

SURPRISE!
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
DECEMBER 16, 2018

OPENING WORDS *Here We Are So Gathered* ~ Patricia Shelden

Here is where we gather in the presence of Mystery.
Here is where we gather to experience the Sacred
Here is where, together, we face the unanswerable questions
and acknowledge that not knowing is as sublime as it is frustrating.
Here is where we unite in the midst of Life and all the glories
and suffering it can hold, knowing both are ever present.
Here is where we ask, think, risk, discuss, ponder and offer what
is on our hearts and minds, without fear of judgment.
Here is where, if we allow it, we are deeply moved.
Here is where we encounter each other in deep and powerful ways
that surprise us, yet without which we would not survive.
Here we gather to worship, to experience something happen –
perhaps something different for each of us according to our beliefs,
something unnamed, uncategorized, and unusual yet absolutely essential.
Here we are so gathered: our minds, our hearts, our bodies, and our souls.
And, so, our worship begins.

STORY FOR ALL *Windows* ~ Julia Denos

(A young boy takes his dog for a walk at dusk, and walking through the city, sees through windows the many kinds of life happening everywhere.)

READING *Ding-a-ling-a-ling!* (abridged and adapted) ~Kaaren Solveig Anderson¹

When I was a child, the day after Thanksgiving was steeped in ritual. Every year my family would travel to Chicago for the holiday festivities.

The day always held magic, mostly because in the morning, my dad would give my sister and me each a handful of dimes, which I kept in my mittens. I would tinker with them as we walked in anticipation of finding another one of “them” – [the bell-ringers with their red holiday Christmas buckets.] I marveled in watching my dimes swirl their way to the quarter-sized slot and plunk in to rest amid other dime-sized donations. They became my symbol of generosity for the season, albeit bucket-sized.

As an adult, I often felt an odd pull to ring the bell myself. One year I gave in. I called up and asked enthusiastically if they were in need of help. They were. I was given two assignments. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on that little tinkly bell.

¹ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/5050.shtml>

The first assignment was a busy street corner. I rang my dinga-lingy bell in ten-degree weather with glee, stamping my feet periodically to stay warm. It was an experience just as I had hoped: people smiled and wished me “Happy Holidays” as they passed. I marveled at the parade of dime donors and the familiar “plunk” of change that followed.

The second assignment was at a mall. [A man] arrived to set up my bucket. My hands reached for the bell. No bell. He explained, “The mall owners have complained, no bells, only this.” He handed me a sign.

The sign was attached to a long dowel. On the top of the dowel, two pieces of paper were stapled together over the center of the stick. One side read “DING,” the other “DONG.” Instead of ringing, I now had to flip a sign that read “DING-DONG.” My little bucket instantly lost its ting-a-ling. My enthusiasm waned. I flipped in silent motion. It seemed absurd. When people spotted me, their faces would contort, scrunching up into embarrassed laughter. They would throw in some dimes, barely able to stifle an awkward yet justifiable smirk.

For four hours I flipped – the sign, that is. Ten minutes before I was to quit, this fellow in black cowboy boots and a ten-gallon hat walked up to me. He was full out chuckles, bent over, hysterically laughing. I stood taller, flipping my sign with increased vigor. When he finally stood up for air, his eyes were smiling, so I hoped for no malicious intent. But I also was ready to kick him in the shins for his reaction to me and my now stupid sign.

Then he said, “I must say, I’ve never seen a sign like that before. Anybody that stands with a sign that says ‘Ding-Dong’ must be duly rewarded.” He reached into his back pocket and retrieved his wallet. He pulled a crisp bill. A fifty. He neatly folded the bill and squeezed it into the bucket designed for coin donors. Nodding, he smiled right into my eyes and muttered, “Well, I never.” Then he continued on through the mall with laughter that hung captive in the air.

I, on the other hand, began to turn that sign with a renewed vigor. I looked at each passerby with a new attitude, whether they snickered or smiled, donated or not. I now felt strangely in awe of my DING-DONG sign. I was unabashedly proud that I was stupid enough to stand in a mall tenaciously waiting for humor and generosity to awaken someone’s humdrum spirit. Waiting for it to finally dawn on me that my gifts of generosity and time needed to lose their pretenses in order for any true generosity to occur. Waiting, just to discover, that this season can still thrill and surprise. Waiting for magic, only to find that red buckets held it all the time. Even without the ding-a-ling. *(pause)*

MESSAGE *Surprise!* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

Okay. Imagine this. There is something that you really, really want. An exquisite pair of shoes. The fastest, most powerful cordless drill. A puzzle-of-the-month subscription. A pain-free body. World peace. Whatever. Just imagine this thing that you really, really,

really long for.

Now, picture a beautifully wrapped gift, sitting under a tree...a package just the right size to hold that thing you most want. You haven't been able to take your eyes off of it since you noticed that the tag very clearly has your name on it. And just now, the gift is handed to you, and you hold it in your lap, about to open it, simply quivering with anticipation.

Ready? One, two...No, wait. Don't open it yet.

It is this very moment that I want to explore this morning. This moment, in which we are suspended between possibility and reality...touching both. The moment when we feel the palpable tension between what we have, what we want and what we might get. The moment when the gift of what will be is yet a mystery.

It seems our lives exist in this space for more than mere moments. Sometimes we are hanging in that space for days, for years, maybe even for a lifetime. Often, what we dream of, and what we imagine will bring fulfillment to our lives, still exists only in the realm of possibilities, so we live between that world and our daily lives. And to complicate it, too often we believe that some possibility out there...some shiny thing in a store window, some other family or home...is preferable to what we have, where we are. So, just how do we navigate being in that space?

I've told you before about what Parker Palmer calls the tragic gap...tragic in the classic sense of it being part of the human condition. The gap he is talking about is the challenge of being able to be an active, engaged citizen, existing always between what we know to be possible, and the hard realities of what we experience. We know both generosity and greed, both love and hatred, both compassion and violence. Both are possible. And Palmer suggests that in order to function and to act, we need to be fully aware of that gap, so that we don't slip into either irrelevant idealism, by floating around only in the possibilities, or corrosive cynicism, by giving into despair or resignation.²

You might not like to think of the human condition as tragic, and perhaps 'tragic' is an unfortunate choice of words. But, in the classic Greek sense, a tragedy involves a hero who has courage and ambitions, but who also has flaws that might lead to those ambitions failing in ways that are destructive for themselves and the community. This hero lives in an ambiguous world, often flip-flopping between commitment and meaninglessness.³ 'Tragic' tales intend for us to identify with the hero, since we are, of course, the imperfect heroes of our own stories. What's more, for those of us who are humanists, we can see it as our responsibility to take on the hero's job, to go out and conquer the world.

Return, if you will, to the image of holding a gift on your lap. In this moment, we are sitting in mystery, surrounded by the unknown, which you could, I suppose, see as one

² <http://www.couragerenewal.org/the-tragic-gap/>

³ <https://quizlet.com/244746942/greek-tragedy-handout-flash-cards/>

dimension of the 'tragedy' of life. We cannot see into the future...that gift is always still wrapped. We have wishes and dreams, but don't know yet, and can't know for sure, if they will ever happen. So, how are we to live with this? Does it matter? I believe that it does.

Now, I've not heard Palmer speak of the tragic gap as a place of mystery, but he does speak of the human condition, and in my book, to be alive, is to be immersed in mystery. There are many times and ways in which we try to predict outcomes, but we never know what is around the next corner; regardless of the specificity of our planning, we can't know how something will turn out. Again, we have witnessed both good and evil, both generosity and greed, both blessing and curse...and we don't know which way the next moment will turn. And we can't control what happens, because, even though it matters what we do, rarely, if ever, does it depend solely our personal actions. And on top of that, the intention of our actions is no guarantee of their impact. What will happen next is a mystery, and yet somehow, it still matters who we are and what we do.

Do you fear terrible outcomes? Pain? Hurt? Broken relationships? Failure? Of course, you do, and I do too. Our fears are completely understandable because bad stuff happens all the time. Do you also expect joy and happiness and meaningful connections? Do you see that success and purposeful work are possible? Do you see peace is possible? I hope so, because good, surprising, stuff happens all the time as well.

A Bible verse, from the book of Hebrews, was frequently quoted in my childhood home. Be content with such things as ye have.⁴ But I think it was used incorrectly. It was used because we didn't have a lot. It was used to tell us to forget our dreams, and to stop wishing for what we didn't have. It was used as an insufficient balm for our disappointments. And the reason I think that is because the passage doesn't stop there. It goes on to say that God, or in my interpretation, life, will not fail us or forsake us. Be content. There's something new unfolding.

So the lesson isn't 'don't dream'. Rather, it is, 'trust'. Let the mystery be. What is past is past. Whatever is now will surely pass away. And what will be...well, let it be a surprise.

In the moments in-between, between now and what might be, there is a space, a holy opening. Since I am a person of action, perhaps overly concerned with what to do and how to do it, I want to learn how not to act, but rather to sit...to rest...to even bask...in this liminal space. Without trying to change anything, without yet feeling the need to DO anything.

There's a spiritual experience to be had in that moment. It is the experience of awareness, of presence, maybe even awakening. We can see it ALL in this place. The reality of what is, including what has led up to this moment and all of our feelings about it, and the poignancy of the unknown future. We are in the presence of all that

⁴ Hebrews 13:5

has been, all that is, and all that might be. The moment, each moment, is full WITH ALL of this. And we can simply open ourselves to it.

Yes, choosing to be open might seem like a call to make an active choice...to choose to be a certain way. But let's say instead that we are simply receiving the expansiveness of this awareness...knowing that we live within a 3-dimensional continuum of all possibilities that ever were and shall be...some never to manifest, some right now coming into being, and some right now fading into the past.

We are a part of an unfathomable universe of all that is. Isn't that a mystery...a mystery that really has nothing to do with an outcome? Whatever happens, we are part of the mystery.

I wonder what a difference it might make in our lives if we could be open to and aware of this mystery all the time? Might we be more content? Happier? More connected? Would life be more meaningful? Would we feel held by life itself?

Once upon a time, what I wanted most for Christmas was a Barbie doll. ALL of my friends had Barbies, and I wanted one for myself. I was aware that Barbie was probably beyond my parents' means; this had been my experience with so many things, as even at a tender age, I could tell the difference between the expensive 'real thing' and any kind of more affordable knock off. And I knew I was supposed to be content with what I had.

Well, a couple of days before Christmas, a present appeared under our tree with my name on it. It was the perfect shape...just wide enough and long enough to contain a Barbie. I was beside myself...unable to believe it might be the REAL thing, and very worried that it was not...but still hoping.

Unable to contain myself, when I was sure I was alone, I tore the edge of the wrapping, at the back where I thought no one would notice, just far enough to see the Mattel trademark. It was indeed a REAL Barbie. Oh joy!

But I had spoiled the mystery, and to some extent, I had spoiled my joy. When we finally opened presents, I had to pretend that I was surprised. So instead of having a joyous gift unwrapping, I had the experience of feeling that I'd been naughty. I still have that Barbie, although I'm not sure I ever really loved her.

Without judging that little girl, I have often wished I could have just 'let the mystery be'. Though beyond my young understanding, what if I could have overcome my anticipation and simply reveled in the possibility that lay within that package?

You know, it could well have been mittens, or a set of chopsticks, you know? There were a multitude of possibilities which, should they have come into being, might have disappointed me. But, what if, letting the mystery be could actually have contributed to appreciating whatever was wrapped up for me?

The future may well contribute to unhappiness, or serve hatred, violence and injustice. But sitting in the mystery, there is also always the very present possibility that we will

be surprised by joy, by kindness, by love...and perhaps, in that awareness, we are better able to handle the disappointments, and respond to the hard realities.

What-is has been gifted to us by the mystery. And as we open the gift of each day, the future unfolds before us. What-will-come has become what-is, and what-is has passed away. Some new surprise always awaits, and one gift of the mystery is that wonderful feeling of not knowing what will come. Surprise is wrapped up in every moment.

I once heard something believable in a sermon⁵ (I hope you know that not everything you hear in a sermon is to be believed.) Since I don't know the truth of it, I won't share details. It was about an anthropological study of an aboriginal culture in which gift giving was expected every day. Each gift was thought to contain a spirit that had a power over the receiver which was likened to a wind, blowing through the community, reinforcing the knowledge that to survive, the people needed each other, in relationships of reciprocity.

I think that's how the mystery of life works. We are in a reciprocal, ongoing relationship with all possibility. The gifts we are given are reminders that we exist within, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr, an 'inescapable network of mutuality'. Whatever comes, we are part of an exchange of breath and life that supports all-that-is, including us. If we happen to unwrap something painful or difficult, there is always the possibility of something different in the next moment, always the possibility of transformation, always the potential for loving companions on the journey, always another surprising turn in the road.

I'm not suggesting that you not dream. I am not speaking of being optimistic to the point of being irrelevant. And, I'm not speaking of walking by the hurts and needs of the world without noticing. Rather, I want to encourage us to just keep holding the gift of life, and to put aside the urge to know what's ahead. Let's be open to the mystery of what might be.

Be like the boy in today's story who walked out into the night and simply noticed. There are countless windows out there, any of which could become part of our story. Walking, contentedly, through the streets of life allows us to experience the presence of that mystery, and the wonder of the gift.

May each of us be at home in the midst of mystery, trusting without a doubt that we have a place in the field of all possibility, that we may be open to the surprise found in each new day.

So be it.

READING *Expect Nothing* ~ Alice Walker

Expect nothing. Live frugally
On surprise.
Become a stranger

⁵ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_22mO6oMloAJiDcKqGtvOmkXf5ezKD3Y/view

To need of pity
Or, if compassion be freely
Given out
Take only enough
Stop short of urge to plead
Then purge away the need.
Wish for nothing larger
Than your own small heart
Or greater than a star;
Tame wild disappointment
With caress unmoved and cold
Make of it a parka
For your soul.
Discover the reason why
So tiny a human midget
Exists at all
So scared unwise
But expect nothing. Live frugally
On surprise.

***CLOSING WORDS** *Bring Happiness ~ Barbara Cheatham*⁶

Before we gather here again--
may each of us bring happiness into another's life;
may we each be surprised by the gifts that surround us;
may each of us be enlivened by constant curiosity --
And may we remain together in spirit
til the hour we meet again.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

⁶ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/5998.shtml>