't pour a lyric line when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't breathe the bracing air when I'm gone

And I can't even worry 'bout my cares when I'm gone

Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't be running from the rain when I'm gone

And I can't even suffer from the pain when I'm gone

Can't say who's to praise and who's to blame when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

Won't see the golden of the sun when I'm gone

And the evenings and the mornings will be one when I'm gone

Can't be singing louder than the guns when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

All my days won't be dances of delight when I'm gone

And the sands will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone

Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't be laughing at the lies when I'm gone

And I can't question how or when or why when I'm gone

Can't live proud enough to die when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone

And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone

And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it

I guess I'll have to do it

Guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

--Phil Ochs, *When I'm Gone*

When I first asked Emma about singing this, she kindly agreed to give it a listen. She liked other Phil Ochs songs and told me to go ahead and send her a copy of the song. So I put a CD in the mail to her, and the next time we spoke she said, "Great song!...Lotsa verses." And, indeed, there *are* a lot of verses to the song.

As I thought about that, I imagined Phil Ochs writing the song sort of like a to-do list and, just as will happen with a to-do list, it just kept expanding as he thought of *one more thing* that had to be included.

"Let me see...oh, yeah, sing louder than the guns. There! That should do it...oh, wait! Laugh at the lies. Yes, I've gotta remember to laugh at the lies today. I'll add that here...and the laundry, do the laundry, pick up bread..."

But, really, the great thing about this song, and the reason we decided not to edit any of the many verses, is because *it is not* just a to-do list. Yes, it's about action, it's about doing our share, adding our names to the fight, standing up for what is right, but it's also about *appreciation* of the pleasures of love, the flowing of time, the golden sun, and even cherishing the chances we have to *worry* about our cares. It's about action *and* appreciation, and, in that sense, it provides a wonderful balance between what E.B. White describes as those conflicting desires to *enjoy* the world or to *reform* the world.

When I came across the E.B. White quote a couple years ago, my first inclination, upon self-examination, was to conclude that I spent far too much time enjoying the world and not enough time reforming it. On further introspection, I decided that, though I maybe hadn't been instrumental in any important reforms of late, I did spend a lot of time *complaining about* the world and *talking about* how it should be reformed, so maybe I was out of balance in that direction. The truth is, of course, that, though E.B. White sets up a very recognizable human dilemma, it is our focus on the dilemma, our insistence that this is an either/or proposition, which can effectively keep us from enjoying *or* reforming the world.

When I am enjoying the world, I scold myself for not acknowledging all those areas in need of reform, and when I enmesh myself in the struggle to change things, I scold myself for not stopping to smell the roses. We want to *do* the things that need to be done, but there's so damned many things to do that sometimes we just want to *be* without even *thinking about* what should be done.

Let's not mince words. We will be asking you today to volunteer to *do* things for the church. The Board has put together a myriad of tasks that need to be done, and you can sign up for any of those that match your skills and preferences...but I think of this less as trying to get you to do something you don't want to do, and more as providing you the opportunity to give. (I hope you do, too). I am convinced that people come to church from a desire to *give* of themselves and their time as much as a *desire* to receive something, and it's all-too-common that we don't provide clear opportunities for giving.

Let me provide you with a rather extreme example. A church where I was doing an internship had decided early on in their history not to pass the plate for offering during the service. There was something sandwiched within the scripted welcome (or maybe just a short note printed on the order of service) saying that if you wished to make an offering, there was a box with a slot in the top mounted on the wall at the back of the church, etc.

My first Sunday there, I remember there was this woman who was visiting for the first time, and she was walking around after the service with this check in her hand, looking haplessly and helplessly for the magic box. She latched onto me, as she had seen me up front doing the readings for the service, and decided that certainly *I* must know where the box was...

Do you think I could find it? I was trying to surreptitiously nudge one of the members as we made our way around the sanctuary, and finally someone led her to the box, and I tried to nod knowingly as if I'd known where it was all along, sure, yeah...

And I wonder sometimes how many of our visitors and new members and long-time members, too, are in that position of wanting to give and not knowing quite how to go about it. We want to take a first step toward rectifying that situation today. We rely on your feedback as to how to make this system more efficient in the future. We want you to be and truly feel a part of the shared ministry of this congregation.

And as I speak of ministry in this context, I have to be a little cautious, as I recall a circumstance with my mother-in-law at her church about five years ago. This congregation was in the middle of reviving *their* internal volunteer efforts, and were now drafting people for various duties into what they called "ministry teams." She did not care for this one bit. "If you want me to pour coffee, ask me to pour coffee, but don't tell me it's ministry." She felt that they were trying to glamorize simple tasks and that, in that sense, it was condescending to the volunteers. I understand what she meant and, believe me, I don't wish to condescend...and at the same time, I see why they may have called them "ministry teams."

The fact is that many of the actual tasks of ministry are pretty simple and straightforward and, well, mundane. They are cast in a special light in the context of the community and its mission. Because we

are doing them with and for each other and for a larger vision of what we can do in the world, making coffee *is* ministry, filing newsletters *is* ministry, folding orders of service *is* ministry, pricing items for the rummage sale *is* ministry...

My very *first* day at my internship, the minister, Victoria Safford, was on her way to a memorial service that morning and asked me if I'd like to come along. I did. Upon reaching the funeral home, I did my best to be helpful, which in this case involved setting up a CD player and cueing the song the family had chosen and playing it at the appropriate moment in the service. Victoria congratulated me afterwards on having performed my first task as Intern Minister, and dubbed me "God's Roadie." I wore this title proudly, and as I got a little more experience in ministry, it seemed all the more appropriate.

For instance, this church had ripped up the pews that had been part of the Methodist Church that had resided there previously, and put chairs in the sanctuary. This was very handy for many things, because the chairs could be moved. This also, of course, meant that the chairs needed to be moved *back* into order by Sunday Service time, and that task often fell to us. Thursday or Friday afternoon, I would look for Victoria in her office and, finding she wasn't there, poke my head into the sanctuary where she would be moving chairs. I would join in, doing my best to pick up on the Feng Shui of it all and never quite succeeding, but enjoying it nonetheless, and thinking, "So...this is ministry."

"I have just arrived at the church, Teacher. Please teach me ministry."

"Will it be time for services soon?"

"Yes, Teacher."

"Then move the chairs."

And the Intern Minister was enlightened.

And I really began to look forward to chair-moving. We would go about our task, sometimes silently, sometimes in conversation, but always, it felt, in harmony. And as I grew to know the congregation, I began to think of the people that would be sitting in the various chairs and, while maybe it wasn't exactly like testing the mike for Mick Jagger, I did feel especially honored to be arranging chairs for each of those individuals who would soon be there, singing hymns, making announcements, doodling on their orders of service, smiling across the sanctuary at friends, coming and coming back faithfully every week seeking inspiration or enlightenment or camaraderie or maybe just respite.

But I learned that so much of ministry is set-up, readying sermons, buying flowers, emailing orders of service, moving chairs, outlining classes, in preparation for...call it God or what you will, spirituality or inspiration or awareness, none of this can be manufactured, it can't be produced, we can only, like roadies, make the preparations, check the mikes, set the stage, work the lights. This is no "show", not a performance, but we do wait on a certain mystery, a magic, a mindfulness that speaks to our uniquely to

us all and that, yet, we share...

And you know as well as I do that there can be holy ground in front of the coffee pot as well as in those pews or behind this pulpit, that it all depends on our relatedness and our openness to each other and to a vision that calls us always beyond our own selves to give to something larger...but for that to happen in front of the coffee pot, someone has to make the coffee, and this all translates into hundreds of different tasks that need to be done. And beyond needing you all to volunteer to *do* things, we ever and always call you also to *be present* in the doing. We not only need you to *do* these tasks...we need *you* to do these tasks.

I like to think that this congregation is a place where we help each other to be present to the moment that is before us. "Look to this day, for it is life, the very life of life!" As working on the mission of this church calls us into the future, it is worth recognizing that that mission will be carried out in small ways at every moment, and we come together to carry out this work. It is here that we find impetus for our action, so that our doing is not just another line on the to-do list, but is indeed our thank you to this community, our grateful response for this life.

Luther said good works stem from gratitude at the grace that is freely bestowed upon us. Phil Ochs understood that it is our gratitude for this life that calls us to reform the world, not our complaints, not our dissatisfaction, and assuredly not our guilt. Luther was right, Phil Ochs was right, our hymn this morning was right when it called us to "feel the deep power of being in all" so that we can "work toward a planet transformed by our care." It is the smile we receive on the way in the door that motivates our doing; it is feeling a connection with the concerns of another that inspires our compassion for those we don't know; it is the feeling of connection to a power beyond joy or sadness that causes us to do our best to bless the world with it; it is a kind word; it is Violet's face; it is a piece of music that touches a chord within. We are an interdependent microcosm of the macrocosm, and it is the spinning of gratitude into action into gratitude into action that creates the web that holds us.

Phil Ochs committed suicide in 1976 at the age of 35. I don't pretend to know what led to that act. As with other suicides, I'm sure there are many explanations, none of them good enough. And I'm not trying to oversimplify the complexities of clinical depression or bipolar disorder (which Phil Ochs was diagnosed with), but I do believe that there are people out there everyday dying, physically or emotionally or spiritually, (and in the midst of the suffering, it hardly matters which), dying of loneliness, starving to be heard, thirsting for connection to a community of people who care, eager to do their part. That's why the light of this chalice needs to burn bright enough to rival the golden of the sun. Our welcoming hymn needs to be louder than the guns. There are bowls to wash and chairs to move and pain to feel and songs to sing (and *how can we* keep from singing?)...There is morning air to breathe and rummage sales to organize and evening light to celebrate and babies to dedicate...

And we can't do any of this when we're gone....So I guess we'll have to do it while we're here.

Closing Words (#693)

From Kurt Vonnegut's novel, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, in which a character who is not at all religious is invited to baptize newborn twins. He sprinkles them with water and says these words:

Hello, Babies! Welcome to earth.

It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter.

It's round and wet and crowded.

At the outside, Babies, you've got about a hundred years here.

There's only one rule that I know of, Babies:

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIND.