

Beautiful Questions

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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Following lunch at one my favorite restaurants in Boston I made the short walk down Charles St. over to Mount Vernon Place for my meeting with the MFC or Ministerial Fellowship Committee. For those unfamiliar with the name or the Unitarian Universalist ministerial credentialing process, the MFC is the body that clears candidates for ordination. It can also send them packing despite one and many others having invested a great deal of time, energy, and money to get to that roughly hour long interview. Suffice it to say, there's a lot riding on the meeting.

I arrived somewhat early and, given it was a pleasant September afternoon, decided to wait outside for a bit before going into the historic building where the interview was to take place. My head was stuffed with information, historical facts and dates, definitions and famous names, and the ability to recall, even if imperfectly, a variety of theologies and foundational ideas about this faith. And whatever I did know or couldn't recall, well, it was too late to worry about at that point.

Despite my years of preparation, I was understandably anxious. As the time neared to go inside, I began to move about, purposely waving my arms around and shaking my legs, even bouncing in place. For a moment it occurred to me that someone from the committee might see me from a window and wonder what was going on. No matter. I just kept on moving until I stopped, gave myself one last full body shake, and made my way to the door.

I guess no one on the committee saw me moving about outside as no one asked what I was doing out there. I suppose that's a good thing. But had someone asked I hope I would have told them I was getting out of my head that I might fully inhabit my body.

I didn't know it then, but what must have looked like a strange or perhaps disturbing dance on the sidewalk of Mount Vernon Place that afternoon, was in fact a response to a question that has lived in me for a long time, "How am I present?"

It's the kind of question the poet philosopher David Whyte might call, a beautiful question. "A beautiful question", Whyte contends, "is one that shapes your identity as much by asking it as by any answer it might provide"...adding..."the

ability to ask beautiful questions – often in very un-beautiful moments – is one of the great disciplines of a human life.”

All of my life I have been or at least felt, physically awkward. Not clumsy, but not quite in synch. Indeed, despite at one time being quite a good down hill skier and nearly a black belt in Tae Kwon Do in my teens, I’ve almost uniformly been terrible at any other sport I’ve either willingly tried or been conscripted into especially within the dreaded physical education program in the American school system. I don’t fare much better on the dance floor or submerged in a pool for water aerobics for that matter.

This awareness, not to mention the notice of other, at times less than kind peers as a child, lends itself to certain degree of unhelpful self-consciousness that for me makes my head an inviting place in which to retreat.

I don’t remember ever coming up with the question, “How am I present?” As my narrative of physical awkwardness alludes, the strategic mind is more apt to defend against a beautiful question than nurture its unfolding. Indeed, “How am I present?” seems to have simply emerged at some point as something to live rather than “think about.” A “tiny, but frightening request”, as the poet observes,

*A request ...to stop what
you are doing right now,
and*

*to stop what
you are becoming
while you do it,*

*questions
that can make
or unmake
a life,*

*questions
that have patiently
waited for you,*

*questions
that have no right
to go away.”*

All of us have beautiful questions, questions patiently waiting for us, questions that have not right to go away, that we need to be faithful to. Questions uniquely our own, some of which will change with the passing seasons of our lives. Still, whatever your question or questions are at any given time in life, chances are you have a favorite retreat to which you like to escape, even before you can articulate the question(s) itself in a language you can understand. A place or rationalization to defend against its “frightening request”, that keeps you from your inner and outer horizons, those, “invitational edges” as David Whyte calls them, “between what is familiar and what must be imagined.”

But absent the discipline of asking beautiful questions, that favorite retreat risks becoming a permanent residence. A comfortably uncomfortable place, that David Whyte describes as “an insulated numbness, which prevents us from feeling, a “rampart” to hide behind and shield ourselves against life.

An alternative to this defense is to seek solace, which Whyte defines, in part, as “the art of asking the beautiful question, of ourselves, of our world or one another, in fiercely difficult and un-beautiful moments. “Solace”, he says, “is what we must look for when the mind cannot bear the pain, the loss or the suffering that eventually touches every life and every endeavor; when longing does not come to fruition in a form we can recognize, when people we love disappear, when hope must take a different form than the one we have shaped for it.”

Whyte’s words contend solace is found not in gaining a reprieve from our vulnerability but in conversing with it. Indeed, “part of coming to life again, Whyte maintains, “is the courage to become vulnerable.” Asking a beautiful question then, is a courageous step into vulnerability.

Today we often equate vulnerability with weakness or view it through a clinical lens focused on a heightened risk of exposure to harm and/or lack of basic material or emotional resources. But as Whyte observes, “Vulnerability is not a weakness... or something we can arrange to do without.” Instead, he contends, “vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state.” “To run from vulnerability”, then, “is to run from the essence of our nature, the attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to become something we are not.”

Maybe that’s why the beautiful question so often announces its arrival as a beckoning within, an interior whisper, often felt rather than formed of words, that say to us, “stop running.” But how often do we actually stop?

Any minister can tell you resistance runs high, even within ourselves. But I take some comfort in knowing, as centuries of wisdom stories and the world’s great

scriptures testify, it also runs long. Indeed, at least as long, and beyond the origins of an old story from Finland called, *Ukko's Bread*, our story for all ages this morning. Now, there are many morals we might take from this humorous moral tale, but if we look beneath the "moral of the story", so to speak, a curious, alternative tale emerges that speaks to what we've been talking about this morning. For the story contains many parallels to the internal experience of asking a beautiful question.

Recall, it begins with a knock at the woman's door that interrupts her routine of making bread. A knock that announces the arrival of a god in disguise, which in many religious tales represents an invitation of one sort or another from life. Here the invitation is to generosity. To share the bread she is preparing. But we know in such stories bread is not just bread. It represents nourishment, as well as material and spiritual abundance. And so the woman is being invited into a generous relationship with life, one that will nourish her. Which is what asking a beautiful question is all about. Initially it seems she's willing to risk it. But she's afraid. Perhaps it's too much and so she keeps cutting back her commitment, until the full loaf is reduced to a small bun. In the end she finds herself in a distressed state, transformed into a woodpecker, fluttering about and perpetually hungry.

Looking out at the world, how many similarly flutter about, tired and seeking nourishment in places and pursuits that do not or cannot provide it. Is the love of money, or war, our addiction to cheap goods and those super computers that happen to also be phones we keep in our pockets and purses the reason we flutter about? Or is the result of our refusing to give ourselves to life, to accept its invitation to generosity, and be nourished by our honest, heart-felt and sometimes heart-breaking engagement with it?

What do we gain by avoiding or turning away from beautiful questions?

Oscar Wilde, whose words were our call to worship this morning, wrote, "The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?"
(*De Profundis*)

Perhaps then, what we gain in refusing or turning from beautiful questions, is a sort of ignorance we take for bliss. For beautiful questions are as formidable as their arrival is subtle. As Whyte notes, "Beautiful questions enlarge the context in which we live." And, he says, "They're often disturbing, because they shake the structures we've built, inviting us to engage with a larger, deeper part of our identity."

We live in a very self-absorbed, but not very self-curious age. Hence we remain strangers to ourselves even as we proclaim our identities to anyone who will listen. In other words we seem not to know what we don't know about ourselves.

Beautiful questions are both a practice and a charge to, as David Whyte so eloquently puts it,

*“Find that far inward symmetry to all outward appearances,
apprentice yourself to yourself,
begin to welcome back all you sent away,
be a new annunciation,
make yourself a door through which to be hospitable,
even to the stranger in you.”*

And with that last line, “make yourself a door through which to be hospitable, even to the stranger in you”, we return to that sidewalk in Boston years ago, where I spontaneously began moving about, waving my arms, shaking my legs, and bouncing in place. A response, but certainly not the only, over the years, to the beautiful question, “How am I present?” By the time I walked into the interview, I could say, “Fully. Body and brain.”

Again, I don't recall the question or the answer, for that matter, coming from thinking about it. However, if you're wondering where to look for your beautiful question(s), you might begin by asking yourself,

What is the question I'm refusing to ask?

Or taking a prompt from our reading, David Whyte's poem, *Sometimes*,

What question has no right to go away in my life right now?

These can help point you toward your beautiful questions. Questions that invite you into a more courageous, generous, and nourishing relationship with life and the world. Questions whose asking becomes the source of our solace when we're tempted toward retreat from the mystery and vulnerability that is “the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state.”

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be

David Whyte poems/writings quoted:

Sometimes

Solace

Coleman's Bed