

WANNA PLAY?
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *Beginning To Begin* ~ Gunilla Norris

Can we recognize that now and then there comes an inner sense,
a fleeting thought, a little yearning to live our lives differently?
We don't know what this means or what it requires.
We shake these notions off like a dog shakes off water
And go about our business.
But the longing continues.
Our practical selves only know how to perfect, produce and perform.
This, at least, we can see as useful.
This has results.
We want to believe in this way of perceiving.
For a little while it seems to give us some sort of self-image.
But the longing doesn't let us alone.
It won't go away.
We become even busier perhaps to "take care of it."
We numb ourselves with distractions – things to do, consume, and maintain –
Things to collect, experience, and entertain.
We can always think of more miles to run.
Still the little yearning continues. . . .
Could we sense that this longing is not lack
or something worse—some kind of fundamental fault in us?
Could we receive it as an invitation instead,
a calling, a small voice inviting us home, back to our truer self?
This shift in thought can move mountains.
It can let us begin to begin.
And so, let us begin.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Moonlight* ~ Helen Griffith

(A rabbit waits for the moon, but then gives up and goes into his burrow. When the moon comes out, it invites the rabbit to wake up.)

READING *The Fox and The Little Prince Who Tamed Him* (Chapter 21, Adapted)
~ Antoine Saint Exupery

It was then that the fox appeared.
"Good morning," said the fox.
"Good morning," the Little Prince responded politely. "Who are you? You are very pretty to look at."
"I am a fox," the fox said.
"Come and play with me," proposed the Little Prince. "I am so unhappy."
"I cannot play with you," the fox said. "I am not tamed."

"Ah! Please excuse me," said the Little Prince. But, after some thought, he added:

"What does that mean--'tame'?"

"You do not live here," said the fox. "What is it that you are looking for?"

"I am looking for men," said the Little Prince. "What does that mean--'tame'?"

"Men," said the fox. "They have guns, and they hunt. It is very disturbing. They also raise chickens. These are their only interests. Are you looking for chickens?"

"No," said the Little Prince. "I am looking for friends. What does that mean--'tame'?"

"It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."

"To establish ties'?"

"Just that," said the fox. "To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world . . ."

"I am beginning to understand," said the Little Prince.

"My life is very monotonous," the fox said. "But if you tame me, it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that will be different from all the others. Other steps send me hurrying back underneath the ground. Yours will call me, like music, out of my burrow. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! The fox gazed at the Little Prince, for a long time. "Please--tame me!" he said.

"What must I do, to tame you?" asked the Little Prince.

"You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you will sit down at a little distance from me--like that--in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day . . ."

So the Little Prince tamed the fox. And when the hour of his departure drew near--

"Ah," said the fox, "I shall cry."

"It is your own fault," said the Little Prince. "I never wished you any sort of harm; but you wanted me to tame you . . ."

"Yes, that is so," said the fox.

"But now you are going to cry!" said the Little Prince.

"Yes, that is so," said the fox.

"Then it has done you no good at all!"

"It has done me good," said the fox, "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

"What is essential is invisible to the eye," the Little Prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

MESSAGE

You know this feeling, right? You're walking down a busy sidewalk, or an airport terminal, or across a crowded theatre lobby, and you notice someone walking toward you, waving and smiling. While they clearly seem to know you, you are pretty sure you don't know them, but you don't want them to think you don't know them if you do...Besides, they're waving at you,

so friendly looking, inviting you to connect. So tentatively, you make eye contact and begin to raise your hand to return the wave...just as you realize they're waving at someone behind you.

Let me share with you an experience from my life, with an invitation to you to recall something similar from your own.

I was born late in 1954. My father was serving a suburban church which had just built a new parsonage next door (that's manse, in Canadian.) It was a pretty typical 1950's bungalow in a pretty typical 1950's suburb...efficient and plain...well-constructed and adorned only with pale blond wood...with, as was the trend in that era, a not-very-big kitchen that served as both the dining room and the central family space. There was a door leading from the kitchen directly to a small side porch, a door that often stood open with only a wooden screen door between the inside and the outside...the outside being mostly open and overgrown land that was awaiting more houses...open space full of promises and possible adventures. Can you picture it?

I have a memory...something which may have actually happened...of being in that family kitchen one early evening...perhaps just finishing dinner...enveloped in a place of comfort, reassuring food smells and the familiar clatter of dishes and voices. A young boy...a friend of my brothers' I suspect...comes noiselessly to the screen door and presses his face into the screen....a freckled face, with tufts of unruly red hair...likely the boy who inspired the Dennis the Menace character. You know him, right?...you know both the boy and the image...flattened nose and cheeks against the mesh of the screen..lips all smushed up.

When he becomes aware that we...those on the inside...have noticed him...on the outside...he speaks. "Anybody wanna play?" The plea was doleful, but still full of temptation. "Anybody wanna play?"

To be sure, he wasn't really asking me. I could only have been 3, maybe 4. He had certainly come for my older brothers. And yet the invitation hung there...for anyone...for anyone who was on the inside to come outside...for anyone who might join him in assuaging his boredom...for anyone who was up for an adventure.

I knew, sadly, that the invitation wasn't meant for me, but I heard it loud and clear. Didn't I just want to take him up on it? Didn't I long to jump down from the table and run to that door and fling it open, and say YES! I WANT TO PLAY!! Didn't I just?

Or maybe not. That boy represented an element of danger, an element of risk, which while enticing, was also scary. I probably wouldn't be able to play his games, and didn't know where those games would take me on my little legs. The kitchen, after all, was a place in which I was comfortable...a place that was safe.

Have you ever had such an experience? Never mind the specific invitation, or how you responded. What I'm asking is, have you ever been confused in the face of an invitation...seen that wave from across the room...that feeling you're being invited into something, but are unclear about what the invitation really is, and not even sure if the invitation is yours to accept? Feeling both enticement and trepidation...not knowing if you should say yes, or no, or maybe later.

My childhood memory is an example of my somewhat conditioned response to many invitations I have received in life. "What? Who me? Are you sure you're asking me?" Wait. What exactly IS this invitation? Can I trust it? Is accepting it worth whatever risk it contains?

So here we are in a month when we are considering what it means to be people of invitation. People of invitation who would, I believe, like to think of ourselves as those who would throw open our doors to others and to new possibilities. People of invitation...who would make space for differing opinions and lifestyles. People of invitation...who would even, are even, considering sponsoring refugees. People of invitation...the people who will 'officially' welcome the new year with our ingathering service next Sunday.

But today...we're considering 'invitation' in a different way. Not only are we exploring being on the receiving end of an invitation, but I'm also looking at this, not as people of invitation, but as persons. What does it mean to be a person, an individual, who welcomes with an open heart the presence of invitations as possibilities to consider...as possibilities that might lead to a richer, fuller life? A person who like the older brother is ready and eager to jump up and run out and play. A person of invitation, also like that little girl at the table...unsure, unclear...but feeling a tug, a lure, toward an, as yet unknown, experience. A person of invitation.

There are so many appropriate and meaningful metaphors for how we receive invitations. Pick what works for you...a knock at the door...a personally addressed and engraved letter...an 'open' sign...a beam of light...the less traveled path...the eyes of an admirer...a ringing phone...a fundraising drive...a petition...the end of a dock...and in this age of technology, all manner of pokes and bleeps that invite us into some ap or game or social media connection. What is poking at you?

We get invitations all day long, dare I say in every moment, although many are subliminal and barely noticed. Frankly, one becomes weary of invitations, of requests for our time and money, of enticements that seem to offer something better, something shinier, something more fun. Every advertisement we see is an invitation. Every to-do list. Every urge to eat or move our bodies. We receive invitations to events, and invitations to serve, invitations to play, and invitations into relationship. Many are invitations to go down a rabbit hole. And our task, each of us as a person of invitation, is to sort out the invitations that matter, and to make conscious choices that best serve our spirit and our values...something that is increasingly difficult in the midst of a multiplicity of options and demands.

And I fear that the presence of so many invitations can cloud our ability to listen to the invitations that speak to our deepest selves. You know the ones I mean...the ones that tug at you, that cannot be quieted, that show up in your dreams, that keep entering and re-entering your consciousness...invitations like the insistent moonlight in this morning's story that wouldn't let the little rabbit burrow away from it...those persistent invitations that, like other questions of meaning and purpose, demand that we pay attend and require discernment. And what I hope we can be for one another in spiritual community is people who diligently support each other, and encourage one another to walk openly with those questions, and remind each other to continually return to our inner home and inner longing, and to find there the truth that will guide us...guide each of us...as we navigate all the invitations and questions in our lives.

The conversation between the Little Prince and the fox might be likened to the internal conversation we have between our longing, our true knowing, and whatever invitation lays before us. Internally, we play all the parts...the inviter and the one being invited...the speaker and listener...the one who understands and the one who is learning. We are both the Little Prince and the fox. The Little Prince longs to play, to have friends who are like him, but instead is presented with an unusual but compelling invitation from a fox...who asks that the Little Prince tame him. We don't always get to decide what will present itself to us.

We left out of today's reading, the part where the Little Prince learns what it means to tame and be tamed by likening it to a relationship he has with one particular rose...his rose...a rose that while one in a field of roses, is the only one that truly belongs to the Little Prince's heart. And so, he comes to see that 'taming' is to enter into a relationship like that...when the heart knows and is known...when a connection is made that singles itself out from all the possibilities as the one connection we must make, because it is that connection which resonates with our deep place of inner knowing...that essential place...invisible to the eye. You might call it reason, or intuition, or wisdom...a rose by any name is still a rose...that place where you know what you know without necessarily understanding how you know it to be right and true...for you, and for you alone.

Often, people come to me to talk about some issue they are facing, and express that they don't know what to do, expecting that I might help them to make a decision. But in truth, my best response contains no answers. More and more, I have come to believe that each of you does know what to do, no matter how deep inside that knowing might be hiding, and that you can find it if you again and again sit with our hearts until the way becomes clear. So, my task, and our task for each other, is to encourage you to listen for that inner wisdom, trusting that each one has a voice that is true and real...a voice which is uniquely your own...the only voice that can know the way that is right for you.

What I also know...is that it can be hard to discern which of the many voices we hear is truly our own. Demands of our families, our need to earn a living, our images of what success is, our expectations of ourselves, peer pressure, fear of change or the unknown... all of these voices are legitimate and usually competing. Rarely can they all be satisfied with one tidy response. To say yes to one thing most often means saying no to something else. And our responsibilities may require us to put off saying yes to something that is truly calling to us. Hearing and responding to our inner voice and the invitations is something that takes practice and persistence.

Do you know the story of Samuel from the Hebrew Bible? In the larger context, it tells of Samuel's call to be a prophet and to come into his gift to speak difficult truths to power, but the part I love is about Samuel as a boy. One night he continues to be awakened by a voice he believes to be the voice of Eli, the priest he is studying under. So three times, Samuel runs to Eli, waking him up to ask what he wants. Finally, a weary Eli recognizes that Samuel is hearing the voice of the Lord, and instructs him to find out what it is the Lord has to say. And so, the next time he hears his name being called, Samuel remains in his room, and says, "Speak. I am listening."

To be a person open to the invitation of life and of love, could this not be our best possible response? Speak. I'm listening. I am waiting to know and understand. I am making space and time to carefully hear the call of that deep voice within...the call of our own lives.

Sometimes, the voice comes like a wave from something we don't yet recognize, although we do feel a desire to find out if that wave is meant for us.

Sometimes, fortunately we are able to clearly hear that still small voice within....the voice that urges us quiet ourselves with patience and to simply listen for what is true.

Sometimes, to be sure, we are unable to hear that voice. It is lost in the tangle and muddle of so much noise. But I assure you, the voice is there. And with time and practice, it will find its way to your heart.

And sometimes, that voice can come in the form of that trickster red-haired neighbour, who teases and tempts us, speaking to the part of us that most wants to jump up and fling open the door...saying YES! I do want to play! That is exactly the invitation I was waiting for, and I am ready to run into the unknown.

May we each be a person of invitation, who would stop and listen with an open heart, ready to hear our own true voice.

So be it.

CLOSING WORDS

These words are the last two stanzas of John O'Donohue's poem, For a New Beginning:

Though your destination is not clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is one with your life's desire.
Awaken your spirit to adventure
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

Go and be awakened to the world that awaits you, knowing that you matter and you are loved.

Amen.