

CONSIDER THE LILIES: WATER COMMUNION SUNDAY

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS (#504) ~ *e. e. cummings*

i thank you god for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes
(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)
how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable you?
(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Now. Here. Together. the ears of our ears awake and the eyes of our eyes are opened.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Everywhere Wonder* ~ Matthew Swanson

(In this picture book, you are encouraged to create your own story by noticing everything that's around you.)

READING *The Flower Sermon* ~ The Buddha

Toward the end of his life, the Buddha took his disciples to a quiet pond for instruction. As they had done so many times before, the Buddha's followers sat in a small circle around him, and waited for the teaching.

But this time the Buddha had no words. He reached into the muck and pulled up a lotus flower. And he held it silently before them, its roots dripping mud and water.

The disciples were greatly confused. Buddha quietly displayed the lotus to each of them. In turn, the disciples did their best to expound upon the meaning of the flower: what it symbolized, and how it fit into the body of Buddha's teaching.

When at last the Buddha came to his follower Mahakasyapa, the disciple suddenly understood. He smiled and began to laugh. Buddha handed the lotus to Mahakasyapa and began to speak.

"What can be said I have said to you," smiled the Buddha, "and what cannot be said, I have given to Mahakashyapa."

MESSAGE

“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” So...don't worry, be happy!

These words (well, the first part anyway!) appear twice in the gospels of the Christian Testament, both times attributed to Jesus, but in very different circumstances. In Matthew, they come near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, an occasion when Jesus is said to be addressing a large crowd...a sermon that begins with the beatitudes, or blessings, on those gathered. Then comes a long 'dharma talk' that covers almost everything...the law, anger, adultery, divorce, almsgiving, love of enemies...and after all of that, Jesus essentially says... “but don't worry. Look at the flowers. They don't stress out. Why should you?”

The other time, in the book of Luke, Jesus is talking to just his disciples, after a very tense time with the Pharisees, and in also in the process of trying to answer some questions from a crowd who has gathered...questions about greediness, and hypocrisy, and blame. His mood, to me, seems a bit short of patience, and yet he comes 'round again to say, “consider the lilies of the field’. Perhaps it was just one of his 'go-to' reminders to relax and trust, like one of those things your mom always says.

This too shall pass. Don't sweat the small stuff. It is what it is. Don't worry, be happy. Consider the lilies.

I find it interesting, don't you, that whether or not this really happened, or however it was passed down to us, these words remain connected with, or said in association with, some rather hard stuff? There's all of this hard stuff in our lives. It's very real and present and consuming. And...consider the lilies.

Did you know that in Buddhist practice there exist instructions in meditating on a corpse? For example, “The Nine Cemetery Contemplations”¹ get pretty gory... speaking of observing festering flesh, of bodies being eaten by crows, and of blood-stained skeletons. The point of such meditation is to create awareness of death as a reality. “My own body is of the same nature; such it will become and will not escape it.” (repeat) And in this practice, it is said, the meditator is able to stop clinging.

In his book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh says that life and death are simply two faces of one reality and that if we do not see and acknowledge death, we can hardly know how to live.² The goal of mindfulness is to see reality as it is, beauty and warts and all...to see the true nature of life...not just in meditation, but throughout all of our living.

Meditation practice often refers to “monkey mind” ...a perfect phrase to describe the inability of our minds to quiet and be still. I have tried all kinds of practices in meditation to banish that monkey in my head...focusing on breath, repeat mantras, think about my thoughts as clouds floating across the sky...and still, the monkey persists.

But, in the process of exploring mindfulness in preparation for this month's theme, I peeled back a new layer of understanding. It began with listening to Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness...which involves being present, without judgment. But, you see, I have one of

¹ Hanh, Thich Nhat, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, p. 116

² *Ibid*, p. 50.

those minds that is very often in judgment...comparing...measuring up...wanting things to be more/better/different...so the idea of being present without judgment seemed an impossible task. But Zinn goes on to say that it's indeed impossible to be human without having judgments; the goal, he suggests, is to stop judging how judgmental we are! And with that, some small understanding clicked into place; mindfulness is about noticing what is. Not fixing it. Noticing my monkey mind. "Hi there, monkey mind. How ya doing?" And then letting go of attachment to it. I have a monkey mind. But rather than trying to squelch it, I just notice it.

It reminds me of a story I read on FB recently, about a mother ignoring a child who was throwing a tantrum.³ Well, not ignoring him, really, but just not getting hooked... responding to each of his rants in a calm, non-attached manner. So when that monkey is taunting me, I can just notice her in a non-attached way. Huh. Interesting. There's a monkey in my brain. Huh. (not bad, not to be avoided, not an indication that I'm horrid at being mindful...) Simply noticed.

And then my new learning was amplified by a conversation in the Journey's Group on Monday. There's a Zen story in the theme packet called "The Empty Cup."⁴ Do you know it?

One day the Zen master Nan-in had a visit from a foreign scholar of Eastern religions who came to inquire about Zen. Instead of listening to the master, however, the visitor kept talking on and on about his own ideas and all he knew.

After a while of talking, Nan-in served tea. He poured the tea into his visitor's cup until it was full, and then he kept on pouring. The tea poured over the side of the cup, filled the saucer, and then spilled over onto the man's pants and the floor. Finally the visitor could not restrain himself. "Don't you see that it is full?" he said. "You can't get any more in!"

"Just so," replied Nan-in, stopping at last. "And like this cup, you are filled with your own ideas. How can you expect me to give you Zen unless you offer me an empty cup?"

Well, I followed that story with a reflection question that was quite judgmental of 'full mind.' I thought the point of the story was to judge having a full mind, and praise being able to have an empty mind. And so, I suggested you reflect on how you might get rid of that full mind. But Julia Wallace then commented that this was not how she saw the story...that rather than judging full mind, it is about noticing full mind. So, the monk is not glorifying 'still mind' but rather simply noticing that the visitor's mind is too full to listen. Simply noticing. Being present to what is.

There are so many things that we turn away from, want to avoid, find painful. There is so much that we tend to judge as wrong. By simply being present to these things, being mindful, noticing what is, it is possible to experience acceptance and equanimity.

And, there are so many things that can bring us joy and peace if we but stop and notice, whether that be the sense of the earth beneath your feet, or the sound of cardinals, or the colour of the blooming flowers in a misty rain. Simply being present to the natural world is

³ <http://theweek.com/articles/602674/threw-tantrum-ignored>

⁴ Found In: *Doorways to the Soul: 52 Wisdom Tales from Around the World*, Elisa Davey Permain, Ed.

wonderful training for those times when we are stressed or hurting. Being mindful doesn't fix the hurt; being mindful allows us to be present to it without giving it painful meaning.

So perhaps it's best to offer the Buddha's flower sermon to you today. Consider the lilies. Simply see them. Just notice them. Pay attention. What you notice may be limp, or dying, or missing a few petals, dripping...and fragile and bruised...and glorious and worry-free. Consider the lilies. (*hold up and offer a flower in silence*)

May it be so.

CLOSING WORDS *Prayer For Those Gathered In Worship* ~ Barbara J Pescan

In this familiar place, listen:
to the sounds of breathing, creaking [pews],
shuffling feet, clearing throats, and sighing...
Know that each breath, movement, the glance
meant for you or intercepted
holds a life within it.

These are signs
that we choose to be in this company
have things to say to each other
things not yet said but in each other's presence still
trembling behind our hearts' doors
these doors closed but unlocked
each silent thing waiting
on the threshold between unknowing and knowing,
between being hidden and being known.

Find the silence among these people
and listen to it all – breathing, sighs,
movement, holding back –
hear the tears that have not yet reached their eyes
perhaps they are your own
hear also the laughter building deep where joy abides
despite everything.

Listen: rejoice. And say Amen.

Amen!