

ALL THAT GLITTERS...
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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Opening Words ~ *Marta L. Valentín*

We come together today to honour the universal community of seekers to which we all belong.

We gather together today to share from our deepest place of safety that we might nurture ourselves by celebrating one another.

We call into our presence this hour our ancestors whose love, labour, and commitment made it possible for us to be here now.

Let us call one another to the table of abundance that we may feed on those fruits that sustain us and ever ask us to grow.

Let us open to this moment with hearts that have no borders.

Come. Let us honour, and share, and remember, and invite, and open to the mystery...together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Mixed Beasts* ~ *Wallace Edwards/Kenyon Cox*
(*In pictures and text, imagines animals who are a combination of ancestry...a bumblebeaver, a kangarooster, etc.*)

READING *Teachers Everywhere*** ~ *Rachel Naomi Remen*

Rachel Naomi Remen's book, *My Grandfather's Blessings*, is a wonderful collection of writings that honour her ancestry, and the wisdom that was passed on to her by her grandfather. In this essay, she shares a lesson received from her mother:

I can clearly remember something that happened when I was in third grade. I was walking with my mother on a downtown street in New York City, pushing through crowds on our way to I no longer remember where. I had just been put into a special class at school because I had done well on an IQ test, and my new teacher had told us that being in her class meant that we were brighter than most of the people in the country. As we moved through the hurrying crowds, I remembered this and was filled with an eight-year-old's outrageous pride. I told my mother that my teacher had said that I was smarter than most of the people around us. She stopped walking immediately and knelt down so that we were at eye level with each other. As the crowd flowed past us on either side, she told me that every one of the people around us had a secret wisdom; each of them knew something more about how to live, about being happy, about loving than I did.

I looked up at the people passing by. They were all adults. "Is this because they're grow-ups, Mama?" I asked her, taken aback. "No, darling. It will always be that way,"

she told me. "It is how things are." I looked again at the crowd moving around us. Suddenly I wanted to know them all, to learn from them, to be friends.

This lesson became lost among the many others of my childhood, but shortly after I became a physician I had a dream that was so powerful that I remembered it even though I did not understand it. In this dream, I am standing in the threshold of a door. I seem to have been standing there a long time. People are passing through the door. I cannot see where they are going or where they have come from, but somehow this does not seem to matter. I meet them one at a time in the doorway. As they pass through they stop and look into my face for a moment and hand me something, each one something different. They say, "Here is something for you to keep." And then they go on. I feel enormously grateful.

Perhaps we are all standing in such a doorway. Some people pass through it on their way to the rest of their lives, lives that we may never know or see. Others pass through it to their deaths and the Unknown. Everyone leaves something behind. When I awoke from that dream, I had a sense of the value of every life.

MESSAGE

All That Glitters

~ Rev. Stoneberg

Do you remember the movie Apollo 13? During a mission, something goes wrong with a CO2 filter, and the air in the space capsule is becoming toxic for the astronauts. The more they breathe, the worse it gets, and they cannot get back into earth's atmosphere fast enough. A group of scientists in Houston are given the task with figuring out how the astronauts can build a new filter out of whatever might be on hand in the space capsule...which is, as you can imagine, a pretty limited list. The scientists dump duplicates of all the possible 'stuff' onto a table...plastic bags, tape, tubes, bits of this and that...and stare at it discouraged. The original filter, and it's casing, are round. The only thing that might possibly, maybe, work as a replacement is square. The ultimate "square peg in a round hole" problem.

Sometimes I think of that scene, that dilemma, as a metaphor for life. It's critical, very important...literally life or death...and yet we don't seem to have the right tools or the proper instructions. What we have has been broken or lost, or maybe we never even had it, and our mission is to find ways to improvise, and create, and survive, in spite of what we've been given. And more, to find joy in our living.

Built in to being human, it seems, is a particular thirst...a longing...to fix it, to feel whole, to make it work. Life is rightfully likened to a quest; we search high and low for what will satisfy that desire, that longing. And too often it feels like we are trying to fill a deep round well with things that are square and awkward and ill-fitting. The pile of options on our table presents as junk that seems highly unlikely to provide the answers.

And yet we search. We look, and, as in Rachel Naomi Remen's dream, we are constantly being handed gifts, packages, and unknown objects from everyone who passes by. Some of

those packages have been handed to those who offer them to us by someone who was handed the package by someone before them, passed on almost robotically. Some packages seem completely random, as if simply left behind on the bus seat of someone else's life. Some are intentionally given to us by someone who loves us and wants only the best for us. These gifts...brown paper packages tied up with string...contain things as significant as values, things as intimate and personal as physical traits, things as useless as unwanted advice, things as learned as traditions and culture, things as useful as wisdom, things as harmful as abuse and addiction.

Which of these will we accept and integrate into our lives? How are we to know which are gold, and which are dross? How do we discern which will actually heal and bless rather than harm or curse? Can we even build what is needed out of what we have? And, even if we determine what might be missing for this great project of a life well lived, how will find that missing piece?

The world is jam-packed with messages that tell us what we need. Beautiful things to buy. Self-help books. Life-changing programs and regimes. Miracle cures. Glittery, glistening things. Shiny objects. Bling that guarantees to make it all better by transforming us into beautiful people with beautiful lives.

Warning, says the wisdom. All that glitters is not gold. Be content with such things as ye have, say the sages. And these cautions never feel so true as when, in the aftermath of another immersion into something glittery, we feel the emptiness that is sure to follow. The low after the high. The fall after the soar. The disappointment after the expectation. It seems that the glitter is a mirage that opens up more holes screaming to be filled rather than a true place of nourishment that fills the deep place of longing within.

It's made even more confusing...sometimes what glitters IS gold. Sometimes that twinge of hope we feel when we 'invest' in something new pans out...the new relationship really is love, that procedure really does lead to healing, that new gadget really does make our lives easier, even more joyful. Sometimes that training or workshop shifts something in us and we begin to feel that we are living, finally, into our fullness and our purpose.

There's a pattern that's been identified by some as "Shiny Object Syndrome," which is defined as the uncontrollable attraction to whatever new thing has just caught your eye. You might suffer shiny object syndrome if, rather than seeing things through to their completion, you routinely abandon commitments and ideas to start something new. You might suffer shiny object syndrome, or SOS, if your attention is drawn to some screen or gadget rather than to a live human interaction. You might suffer from SOS if, when you don't get immediate gratification or instant pleasure, you decide to move on to something that makes better, and more enticing, promises. And, the more you respond to the shininess, the greater the urge for more.

“Shiny Object Syndrome” is a made-up thing, and yet recent scientific research does indeed show that humans are drawn to things that glitter, things like bejeweled high heels and gold-coloured iPhones. The reason? Well, apparently there’s an evolutionary theory that explains our fondness for the glossy. “Our crush on glossiness (and glitter) might be rooted in a primitive desire for water,” says Vanessa Patrick of the University of Houston. “It is humbling to acknowledge that despite our sophistication and progress as a species, we are still drawn to things that serve our innate needs – in this case, the need for water.”ⁱⁱ

Let’s suppose that what will best serve you in this life is water...pure, clean, calm water. You stand in that doorway, receiving packages with nondescript or even deceiving wrappings. Some may shimmer like the surface of water, some might feel moist to the touch, some even may slosh when shaken. But even as they promise to satisfy you, they could as easily lead you into a desert, burn your skin, or contain water but not enough to satisfy your thirst...

Or returning to the analogy of the Apollo 13 scientists, some of the collection of objects on the table contain the key to success and survival; others are completely useless for the project before you.

How will you know? How shall you choose from the myriad options before you, which to embrace, which to follow, and which to discard? This is a test, and you surely should have received better instructions on what to do.

I believe that there are things endemic to this religious tradition, Unitarian Universalism, that contain help for each of us. One is the assurance, the insistence, that every one of us has the freedom and the capacity to determine our own path and find our own meaning. You have permission and encouragement, here, to open and explore each package, each gift, and decide if it is something that you want to integrate into your life.

- This capacity to be quick to anger: no, I want to learn to manage my temper, and use my anger for good.
- This view of citizenship as something that requires my engagement: yes, I feel drawn to giving back to my community. It gives me a sense of purpose.
- This habit of spending free time at the mall: no, I do not want my life to be judged by what I can buy.
- This practice of spending holidays with loved ones; yes, but I want to choose where and with whom. In fact I want to invite others who might not have a place to be for the holidays.
- This belief in hell as a punishment for life: no, I can’t accept that hell is part of a loving creation.

Only you can determine, from all that has been handed down to you, or offered to you by your experiences and relationships, what is of value and use to you. Like a diviner looking for a water source, we assert that something in you knows the right path, the right decision, the

right behaviour. You can trust that you will feel the tug deep within when something resonates as true. You are assured here that you have direct access to the divine, that you can be trusted to recognize the lure of the good, and to follow it.

Second, and maybe more important, given our current cultural bent toward individualism, this tradition provides a community that acts as a safe and loving laboratory...a place of both learning and experiment...where we as individuals come together to test our choices and decisions...to voice our truths...to both drop our protective packaging and to expose those glittering mirages as the illusions they are.

- Here in this community, when I lose my temper, I can learn to ask for forgiveness and for support in dealing with my feelings in another way. I can help others who are struggling with anger issues as well.
- Here in this community, I can be a more engaged citizen...participating in decisions and leadership...testing my abilities and stretching my capacities. I can learn from others who have gone before, and set an example for those to come.
- Here, in community, I can create alternatives to 'mall-time' by volunteering, or hosting social events, or examining with others what it might mean to live a life of simplicity.
- Here, in community, I can explore what I believe, testing if those beliefs create meaning in my life. I can question what is shared by others, and share my beliefs in order to open myself to further understanding and growth.

Here, in community, we are challenged to walk our talk. Here in community, our mistakes are held in love. Here in community, we can examine the packages we have been handed, with full permission to critically and prayerfully determine their worth.

I'll not make this all glittery. Community is not for the faint of heart. It is hard work and demands a lot of us. It takes dedication and resolve to keep showing up. It can mean giving up Sunday mornings, and giving up other things as well. You will sometimes be discouraged and disheartened. You will sometimes be weary of the demands and be unsure if it is worth it. I too am sometimes discouraged and disheartened. And then, something calls me back, reminding me that it is here, even when it's hard or when it hurts, that I find joy and hope and meaning for my living. I am called to community because the alternative...isolation and self-absorption...is unacceptable. So I choose to live in connection with others on a similar path, others who are doing their best...sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing...but still, doing our collective best, to be the loving human beings we most desire to be.

All that glitters is not gold. And, as we are reminded in a poem written by J. R. R. Tolkien for his fantasy novel, *The Lord of the Rings*:

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,

Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

Tolkien's poem reminds me of the beatitudes found in Christian scripture; you know the ones...blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek, blessed are the pure of heart and the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted and those who mourn. Blessed are they; they may not find shiny things, but they shall find comfort and reward. Blessed are those who thirst, for they shall be filled.

What we have can feel like not enough. Not glittery enough. Not instantly gratifying enough. What we have been given can appear inadequate to the task. Similar to the plight of the astronauts, our options can feel limited...even pre-determined. But I tell you. More often, if we hang in there, if we stick with it and trust, there is help to be found: a creative surge, a turn of attitude, a change in the weather...and perhaps most importantly, a community of friends, a team on the ground working to support us ... making it possible for us to survive and even to thrive.

The other day a friend posted a video on Facebook...an image of Snoopy lying on a dock...the water around him shimmering...the sky above painted like VanGogh's Starry Night. I commented that I wanted to be that dog on that dock, right then. I felt an emptiness within and craved the presence of life-giving water.

You, my friends, are that life-giving water. This community, this faith, this combined commitment to a more just and sustainable and loving world. This is one gift that I cherish. So be it for all of us. Amen.

READING *Blessing*** ~Rachel Naomi Remen

Another reading from Rachel Naomi Remen's book, this one on blessing:

"On Friday afternoons when I would arrive at my grandfather's house after school, the tea would already be set on the kitchen table. My grandfather had his own way of serving tea. There were no teacups and saucers or bowls of granulated sugar or honey. Instead, he would pour the tea directly from the silver samovar into a drinking glass... He would put a cube of sugar between his teeth and then drink the hot tea straight from his glass. So would I...

After we finished our tea, my grandfather would set two candles on the table and light them. Then he would have a word with God in Hebrew.

When Grandpa finished talking to God, he would turn to me and say, "Come, Neshumele" (which means "beloved little soul.") Then I would stand in front of him and he would rest his hands lightly on the top of my head. He would begin by thanking God

for me and for making him my grandpa. He would specifically name my struggles during the week, and appreciate how hard I had tried... Then he would give me his blessing and ask the long-ago women I knew from his many stories – Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah, and Leah – to watch over me.

These few moments were the only time in my week when I felt completely safe and at rest... For (my grandfather,) I was already enough. And somehow when I was with him, I knew with absolute certainty that this was so.

My grandfather died when I was seven years old. I had never lived in a world without him in it... But slowly over time I came to understand that in some mysterious way, I had learned to see myself through his eyes. That once blessed, we are blessed forever. Many years later when, in her extreme old age, my mother surprisingly began to light candles and talk to God herself, I told her about these blessings and what they meant to me. She had smiled at me sadly. “I have blessed you every day of your life, Rachel,” she told me. “I just never had the wisdom to do it out loud.”

CLOSING WORDS

~ *Leslie Takahashi:*

We [leave, holding in] our hearts all those who have gone before us: all those whose living in this world prepared the soil for our living, all those whose being has enabled our being.

[We leave remembering] those whose existence is seeded in our lives today, not only those who are our physical descendants but also those whose spirits inherit the love we sow, the hope we reap, the promise we harvest.

May those of us whose religious inheritance is freedom never rest until all who wish to be its children are sheltered.

May we give of our lives in blessing to this great mission. You are indeed a blessing.

ⁱ <http://www.fastcodesign.com/3024766/evidence/an-evolutionary-theory-for-why-you-love-glossy-things>