

All Our Becomings

a sermon delivered to Arlington Street Church (Unitarian Universalist)  
Boston, Massachusetts  
Sunday, October 18, 2009

© Rev. Yvonne Schumacher Strejcek, Acting Associate Minister

Good Morning!

What an honor and a blessing it is to be here with you today. I am so glad you are all here. Again I extend a warm welcome. My name is Yvonne Schumacher Strejcek, your acting associate minister here at Arlington Street Church this year. Our senior minister, Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie, is away this week, but please know that she'll be back in the pulpit next Sunday, as I already mentioned in our announcements this morning.

I would like to begin my message this morning with the reading of one of my favorite poems, entitled "Praise What Comes," written by poet Jeanne Lohmann. She writes:

*Praise What Comes*

surprising as unplanned kisses, all you haven't deserved  
of days and solitude, your body's immoderate good health  
that lets you work in many kinds of weather. Praise

talk with just about anyone. And quiet intervals, books  
that are your food and your hunger; nightfall and walks  
before sleep. Praising these for practice, perhaps

you will come at last to praise grief and the wrongs  
you never intended. At the end there may be no answers  
and only a few very simple questions: did I love,

finish my task in the world? Learn at least one  
of the many names of God? At the intersections,  
the boundaries where one life began and another

ended, the jumping-off places between fear and  
possibility, at the ragged edges of pain,  
did I catch the smallest glimpse of the holy?

~ Jeanne Lohmann ~

(from *The Light of Invisible Bodies*, Fithian Press, 2003)

I have a picture postcard with an image that moves me deeply. I love it so much that I have framed it, and it hangs on the wall by my desk at home where I do most of my writing. On the back of this postcard the postcard's publisher has written a caption, which reads "Morning Rapture. Dawn arrives with a burst of sunlight shafting through giant redwoods." The photo is taken somewhere undisclosed along the Redwood Highway of Northern California, and I probably picked it up on one of my journeys years ago when I lived in that part of our amazing, beautiful country. The postcard offers something like the image I found for the front of today's Order of Service. Though that image is not it, exactly, it's the closest I could find online, preparing for this morning's service.

Sometimes words just can't capture an idea, a feeling. A picture needs to be drawn for the mind's eye, for the imagination. In this case, it's a picture of a lush forest, towering redwoods, streaming beams of light. See it, in your mind. Be there.

Sunlight shafting quietly, serenely, yet filled with ineffable life sustaining power streaming through giant redwoods, just for a fleeting moment or two. Ahhhhhh, so glorious! Indeed rapturous. And you know full well, looking at it, that it will not last, and yet this instant has made all the difference, that it happened at all.

For me it is a profoundly beautiful image, capturing an ephemeral moment of intensity that was soon gone, forever. And such is life – moments, some of them exquisitely wonderful gifts, some of them ordinary moments given little special attention, but that are still singularly unique, moments that come, and they happen, and then they slide on by into the past. Precious and holy are such moments, which gathered up together make up a life's experiences.

I have another treasured image that sits in a frame on my desk – a small photo of my son at age four. Now he's nearly 29, so the photo was taken a quarter century ago. For me, the photo captures the sweetness, vulnerability, and intelligence that were his being at that young age. Big eyes, small hands, a four year old's sweet face. Looking at it, I remember how deeply I loved that child and how very much I loved the experience of being his mom.

But just like the picture postcard image of the sunrays streaming in the redwood forest, this photo of my child, too, has captured a moment in time that was soon gone as well, as that child continued his irrevocable journey upward and outward, a journey of growth and learning and change into increased capability, through his childhood and teen years into the remarkable man that he is today. And in the case of the photo, even it, the physical photograph itself, is in a process of change – the ink on paper has faded over the years, the colors have changed somewhat, and my writing on the back of it ("Brendan, March 1985, 4 yrs old") is fading as well. Often I keep that framed image lying face down to keep the light from fading it further.

Nothing stays the same. Life marches on. We are powerless to stop the relentless arrival of the next moment on into the future, much as we might love to do so sometimes, just for a short while, when it all feels like a bit much, right? Stop! Wait! Just for a moment! And of course, this is one of the purposes of meditation. To simply stop for a bit, and just be, simply. But even as we take that needed breather, change keeps comin' at us, doesn't it. The child keeps growing. The angle of the sunlight in the forest changes. The trees grow slightly higher. Night comes. We

ourselves grow up and then grow older every moment, and our lives continue to change, and the world around us changes. The news breaks. The ocean wave rolls in and then crests, and breaks on the shoreline, and there is no stopping it.

The subject of change, and the theology of change, is front and center for me lately. In the past few years, much has changed in my life. Maybe it's my recent move to Boston, my being uprooted and my arrival here as a newbie minister just beginning again, maybe it's my upcoming 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, or the recent births and deaths in my awareness—but also it's in the notion of the potential of the gathered community to change lives, to change our society for the better, to change the direction of, and priorities lifted up by our complex world – all of that, too, is filling my mind and heart with thoughts of change.

Change can be difficult. We don't always know or trust what's coming. We start across the bridge into the future, hoping and trusting it will connect on the other side of the chasm. Sometimes we rely on something like the very famous Serenity Prayer to help us find our way with change. That this is such a universal feeling, uncertainty about the coming changes, is why, I think, the Serenity Prayer has achieved such widespread familiarity and has come to be so well loved. "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." In any case, the fact of the unavoidability of change is a given, and we must manage it, somehow.

I could have retired into a simple, quiet, stable, rather privileged life. Instead, the unfolding of my journey took me, decades into my life, to an amazing Unitarian Universalist seminary to study theology and ministry and the deeper, more effective, more sustainable ways of seeking justice, truth, and love and transforming the world. It was an irresistible tug for me, a lure, a summons – one that demanded my response, and big changes in my life. I resisted for a time, struggling inside with it, and finally said, in essence, okay, I'm yours. It was transformative in many more ways than I have time to describe here today, but you will likely hear more about that journey in our future together.

Shortly before I embarked on that challenging quest towards professional ministry, my husband Barry had a heart attack and six-way bypass surgery, with a lot of little strokes during the surgery. He hasn't been fully himself since then – again, changes – though he's come a long way back with the help of skilled doctors and therapists. Our relationship has changed significantly – from being one that was more like your standard, more balanced marriage partnership (if there is such a thing) to one that is much more now about my being his caregiver. There have been other significant changes in our personal lives, too, just as I know there have been in each of your lives. Our gifted son went off to college and embarked on his own, productive adult life. We've lost one beloved dog to cancer in recent years and then acquired a new sweet little canine sidekick who enriches our lives and brings us joy reliably. Changes keep on happening. We packed up our stuff, our lifetime accumulation of archives, photos, books, furniture, and other worldly goods, and moved it all three times in the past five years, from the Sierra foothills to the San Francisco Bay area, to Pennsylvania, to Boston. Changes. Lots of changes: places, experiences and relationships fade into the past, and on some level we grieve their passing, just as we have faced the unfolding of the new with curiosity, anticipation, hope, faith, and courage.

The Unitarian Universalist congregation I served in central Pennsylvania grew immensely, in depth and breadth and numbers, in the two years I was there. Looking back, I behold with awe the transformation that took place as the congregation perceived and responded to its calling into deeper engagement in the life of the city and took on a more challenging ministry than it had ever before dared to embrace. It took courage for them to face issues that are among the most challenging and complex in our society – racism, class based oppression, deprivation, “otherness,” economic and social privilege – and that journey is, of course, still underway for them. I am so very proud of them. It was a transformative journey – for me into ordained Unitarian Universalist ministry, for the congregation embracing a new notion of its calling, and for the wider community that will both influence and be influenced by the Unitarian Universalists there.

I am also very proud of the new congregation that I as a lay leader helped to organize in the mid-1990s out in the Gold Country of the northern Californian Sierras, and how far that congregation has now come in just a little over a decade. It took many hands, minds, and hearts to get a new congregation going, and now they number over 100 members with a church building, religious education program, and a fulltime minister of their own, making a transformative impact on the lives and values lived in that community.

And now I am gone from both of those well-loved congregations, and I have arrived here in Boston. I arrived here in response to a sense of being summoned... summoned to support Rev. Kim’s skillful ministry here, to serve, preserve, and grow this historic congregation, to get to know you, to walk with you for a time, to fulfill my calling here, and to help you as you perceive and respond to your own. What will our relationship become? What is it that is calling this congregation with urgency and each of you who sit in its historic pews? What does our free faith demand of each of us individually and all of us together as we influence the course of the future in our own lives, and in this neighborhood, this city, the wider world around us? Do we have the courage needed to respond? Oh yes, I perceive great courage here already. Dare we love each other? It is my hope and prayer that we will, more deeply than any of us might imagine in this moment. (Understanding what love requires of us? ...aye, there’s the rub.)

Change, ever unfolding with the arrival of each moment, is the nature of life. Every newcomer who arrives in this congregation changes it. It is a key function of ministry, to empower and encourage each other to face life’s ups and downs together and to help each other with it, both in celebration and in mourning, coping, and healing from injury or loss. It is a gift we give, to allow others to help us when there is cause for despair. We symbolize this faithful congregational calling and the abundance of our responsive resources in our candles ritual most Sundays. In this way we weave the tapestry of our beloved community, and we find the blessing in each moment that crests like a breaking ocean wave.

Some needed change is insistent, and it takes more than ourselves alone to accomplish it. Some is so significant that it takes all of us, together as much as possible, to move our broken, hurting world, filled as it is with injustice, pain, brokenness, prisons and cages, towards more justice, more freedom, more love. The good news is that we *do* have the capacity and the resources to do this. “Yes, we can!” Some of us resist needed changes, coming from a place of privilege, or ignorance, or fear, or weariness, or inability to express ourselves well or to hear each other, or to

grasp the issues completely -- but change is coming nonetheless. This, too, is a part of the unfolding of our days and the reason for religious community: to learn with faith and patience to hear each other, to gain skill with speaking the truth in love, to empower and support each other, to work through misunderstandings or conflicts, understanding all the while that all that process too is a gift. And while we face all those challenges, may we find and praise moments of life-affirming, life-giving sunshine streaming through the towering trees. May we catch small glimpses of the holy. May we know deep in our bones that the Spirit of Life is with us all, throughout, holding us tenderly and bidding us walk on in faith and love. And let us have a little fun along the way! Notice the streaming sunrays in the forest.

None of us alone can do the most important, the most difficult work of changing our society, our culture; not one of us knows all that needs to be known or has strength to accomplish alone what needs and deserves our help to be changed in this world. We need each other to create a better way, a better world than what's come before. This calling is urgent. It is literally and urgently a matter of life and of death, when it comes to major issues such as addressing hate crimes and violence, global warming, the provision of healthcare and other basic needs to all, immigration reform, and more. It is *also* literally a matter of life and death when we walk alongside each other in our times of sorrow and despair, helping each other to find our way. We sometimes lose sight of the fact that we ourselves make choices that matter, in every moment, moments large and small, with our every breath and every act. Our beliefs, our behaviors, our expectations, and the extent to which we can learn to truly love each other MATTER.

Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell, offers this wisdom: "If you are willing to be used for the good, and put your ego on the back burner, the way will open before you." Together we will find that way. Each day we get to start anew; it is all ever in process; each day we are becoming something new; all of our becomings are holy.

I look forward to walking with you on this holy journey, praising what comes. The great poet Rumi suggests we can become a "mighty kindness." I pray that together we may foster a world of more kindness, peace, and justice, find strength and equanimity in the face of daunting change, intimacy amidst notions of ultimacy, and a calling beyond ourselves, one which will lift and lure and lead us into our most blessed becoming.

So may it be,  
Namasté,  
Amen.