

LIVING ON A MOBIUS STRIP
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *There Is Room For You Here* ~Mary Edes

If God is your strength and companion
and prayer the means of centering your thoughts,
There is room for you here.
If the teachings of the Buddha give you
clarity and calm in the midst of human striving,
There is room for you here.
If Gaia's seasonal rhythms lead you best
through the myriad steps of Life's great dance.
There is room for you here.
If the still mysterious capacity and power of the Mind,
stirs your imagination and quickens your pulse,
There is room for you here.
Rest now, beside that spring, wherever it is for you
And let your attention go to the small places – inside
or out in the great wide world –
places or people in need of healing
or for which your heart is filled with thanksgiving,
And in that spirit, let us be together for a time.

Come, let us put our attention on that what matters to us most.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Frog Prince Continued* ~ Jon Scieszka

(In this sequel to the fairy tale of the Frog Prince, the Prince recognizes his true self, and seeks for someone to turn him back into a frog.)

READING *Worthy of Love* ~ Karen Madrone

One night [], I found myself at a dinner party in the home of a male-to-female transgender woman and her friend, the wife of a male-to female-transgender woman. I was surrounded by people transitioning between genders. Some had fully transitioned, whatever that means, some were still toying with the idea, and others were comfortable with the in-between stages, still learning their way. The people who had more experience on the journey gave sage advice to those just beginning, and those just beginning listened and asked questions with reverence given for wise words. I got to experience one person talking about how, when he finally began to allow himself to present as male in public, it was both terrifying and it felt absolutely right. I felt the support in the room when others said, yes, yes, it felt the same for me, too. It was

especially poignant when a male to female transgender woman affirmed this experience for my new friend. She was saying, “I understand why being female wasn’t right for you and at the same time it is right for me.”

There were so many stories of rejection and pain in the room. Of not being accepted for who they were. On a very basic human level we all need love and acceptance. These new friends of mine had to “prove” their worth, prove they were worthy of love regardless of the gender they presented as, on a daily basis. Many of them faced divorce and loss of their children and their jobs; things that contribute to our identities, to who we say we are as people.

And yet, they carry on because they know they are living in the way that is right for them. They know that living any other way would literally kill them from the inside out and so that is a path they can no longer take, that door is shut to them. They have to take a new harder road, but it is one that brings great joy because it is the road of self-acceptance and self-love. It is the road where you finally know, “Yes, I’m living the life I’m supposed to live. It is the right one for me.”

That night, I got to experience my own discomfort. I got to just be with my own questions and know that we are all deserving of love just for being human. And I got to experience love as they accepted me into their world, honored my discomfort, and loved me as I am. I am grateful for that evening and for that experience.

If you should find yourself at a dinner party and you are uncomfortable for whatever reason, remember we’re all on our life journey just trying to live life the best way we know how right now. Let us remember that we do not have to understand to love and that sitting in the discomfort is a radical act that has the potential to heal.

MESSAGE *Living on a Mobius Strip* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

Singing that song¹ always brings to mind a great children’s book by Peter Reynolds called *The North Star*. It was almost the story of choice for this morning, except that it’s a bit too long to read in this context. In any case, it tells of a small child on a journey...a child who loses his way, and gets all kinds of advice, and follows all kinds of detours, and finally finds a star that leads him on his OWN journey, down his OWN path.

O star of truth, though I be lone and weary, lead on, I follow thee.

Isn’t that often the way we think about what it means to be true to ourselves? That it means finding and following our own path? That somewhere, however deeply buried in us, there is an authenticity, a right alignment, that would tell the truth of who we truly are? A truth that would guide the living of our days.

¹ O Star of Truth, #293 in Singing the Living Tradition

Before I go any further, let me acknowledge Parker Palmer.² He's the one who inspired much of what I am sharing, and a section in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, gives the substance to my message today. That section speaks of a divided life, a life where our inner life and our outer life don't relate much to one another.

Inside your order of service, you'll find a strip of coloured paper. Could you take it out now, and also, if you'd like, find a writing implement? Is there anyone who doesn't have one or both of these things?

We're talking this morning about the RELATIONSHIP between our inside and our outside...the RELATIONSHIP between who we know ourselves to be in our heart of hearts and what the world knows/sees of us...the RELATIONSHIP between who we most want to be and the person we choose to present to the world. Our inner self and our outer self.

Take that piece of paper (feel free to use a hymnal as a hard surface to write on) and take a few moments to jot down some words, or to draw an image or a doodle, that represents who you know yourself to be. Who are you at core? What are your deepest values and dreams? What qualities describe your inner being? Who is INSIDE of you? Who or what is your soul

Now, turn that strip over. Write or draw something on the other side that is indicative of who you think the world sees. How do you present yourself? How would others describe you? What impact or impression do you make? What are your roles in life? How do you look as you go through the world?

Now, take your piece of paper...hold it in such a way as that you are aware that there is a front and a back...what is seen and what is hidden. Many of us have learned from an early age...whether that be at home, or in school, or in the workplace...that it's not safe for us to be our true selves in the outside world, that it's dangerous to reveal all of who we are. And we build walls of separation, walls that sometimes provide much needed protection.

But what happens is, that in this process, we can become separated from ourselves. There is a disconnect between what's on the inside, and what's on the outside. And, the irony of protecting ourselves from whatever threats lie on the outside, is that we become hidden even from ourselves. Palmer suggests that living behind a wall has consequences. First, our inner light cannot shine out into the world. Second, our inner darkness is not able to access the light that exists out in the world. Third, those close to us begin to recognize our duplicity and can become distrustful and wary of being in relationship with us.

For many people, this divided life becomes unbearable. Pathologies arise. Depression sets in. We numb ourselves with addictions. Living behind a wall is painful, isolating, and dangerous. So...what to do?

² <https://vimeo.com/85777402> ; Palmer, Parker, *A Hidden Wholeness* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2004) pp 39-49.

Palmer says that healing begins by seeking integration, by trying to make sense of the inside **and** the outside. Take your piece of paper...you'll find it has a sticky end...and make it into a circle, with who you are on the inside, on the inside. And who you are on the outside, on the outside. Take a moment to look at this.

As we begin to work on bringing some integrity to our lives, we want what's on the inside to be the principles upon which our external life is built. We want integrity, harmony, unity. We want to be centered...and this circle we've just made can be interpreted in that way. It's elegant, and graceful. An unbroken circle, with a center, a center that represents our inner life, a center we can identify and strengthen.

One of the most frequently used words in the world of spiritual healing is 'center', or centeredness, or centering. Centering our outer lives based on what is real in our inner lives makes a whole lot of sense as we strive for integrity. But Palmer points out that there is a shadow side to this construct.

Can you also see that it can be perceived as a corral, or a gated community? I often think, when we sing the song "Let the Circle Be Unbroken" that there is something wrong with that desire, because a closed circle, while a thing of beauty and symmetry, is still closed. A closed circle gives rise to drawing boundaries around capital-T truth, and naming insiders and outsiders, and staying closed off from new insight and understanding. A closed circle keeps people out...I can exclude anything that doesn't share my core beliefs, and send a message that only what agrees with me can be on the inside. I don't think that's what we want.

The good news is that there's another way. Do you know what a Mobius strip is? According to the expert Wikipedia, a mobius is a surface with only one side and only one boundary, with the mathematical property of being 'non-orientable'...which is to say, that one cannot make a consistent choice of surface at any given point. Let's make one together (and I apologize that your strip of paper isn't longer to make this easier.)

Take your circle, disconnect the end, and make one twist, and then reconnect the ends. This makes a Mobius strip, such as is pictured on the order of service. It is continuous, unbroken, and you can't make a consistent choice of inside and outside. Place your finger on what appears to be the outside surface, and trace it around, and you see that you end up being on what appears to be the inside surface.

The message of the Mobius strip is that there is no inside or outside. They co-create each other, just like whatever is on the inside of me and you, emerges into the world, even when we try for it not to, and interacts with whatever is on the outside. And what we encounter there, we bring back to the inside and are changed. Palmer says that when we become aware of this, we also become aware of the fact that this relationship has always been true....that a divided life is an illusion.

Palmer says that living our lives as on a Mobius strip is the model of adult wholeness. Since our inner and outer lives are constantly co-creating our reality, the challenge is to become more and more aware of this act of co-creation in each moment of our lives. We can ask ourselves, how can I increasingly make choices that are life-giving?

You see, “either we walk on the Mobius strip wide awake to its continual interchanges (inside and outside,) learning to cocreate in ways that are life-giving for ourselves and others, OR we sleep-walk on the Mobius strip, unconsciously cocreating in ways that are dangerous and often death-dealing to relationships, to good work, to hope.”³

What is it that you want to send out from yourself into the world, and what impact are you having ‘out there’? What is the world beaming back into you, and what impact is it having ‘in here’? We have the power to choose, in every moment, between that which gives life, and that which does not.

There are so many examples of things that do not serve life in the world. Think about the experiences trans folk certainly have had. Think of all the times girls have been told they cannot be or do something because they are girls, or all the times boys are told they can’t be emotional or effeminate. Think of all the ways we limit ourselves because of stories we’ve been told about who we are and what’s available to or appropriate for us.

Then, think of how wonderful it was for those trans folk in the story Andrew shared to experience a community in which they are affirmed and loved. Think of the many stories of inspiration we hear, and know personally, about what happens when a person is given encouragement, and permission, to follow their dreams. Think of what happens in your heart when someone tells you that you are loved and that you matter.

Can we return to the story of the Frog Prince for just a moment? I was really tickled to find this story about the old Fairy Tale...a fairy tale I had swallowed whole, by the way, as being about a frog being rescued from frogness and lifted to princehood...and this new, continued story gives pause for us to consider the story from the frog’s perspective....to imagine who the frog really is...inside and out...and who he wanted to be.

Rev. Christopher Buice tells a Frog Prince story of a different kind.⁴ It goes like this:

There once was a little girl who was walking beside a creek when she happened to see a frog that looked very sad. “I wonder why that frog is so sad?” she asked herself. Then she remembered a story once told by her mother about how a girl had kissed a frog and how the frog had magically turned into a handsome prince. “Maybe that is why the frog is so sad. No one will kiss it so that it can become a prince.”

³ Palmer, p. 48

⁴ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/story/frog-prince>

She decided that she would give the frog a kiss herself. And so she did. But nothing happened. There was still just a frog sitting in her hand. She set the frog back on the ground and said, "Poor froggy, I'm sorry I couldn't turn you into a handsome prince."

The frog replied, "Oh, but you have done something far better. You have made me a happier frog." And the frog hopped off with a great big smile on his face.

Now, I know it's not so simple as all that. As adults, we have many burdens and challenges from our past experiences, and we carry all of these things as we negotiate that Mobius strip...as we consciously try to travel a path of authenticity and love. It's not always easy to make even the choice we want to make.

But it's a start, don't you think, to begin to recognize that a divided life is an illusion? It helps, don't you think, to remember that each choice we make can contribute to life and love? That each bit of light we can share changes the world, and each bit of light we can let in, can lift our spirits?

We are, each of us, born into wholeness and integrity, without division. We just have to remember that...to believe it. Rev. Buice ends his frog story thusly:

So, if you're walking through the woods one day and happen to see a little girl picking up frogs and kissing them, don't try to stop her. She knows what she is doing. Frogs need love, too, you know. You may not be able to see the frog change on the outside, but, believe me, a little love and attention makes everyone feel like royalty on the inside.

Each of us needs love. You need love in order to find and follow your true path. Love sure makes traveling on the Mobius strip of life a bit easier. I love you.

So be it. Ever and always.

READING *If We Do Not Venture Out* (adapted) ~M. Harmony

If, on a starlit night,
with the moon brightly shimmering,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the evening universe remains a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a cloudy day,
with grayness infusing all
and rain dancing rivers in the grass,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the stormy, threatening energy of
the universe remains
a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a frosty morning,
dreading the chilling air before the sunrise,

We stay inside and do not venture out,
the awesome cold, quiet, and stillness of
the dawn universe remains
a part of life we shall not know.

If, throughout these grace-given days of ours,
surrounded as we are by green life and
brown death, hot pink joy and cold gray
pain and miracles – always miracles –

If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out
then the Fullness of the universe
shall be unknown to us
And our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship.

CLOSING WORDS

What's In The Temple? (excerpt)

~ Tom Barrett

What's in the temple?
Put your ear to the wall of your heart.
Listen for the whisper of knowing there.
We don't build many temples anymore.
Maybe we learned that the sacred can't be contained.
Or maybe it can't be sustained inside a building.
Buildings crumble.
It's the spirit that lives on.
If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart,
What would you worship there?
What would you bring to sacrifice?
What would be behind the curtain in the holy of holies?
Go there now.

Go there knowing that what resides inside of you is sacred. Go there, trusting that it can't be contained, and that the world needs and welcomes you, as you are.
Go in peace and love. Amen.