

MAKE YOURSELF CLEAR!
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The Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS **#504 (SLT)** ~ *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 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)

STORY FOR ALL *Life* ~ *Cynthia Rylant*

(With lovely pictures, this book expresses a clarity about life as something that starts small, changes and grows...and always worth waking up to!)

MEDITATION *This Very Moment* (excerpt) ~ *James Ishmael Ford*¹

[T]his way of simple attention, bare presence, is the path of wisdom, the journey of heaven, the way home.... Again, attention is the great solvent. Attending, paying attention, we discover how wide the mind is, how great is the field of consciousness... Over the centuries people have grown deep and wise engaging the ways of clarity and attention.

READING *Clarity of Hindsight* (excerpt) ~ *Lisa Doerge*²

Knowing what you now know, would you do it all over again? Whatever it is. Marry your spouse? Pursue your career? Buy that house? Go to that college? Enlist? Join the Peace Corps? End that relationship? Plant that crop? Invest in those stocks?

Novelists often make use of foreshadowing to hint at dramatic turns still to come. Movie makers use music in the same way. ... Life, on the other hand, doesn't usually provide such advance notice....

Our species would have died out long ago if prospective parents had absolute

¹ James Ishmael Ford, *This Very Moment: A Brief Introduction to Buddhism and Zen for Unitarian Universalists*

² <https://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/clarity-of-hindsight/>

foreknowledge of middle-of-the-night fevers, toddler tantrums, and teen attitude.

What decisions would farmers make if they knew in advance that this is the year the drought would be too deep or that a tornado would crisscross the county, leaving their fields in ruins?

Deciding to marry is daunting enough knowing the divorce rate is about fifty-percent. ... But what if you knew it would fail after twenty years, but also knew, without a doubt, that during those twenty years you would grow into a strong and confident and capable adult, because of, not despite, the marriage? ...

Without a musical score, without an author tossing in a bit of subtle or heavy-handed foreshadowing, we make our own ways through life. Some of us sense meaning in our lives and make life decisions accordingly. Some of us believe that if life has meaning at all, it is something we impose on it, and we make life decisions accordingly. Some of us wake up each morning and say, "I wonder what life will bring today!" and make life decisions accordingly. But none of us knows exactly what our life or even our day will hold, or how our decisions will shift and shape the hours and days and years yet to come.

Life, as far as we know it, is an unfolding of a series of endless possibilities. I believe that we would be paralyzed by any certain foreknowledge of how any one of those possibilities would ultimately unfold. ... I believe that Kierkegaard's observation that "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards" is a gift. It frees us to live, to determine our own paths, to take risks and to trust the future.

Because only hindsight is 20/20, because life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards, because most of us are never given a vision of the date engraved on our tombstones or the events of our deaths, we get to decide how we will move through our years and in what spirit:

Will we throw up our hands, saying, It doesn't matter what I do because I will never know the outcome until it is too late anyway? Will we embrace what comes as a grand adventure, ...? Will we trust that there is a thread pulling us along and stringing together the hidden meaning of our days, and, resting on that trust, move deliberately, thoughtfully through our years, pausing at strategic times to listen and watch before staying the course or choosing a different path?

... Only I can know which is my way forward. Only you can know which is your way forward. But we can support one another in our choices. We can tell the stories and speculate about the meanings. And we can offer thanks that in the mystery of life's never-ending unfolding, possibility abounds for redemption, for surprise, for joy, for love's irresistible embrace. *(pause)*

MESSAGE *Making Ourselves Clear* ~ Rev. Julie

I studied theatre in university, and in my senior year, I had a job teaching creative dramatics in local elementary (public) schools. I and a partner would go into a classroom, push all the desks aside (remember, these were the days when desks were lined up in rows, filling the entire

room) and invite the kids to use their imagination to bring some experience into their bodies. With a guided meditation, we'd help them to see what it would be and feel like to be a tree, or a flower, or a particular animal, or bug, or even a table.

I just thought it was cool...spending time in a kind of alternate reality...but I also know that it was about learning social skills and building community. Creative dramatics helps us to 'walk in the shoes' of some other being or entity. It increases empathy and understanding. From the point of view of theatre, it is a very important skill to have when trying to 'be' any character other than oneself.

I got to thinking about these classes after I picked a title for this sermon...*Make Yourself Clear*. Imagine this...that you were taking part in a creative dramatics class, and the instructor gives this task. Make yourself clear. Do you even know where to start?

Maybe imagine that you are a sparkling pane of glass, utterly transparent. Or, imagine yourself as a crystal-clear pond, shimmering, reflective. Do you know how you'd act that out? Could any of us follow those instructions? I wonder what we would do with our bodies to get into those personas? What kind of movements would we make? What does glass, or water, think anyway? How do they feel? Remember, the idea of creative dramatics is that if you can imagine how someone or something feels or thinks, you would know how to embody it.

So make yourself clear.

I don't know about you, but while I've not yet able to get my body to actualize clarity or transparency or crystal-clearness on demand, there is some part of me that understands clarity. I have occasionally experienced it. You know...that moment when one's body feels like the blood and oxygen is flowing freely and unimpeded. When my heart is beating in a matching rhythm to that of the trees and the sky. When the boundary between what is me and all-that-is dissolves. When I feel strong and resolved in who I am and what is mine to do. If I dig deep down, if I quiet myself and listen, the truth is that I do know what clarity feels like.

Trouble is, while I know what it feels like, and while I recognize it as a preferred state of being, I am more often murky and confused...the exact opposite of clear.

Let me present this a slightly different way. To be clear, clarity is that place where we are able to see things objectively, and are able to put ourselves in a kind of global picture knowing that we have a place there. It is the sense of 'rightness'...that unquestionably we belong and are just where we need to be. It's authenticity. It is clarity of purpose. Clarity of vision. Clarity of what we are called to be. Clarity of our moral ground. Someone, somewhere, once spoke of this reality as 'unalienable'... right?...an inability to feel out of place or unfamiliar.

And to take it a step further, this clarity...of our inalienable rightness...lays the ground for us as individuals and as a community to act. To take steps forward. To trust what is ours to do.

Parker Palmer tells a great story about clarity in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*.³ He was once leading a retreat for elected and appointed officials in Washington, DC...a retreat about how

³ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, pp 18-19.

to live with wholeness and integrity, living exactly as your values call you to live. One participant, a farmer who had worked many years for the Dept of Agriculture, shared that there was a proposal on his desk related to the preservation of topsoil. He said that his farmer's heart knew how the proposal should be handled, but he also knew that following his heart would not be in his political best interest. He was struggling with this dissonance.

By the end of the retreat, this man found clarity about what to do, which was to listen to his farmer's heart. He said that he had remembered something important: "I don't report to my boss. I report to the land."

Clarity is remembering who or what you report to.

Several years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association initiated a wide collegial conversation entitled "Whose Are We". Who do we report to? There was no assumption that there would be one answer to this question; the beauty of the conversation was wrestling with the question itself. Whose are we? The question had been inspired by a worship service at which Rev. Jon Luopo told this story:

"It seems that in Seattle the interfaith clergy organization has a tradition of asking senior colleagues to share their life odysseys. On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure. He remembered the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet, these many years later he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams had not been realized. "Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, his demeanour seemed quite peaceful and content. 'How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?' 'I know whose I am,' replied the priest. 'I know whose I am.'

Isn't that just the picture of clarity? To be calm and serene and assured even in the midst of disappointment and failure? The image of an enlightened being comes to mind...content, quiet, peaceful.

I am pretty sure that I am not going to attain enlightenment in my life. Perhaps it's a worthy goal, but let's be a little more realistic. It may well be that clarity comes sporadically, unexpectedly, in an otherwise muddy and chaotic existence, and that such clarity is what lays the ground for us to go on. Maybe clarity comes like waves, in moments...like a drink of water after a period of extreme thirst, or a still point after a time of spinning.

Wendell Berry puts it this way:

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

So, maybe we need the times of bafflement and confusion, as well as the times of clarity. Or maybe life is bafflement and confusion, and moments of clarity help us to navigate it. Or perhaps because we want to act for justice and sustainability on a planet that is swirling with the antitheses of these things, we need clarity in order to step out into the fray carrying with us a fierce kind of presence.

In other words, maybe it doesn't matter which comes first, the chaos or the calm, the confusion or the clarity, but it DOES matter that we find occasional, even regular, moments of clarity.

So how do we do that? From what I can tell, teachers in all times and places have suggested a handful of practices to bring clarity into our beings.

The first can be summed up in these words of Parker Palmer: "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am."⁴ Listen to life telling you who you are. Listen. Listen to that still small voice within. Listen to the dark of winter. Quiet yourself and your mind, and listen. This can be done in meditation, or in quiet reflection, or by spending time alone. Listen.

Second, nourish yourself. Don't go without water...without time for restoration... without inspiration. Get in touch with whatever for you is the great source of truth or the divine...that universal connection to all of life and all-that-is. Choose the paths that will bring you more fully in touch with wholeness. Be sure that you are sufficiently resourced to withstand the storms of life. It's that old saying about how a dry well can't give water. We need to fill up our own wells.

But then share your well's water where there is thirst. Clarity of purpose is found in service, and in giving of yourself. Clearly finding and knowing your place is like being where the cogs of your authentic being mesh with the work that is to be done. As Howard Thurman so beautifully said: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Be alive with gratitude for all that this world is. Spend time in nature. Breathe in beauty. What else? Well, remember that we need others. Being in community helps us to discern our place and our calling. It doesn't mean that someone else can tell you who you are or what you need to do, but there's something about engaging with others that gives us information about ourselves. Clarity can bubble up in us when we are truly heard and understood, so we need others who will do that listening and understanding. And I'm here with you because this faith reminds me that there is a wholeness at my center, and that this wholeness is present in each of us, and that we are here, willing to listen it into being for and with each other.

Clarity. Have you ever swum in a pond or river with a muddy bottom? I'm sure you have, and that you can recall looking down at your feet...or where your feet are supposed to be, but all you can see is this dense swirl of mud. Yet if we're willing to remain motionless...to watch, and to listen, and to trust...slowly that mud settles, and the water become clear, and we can

⁴ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

see where our feet are planted.

But also imagine this in another way. Step your foot into that muddy bottom, knowing that the waters will churn, and the way will be unclear. Close your mind's eye, and simply remember who you are. Find your clarity. Make yourself clear. Though you might not be able to see your feet, you can still feel where they are, and still know that you are exactly where you need to be. We can experience clarity even when we cannot see clearly. We can still go into an unclear future with clarity about who we are.

*What Is There Beyond Knowing*⁵, a poem by the late Mary Oliver, says it this way:

What is there beyond knowing that keeps
calling to me? I can't
turn in any direction
but it's there. I don't mean
the leaves; grip and shine or even the thrush's
silk song, but the far-off
fires, for example,
of the stars, heaven's slowly turning
theater of light, or the wind
playful with its breath;
or time that's always rushing forward,
or standing still
in the same - what shall I say -
moment.
What I know
I could put into a pack
as if it were bread and cheese, and carry it
on one shoulder,
important and honorable, but so small!
While everything else continues, unexplained
and unexplainable. How wonderful it is
to follow a thought quietly
to its logical end.
I have done this a few times.
But mostly I just stand in the dark field,
in the middle of the world, breathing
in and out. Life so far doesn't have any other name

⁵ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems, Volume Two*

but breath and light, wind and rain.

If there's a temple, I haven't found it yet.
I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass
and the weeds.

Something beyond knowing keeps calling to me...the far-off fires of the stars and the heaven's slow turning. The best we can do is stand in the middle of it all, breathing in and out, having made ourselves clear as glass that we might drink it all in.

Amen.

READING *A Prayer for the Overwhelmed*⁶ ~ Meg Riley

For you who are stretched too thin,
Flat out,
Buried up to your eyeballs,
Pulled in too many directions,
Keeping too many balls in the air,
Tracking too many loose ends.
May you drop it all, just for a moment, and know strength and wholeness.

For you with to-do lists as thick as the yellow pages,
With electronic time management systems
And scraps of napkins and receipts with urgent notes on the back.
For you worn out from chasing young children,
For you responsible for both children and aging parents,
For you caregivers, For you split shift workers,
For you job seekers, never resting easy in your search.
May you come to rest, just for a moment, and know well-being.

For you who struggle to make ends meet,
Who don't know where the money will come from,
Who juggle bills deftly as those who juggle fire,
For you who can't keep up with the medical bills,
Who are as stressed by [costs] as you are by the illness,
Who are being hounded by creditors or causes,
May you have clarity, just for a moment, that life matters more than money.

Breathe in joy, breathe out fear.
Breathe in fluidity, breathe out rigidity.
Breathe in acceptance, breathe out resistance.

May you know you are not alone.
May you feel encircled by loving arms.
May you know, finally, that whatever you
Do or don't do

⁶ <https://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/living-with-purpose/a-prayer-for-the-overwhelmed/>

See or don't see,
Pay or don't pay,
You are part of the web of life
And there you are held, secure.

* **CLOSING WORDS** *Clearing* ~ *Martha Postlethwaite*

Do not try to save the whole world or do anything grandiose.

Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life and wait there patiently, until the song that is your life falls into your own cupped hands and you recognize and greet it.

Only then will you know how to give yourself to this world so worthy of rescue.

Go and find the song that is your life. Sing it out loud and clear. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME