

THE BELLY OF THE WHALE
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
REV. JULIE STONEBERG
MARCH 31, 2019

OPENING WORDS

Start Close In ~ David Whyte¹

Start close in,
don't take the
second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to
take.

Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way of starting
the conversation.

Start with your own
question,

Come, let's take that first step together.

give up on other
people's questions,
don't let them
smother something
simple.

To find
another's voice,
follow
your own voice,
wait until
that voice
becomes a
private ear
listening
to another.

Start right now
take a small step
you can call your
own
don't follow

someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.

Start close in,
don't take
the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to
take.

CHALICE LIGHTING

The End Is the Beginning ~ Katie Gelfand²

We call forth the life of our faith by igniting our chalice.
This spark of new beginnings invites us into a sacred space
to reflect where we have been and where we are going.
Even knowing that this particular flame will intentionally end
with our ritual extinguishing, we fear not its end...
For we know, with brave hearts,
that from every ending of our lives,
We are sent forth to make a new beginning.

STORY FOR ALL *Following Papa's Song ~ Gianna Marino*

(A young whale is shown the far away dark depths by his father. Little Blue learns to listen for his papa's song so that he can find his way.)

READING *Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale ~ Dan Albergotti³*

Measure the walls. Count the ribs. Notch the long days.
Look up for blue sky through the spout. Make small fires

¹ <https://pathwriter.wordpress.com/2012/03/19/start-close-in-david-whyte/>

² <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/end-beginning>

³ http://www.towncreekpoetry.com/FALL08/ALBERGOTTI_THINGS.htm

with the broken hulls of fishing boats. Practice smoke signals.
Call old friends, and listen for echoes of distant voices.
Organize your calendar. Dream of the beach. Look each way
for the dim glow of light. Work on your reports. Review
each of your life's ten million choices. Endure moments
of self-loathing. Find the evidence of those before you.
Destroy it. Try to be very quiet, and listen for the sound
of gears and moving water. Listen for the sound of your heart.
Be thankful that you are here, swallowed with all hope,
where you can rest and wait. Be nostalgic. Think of all
the things you did and could have done. Remember
treading water in the center of the still night sea, your toes
pointing again and again down, down into the black depths.

MESSAGE *The Belly of the Whale* ~ Rev. Julie

Not so long ago, during the summer months, I attended a Sunday service at a not-to-be-disclosed location here in Peterborough. Regardless of the service being held in a rather small space, they had both a band and a large projection screen. The topic was similar to ours for today, except that their focus was on being in the 'bowels' of the whale, rather than in the belly.

At the beginning of the service, the screen changed often to project song lyrics, but kept returning to a dark, circular graphic that drew one into what it might feel like to exist in the bowels. The whale was presented as a metaphor for life, and the lesson, as I can best recall, was that we've likely ended up where we are through some fault of our own, and that there are lessons to be learned from that, even when we're sitting in the shit.

This resonates with what I learned about Jonah. The version of the story I was told makes Jonah out to have gotten what he deserved. He ignored God's instructions, and that's why he was where he was...inside a great fish...on the verge of being digested.

Now, although there was something uncomfortably compelling about that message... probably a familiarity with my childhood church lessons...I began to feel that I literally WAS in the belly of some great whale, and was relieved when the service ended, and I could toss myself back outside into the fresh air.

So, I begin by assuring you that I'm not focusing on our shortcomings in today's message.

Here's another story as metaphor, one with many fewer personal culpability nuances.

One of my nieces was married at her family's country home on a very warm August day. While they keep horses, and I could place blame there, I think the swarming flies were just a fluke of timing. It was awful. Everything, from bridesmaids to wedding cake, was covered with flies, and most of the day was spent batting them away.

As I prepared to leave, I found that I had left a window down, and my car was full of flies. I did my best to shoo them out, but during the three-hour drive home, I had to occasionally roll down a window to let one or two out. I arrived home with several flies still in tow, and I got to

thinking...what was it like for those flies? ...to have been living in the country with the only family they knew, and then to have been transported, without a say in it, to places unknown? Were they anxious on the long drive, or did their curiosity keep them buzzing with anticipation? Not a journey they chose, but still, their journey. It's an insect-size version of the beautiful story told in the movie *Lion*⁴, where a small boy falls asleep on a train that takes him thousands of miles away from home and family.

I should say here that a 'belly of the whale experience' is part of the hero's journey so famously articulated by Joseph Campbell. In his book, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*,⁵ Campbell speaks of the belly of the whale as a threshold into a place of rebirth. It represents a kind of death, a self-annihilation, in which the hero is swallowed into the unknown, and goes inward...in order to be born again. Campbell recounts multiple myths from different traditions in which the hero chooses the belly of the whale, as a rite of passage, knowing that they must make this self-sacrifice into darkness in order to complete their journey, often for the very sake of humanity.

It's difficult, even silly, for me to project this analysis onto the journey of the flies in my car. Let's just say that we have at least three ways we end up in the belly. One, as some twisted form of disciplinary punishment. Two, by circumstances beyond our control. Or three, as a chosen heroic path. But again, how we got there is not our focus for today. We're just going to consider the three days and three nights that Jonah was in the belly of the great fish.

We've all been there. It could be anything from being held captive by the weather to feeling stuck in a relationship. Perhaps you're waiting for some medical test results that will determine your next steps. Maybe financial circumstances are keeping you from doing something you're passionate about. Or some self-sacrificing obligation, even one you've gladly chosen, means that you have to set aside other plans and goals.

It happens on the spiritual journey as well. It could be as simple as not taking time for spiritual practice or not participating regularly in Sunday services because you've got young children, or because your health is unstable. Maybe life circumstances have thrown you into the depths of existential angst...a dark night of the soul. Or, some old belief still has you held captive, and you're looking for ways to release its hold.

All of these things are 'belly of the whale' experiences...being somewhere not ideal, in a waiting mode, experiencing shame or despair, and uncertain of what shores we'll be tossed upon next. I don't mean to imply that all 'belly-experiences' are equal...waiting for a sunny day is qualitatively different than waiting for some glimmer of hope...being tossed into hopelessness by the experience of trauma or tragedy is qualitatively different than waiting for your circumstances to change.

But still, what's it like there, in the belly of the whale? Can you imagine it? Never having literally been in one, I assume it would be dark. And probably slimy. And there'd be stuff and surfaces I couldn't identify by touch...and not enough anti-bacterial gel in the world to make

⁴ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3741834/>

⁵ <https://biblioklept.org/2012/07/08/the-belly-of-the-whale-joseph-campbell/>

me comfortable.

I bet there wouldn't be cozy furniture or a TV or any 'usual' kind of entertainment or distraction. No windows to gaze out of...with the exception, perhaps, of the spout hole. No refrigerator, or room service. No luxury. No joy.

Just darkness, and sounds. Close by gurgling sounds. Far away echo-y sounds. And time. Lots of time. Without a foreseeable end.

Billy Collins wrote a beautiful poem called *Aristotle*⁶, in three stanzas...starting in turn with: this is the beginning, this is the middle, and this is the end. I couldn't find a way to fully incorporate it into any of our 'journey' services this month. But it suggests to me that being in the belly of the whale is a kind of middle passage...(which of course has a whole other, more oppressive meaning for those who were taken from Africa as slaves). But, it is in the belly that things seem complicated, and we experience disappointment. As Collins says, "This is the sticky part where the plot congeals, where the action suddenly reverses or swerves off in an outrageous direction." "This is the thick of things."

Or, as Dante described in the very first verse of the *Inferno*, "Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest, for the straightforward pathway had been lost."⁷ At some point, the path disappears, and we find ourselves in darkness. Is this to be a journey to hell and back, a journey into the dark and back out into the light? Or, just a journey into hell?

What if we could see it as something in the middle? Some necessary experience between the beginning and the end. This perspective might offer us some space to decide what to do while we're there...in that great and discomfoting belly.

The Bible story suggests that Jonah spent his time regretting what he'd done and praying up a storm, begging forgiveness. But as the poet Dan Albergotti⁸ tells us, there are a lot of other choices. We can take stock of our environment by measuring walls, and counting ribs, and getting familiar with the mucous-y surfaces around us. We can assemble and catalogue what we find...broken hulls of fishing boats, and bones of earlier meals and travelers. We can do all manner of busy work...writing reports and organizing our calendars. At least this stuff keeps our minds busy and perhaps keeps anxiety at bay.

We could also spend time in reflection...dreaming forward, or reviewing our choices backward. We can think nostalgically of all the things we've done and those we didn't do. Last week we talked about the road not taken and of the value, and weight, of feeling regret. Regret, we learned, is something that we can be grateful for, because it is a by-product of having free will, and it teaches us to make choices that best align with our values. So in the belly, we can look both backward and forward, learning more about ourselves, and appreciating the opportunity to do so.

And we can listen. Listen carefully. Remember the young whale in today's story? Little Blue's

⁶ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46706/aristotle>

⁷ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/inferno-canto-i>

⁸ http://www.towncreekpoetry.com/FALL08/ALBERGOTTI_THINGS.htm

papa was teaching them about life's dark moments...about those times when we enter the darkest depths. And the papa taught them to listen.

For what? Help? Some sound that there is a life outside the darkness...sounds of 'gears and moving waters?' Some sound that a rescue team might be on the way? Some assurance that all shall be well? In the story it was to listen for the sound of other whales, and more specifically for papa's loving song. In Albergotti's poem, it is to listen for the sound of your own heart.

Your own heart. Its beating. Its life-force. Full of smoke from previous hearth-fires. Full of yearnings. That small glowing voice of compassion for yourself and acceptance for the place where you find yourself. Listen.

What do we do in the belly of the whale, when the way seems dark and the path uncertain?

Well, what if we could remember that we are in a place of transformation, in a womb that promises to birth some needed change? What if we could see that this is a necessary passage into something new? Maybe this suggestion feels like asking a fetus to foresee its birth, but still, it's a worthy perspective to try to achieve. We could, if not reveling in it, at least trust, the coming transformation.

Listen for your heart's yearnings. Do some soul searching. Take stock. Pay attention to the churning of your mind and the aches in your own belly. Remember that you are on some threshold. Call upon the wisdom of the ancients who remind us that enlightenment is possible only after thousands of hours of meditation. That meaning becomes clear only after decades of service, and that peace is found on the dawn-side of a dark night of the soul. Appreciate that you are somewhere in the middle of it all.

Imagine if the story I had been told about Jonah told me that he embraced his time in the darkness, and waited upon the voice of his heart to instruct him. Imagine if, in some animated version of the flies' trip across southern Minnesota, they folded themselves into a meditative pose and waited. What might we learn from stories such as these?

I love swimming in a lake, and I particularly like swimming in the moonlight. It is a spiritual practice for me...feeling myself buoyed in the dark water, gazing up at a canopy of stars protecting me, opening my hands and my heart to welcome whatever is ahead. Albergotti's words are as familiar as my own skin..."Remember treading water in the center of the still night sea, your toes pointing again and again down, down into the black depths."

Remember. You are held. You are not alone. You are not done with your changes.⁹ So Be It.

READING

Detour

~ Ruth Feldman¹⁰

I took a long time getting here,
much of it wasted on wrong turns,
back roads riddled by ruts.
I had adventures
I never would have known

⁹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54897/the-layers>

¹⁰ <https://wordsfortheyear.com/2018/05/29/detour-by-ruth-feldman/>

if I proceeded as the crow flies.
Super highways are so sure
of where they are going:
they arrive too soon.

A straight line isn't always
the shortest distance
between two people.
Sometimes I act as though
I'm heading somewhere else
while, imperceptibly,
I narrow the gap between you and me.
I'm not sure I'll ever
know the right way, but I don't mind
getting lost now and then.
Maps don't know everything.

* **CLOSING WORDS** *A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark*

~ Jan Richardson¹¹

Go slow
if you can.
Slower.
More slowly still.
Friendly dark
or fearsome,
this is no place
to break your neck
by rushing,
by running,
by crashing into
what you cannot
see.

Then again,
it is true:
different darks
have different tasks,

and if you
have arrived here
unawares,
if you have come
in peril
or in pain,
this might be no
place
you should dawdle.

I do not know
what these shadows
ask of you,
what they might
hold
that means you
good
or ill.

It is not for me
to reckon
whether you should
linger
or you should leave.

But this is what
I can ask for you:
That in the darkness
there be a blessing.
That in the shadows
there be a welcome.
That in the night
you be
encompassed
by the Love that
knows
your name.

Go, knowing that LOVE knows your name and you are not alone. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

¹¹ <http://adventdoor.com/2015/11/25/advent-1-a-blessing-for-traveling-in-the-dark/>