

Where Our Future Can Begin

Sermon Given at
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

September 10, 2023

The Rev. Craig M. Nowak

One morning last week on the way to the gym, I found myself behind a school bus. As I sat there while children climbed aboard at each stop, I started thinking about riding the school bus when I was a kid. Before my family moved to the rural town with expansive, rolling farmlands and dense woods where my parents still live, we lived in what might be considered a small city outside of Hartford where the largest plots of land were reserved for retail or commercial space and public buildings, thus my bus route to school took me past things like the town library and strip malls, gas stations, warehouses, and apartment complexes as well as single family homes.

With rare exception, the buildings were dull, lifeless boxes... some were downright ugly. I remember gazing out the window, bouncing up and down in my seat as the bus rolled over railroad tracks and potholes and thinking about how someday I was going to become an architect and fill the world with attractive buildings. It was my dream to help create a more beautiful world, a dream that never left me even as the likelihood of me becoming an architect diminished thanks to...well let's call it a unsatisfying relationship with calculus...we just didn't get along.

Of course, every child dreams. Some dreams come and go, many perhaps, are never realized. But some dreams stay with us even if they can't be realized in the way we first imagined. Dreams that stay with us, that survive the innocence and naivete of youth, like my own dream to help create a more beautiful world, might more accurately be called a longing.

When we feel or experience a sense of longing we are acknowledging that something is amiss... in our lives or the world around us. We long when we're aware we're not quite where we want or need to be. Indeed, longing is marked by a profound sense that there is more to life than what passes for life as viewed on our screens, advertised in the pages of magazines, and displayed in store windows.

The contemporary philosopher Jacob Needleman reminds us, "Human beings are meant to do more than simply live out their physical lives on this earth." To long then is to experience an essential hunger, hunger for a life that matters....a life that has depth....that is multi-dimensional... a life in which, as an old Isaac Watts hymn goes, "my heart in tune be found." And to pursue our longing is to embark on the journey of a lifetime...our spiritual journey.

Each of us here today carries within us a longing...a longing for a world that looks...no...that IS... different from the one we know today in some way. Which is to say, we are a hungry people. Otherwise we wouldn't be here.

Now, there are many, many people who feel the same sense of longing, same sense of awe, wonder, frustration, excitement, fear, and hope about life, the world we live in, and our place in it all as you and I do. But, for varied reasons, they do not gather with others. They try to go it alone. It's not really that surprising given the strong do-it-yourself, ultra-competitive current that runs through the American psyche.

Now, some claim it is impossible to travel a spiritual journey alone. I don't know that it is impossible, but I believe it is more difficult, for the spiritual journey is really about becoming who are...who we really are. This becoming is at the heart of the teachings and practices of the Buddha, Jesus, The prophet Mohamed, Moses...and countless other spiritual teachers. The great paradox is that becoming who we are happens best in relationship with others, that is, in community. So while our longing for a better world or deeper life may spark our spiritual seeking, it is the process of learning to live in covenant with one another, building that better world, and discovering our deeper self together that actually begins to sate our hunger...our longing, giving sustenance to our becoming.

Yes. We are a hungry people.

And because we are a hungry people, we gather together to feed one another and be fed.

No matter the source or object of our longing, we gather together:

Because peace is too often pursued through war, we gather together to cultivate peace within and among us.

Because courage is the exception and fear the norm around the globe, we gather together to speak truth to power.

Because the good we see and do sustains us, we gather together, to remain strong.

Because only love can disarm evil, we gather together, to learn the ways of love.

Because our hearts at times grow heavy, we gather together to comfort one another.

Because we sometimes make mistakes and mess up, we gather together forgive one another.

Because there is suffering in this world, we gather together, to practice kindness and work for justice.

Because we are part of a greater whole, we gather together, to promote good stewardship and right relations.

Because we are a hungry people, we gather, here...to feed, be fed, to become more deeply who we really are.

Indeed, in our gathering together we join with those, who, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "...age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world."

For when we gather together, we create a community; a community to support, encourage, and provide a place to act and reflect, celebrate and mourn.

Both the people that form and the place that houses a faith community provide both refuge and inspiration for the spiritual traveler. This is why Robert Walsh speaks of gathering as an act of this season, for the here and now...a community of and for this particular time in history and at the same time Kenneth Patton reminds us to "build temples" that our gathering today may be known to future generations who will "put their carvings beside ours and light candles where long ago ours burned away." and yet shall there remain "a lingering of our questions and solicitations" and "the rafters and pillars will remember our dreams."

In her book, Traveling Mercies, novelist Anne Lamott explains why she bring her son Sam to church, "The main reason [I make him go] is that I want to give him what I found..., which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want, which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy, are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community who pray or practice their faith, they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians, people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle, they are part of something beautiful."

Lamott's words express what she knows on a deeply personal level... that communities of faith and the places they meet, being rooted in the past, active in the present, and mindful of the future, offer something not easily found elsewhere in our daily lives.

Lamott describes this something as an opportunity to transcend the narrow confines of the ego-self. Robert Walsh and Kenneth Patton describe church, both the gathering of people and the physical space, as providing a dimension of timelessness to our finite lives.

I agree communities of faith and the space in which they meet are places to experience timelessness and self-transcendence, but they are also, and perhaps most importantly, I

think, places, in the words of the hymn we'll soon sing "where our future can begin." For it is within communities of faith and the church, mosque, synagogue, temple or meeting house it calls home that people have gathered for centuries to commit and recommit themselves to the journey of a lifetime...the spiritual journey...the journey of becoming.

And so we regather today...a day filled with hope and promise for the coming year. We gather, each of us, from the youngest among us to the oldest, as heirs to all that has come before us and stewards of what will be long after we're gone. We gather here, in this building of wood and masonry, metal and glass, tended and cared for with sweat and tears, a house of hope and light brimming with charm and challenges. We gather together here to carry forward dreams of the past, bear witness to and engage the present, and shape tomorrow.

We gather a hungry and hopeful people... and in so doing we become a community of faith, a people and a place, where our future can begin.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be