

Living Abundantly

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

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Children's Greeting: *Everything Possible*, by Fred Small

Reading: *The Summer Day*, by Mary Oliver

Sermon:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon...?

This earthly life is a journey, a spiritual journey. I know it has become cliché, but it's no less true for that fact. There's a beginning point and an ending point, and our life is what happens in between. And you've heard me say many times that I believe the primary purpose of religion is to help us figure out how to do that *well*. As faithful life travelers in religious community, together we wrestle with the unknowns; try to make sense of the mystery; honor our human nature as relational beings – thereby shaping moral and ethical systems that help us navigate those relationships, leading us to be respectful, humble, gracious, compassionate, and righteously outraged when those values aren't shared.

One of the many challenges of the religious life is weighing the varying demands of our faithful devotion. Some religious persons seem to put the greatest priority on the individual's relationship with a divine being or system, demanding devotion to strict practices and behavioral rules that ensure a purity of heart and mind. Others are less concerned with the individual as an individual than with the individual as part of a relational community. And yet others would argue that those personal or relational aspects have meaning only insofar as they inform the structures of the world we live in – the religion is useless if it doesn't promote justice for all persons or for the earth itself.

But we err as persons of faith when we don't actively acknowledge that any of those priorities is meaningless without recognizing their interrelatedness with one another – that personal spiritual devotion is empty if it does not inform our relationships and our justice-making; that relational communities are unhealthy if they're insular; that justice-making is of little value if not coupled with personal spiritual fulfillment on the part of the justice-seeker.

And so it is that today I speak of abundance. Or, more specifically, of *living abundantly*... Living in the knowledge that life offers infinite possibilities, and our task

is to *live* them. We Unitarian Universalists often are misunderstood by outsiders – even sometimes by ourselves – as being a non-religious group, or merely a political action group, or something even more amorphous than that . . . And I think that misunderstanding is rooted in part by our lack of attention to the question of *personal spiritual fulfillment*. We Unitarian Universalists – not unlike many other Americans, frankly – are very interested in *doing* things with visible results. Making a difference in the world. Accomplishing things. Being productive and successful. Making important statements about big ideas and lofty goals. And as productive members of society, we’re active, we’re busy, we know a lot, we do a lot, we work hard. And, and...

And somewhere, I fear... too often... *we get lost* in the doing.

For whom, and to what end, are we *doing* all those things? Who is really benefiting? What is this life for, anyway... this adventure that does have a beginning and an ending, and a world of opportunities in between? What is *my* life for, I ask myself?

These are questions I have been asking myself in a more personal way recently. I worked pretty diligently over the past 10 years or so to arrive at the place where I’ve landed – with a life partner with whom I share a mutual devotion; in a settled Unitarian Universalist ministry that I love; in a home of our own. A job, a marriage, a house. A bounty of riches whose worth I do not discount – I do know how fortunate I am.

But that didn’t keep me from an internal spiritual struggle, where I have questioned the true source of my joy, my creativity, my love of life. And it didn’t keep me from feeling haunted by a Christian scripture I remembered from my youth: In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the people, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10, NRSV) What might that be, I wondered... having life *abundantly*?

In the scripture, Jesus makes this statement in the context of a message in which he describes himself as the gatekeeper of the sheepfold – the one who opens the gate and whose voice the sheep recognize, and whom therefore they trust. Others, he says, are thieves and bandits, entering not through the gate but through other means. And they, he says, are there only to steal and destroy, but “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Most Christians, of course, interpret this scripture as proof of Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah, of his promise of salvation and *eternal* life, and of his dismissal of any prophets beside himself. And maybe that was his intention. But we know, of course, that no scripture stands up to scrutiny under one single strict interpretation. And whatever the meaning of Jesus’ gate and sheepfold metaphor, his last statement has spoken clearly to me – Jesus wanted the best life, *abundant life*, for his people.

Where is my abundance, I wondered? There is abundant love and devotion in my marriage. Abundant rewards in my work. But, I have wondered in self-reflective moments, is that all there really is? Might there be more in my life than partnership and work? Indeed, might my partnership and my work benefit from my opening myself to life in deeper and wider ways?

I have spent much of my adult life maintaining a significant level of comfort and safety in my world. Actually, not only in my adult life... My 5th grade teacher told my parents that I needed to start taking more risks in my schoolwork and stop checking with her every 5 minutes to be sure I was doing it right. I am still – though to a lesser extent – attached to that safety and comfort; the order and tidiness of my life; its predictability. Of course I know that such comfort and safety is an illusion, or is at least temporary. But it was a lesson long in the teaching. And I'm still a student.

About 10 years ago I began learning about addiction. I was not suffering from an addiction to any substances, but I was urged to consider that my own insistence on keeping things in my world “looking as they *should*” was a type of addiction. Because addiction, this teacher reminded me, is (in large part) the avoidance of pain. The pain of discomfort, of loss, of rejection, of failure. I took little risk. I didn't really dream about life's possibilities. I simply worked hard at being grateful for what was – reaching only as far as those things that were clearly within my reach. Anything more was too risky.

Perhaps that's why Marianne Williamson's words now resonate so deeply with me:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?*

*Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small doesn't serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.*

*We are all meant to shine, as children do.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

— Marianne Williamson, from *A Return to Love* (<http://marianne.com/book/index.htm>)

We know there is plenty to fear in this life – though not us much as some would have us to fear. But if we structure our lives so to maintain comfort and avoid all fear, what is the ultimate consequence? Ten years ago I was working hard to avoid pain – well, except that it wasn't really working. And I wasn't having a whole lot of fun at all.

That's about the time I was introduced to the words of Mary Oliver, and the songs of Fred Small.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

You can dream all the day never reaching the end of everything possible for you. ... The only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're gone.

It was through such inspirational words and my own self-awareness that I came to hear the call to divinity school. That was a little risky – applying to graduate school from a not-particularly-competitive undergraduate one. (I could be rejected!) Later I fell in love with a person who was headed off to a Buddhist monastery to be a monk for life. Anyone see “heartbreak” careening toward me? (Yes, that monk's name is Graham Robertson *Getty* now.) In 2003 applied for a job at a congregation who said they didn't want a young minister entering her first settlement.

Of course there have been persons who didn't love me back, and school and congregations that rejected me. But I've learned that sometimes risks result in rewards, not in failure.

I have learned to take some risks, and I'm still learning. Things had gotten pretty comfortable and routine again over the past couple years, and I felt life calling again. Maybe we'll get a puppy. Or a child? (If the prospect of parenting doesn't seem risky – well, then, I don't know what does. I have invited another's life into my hands and my heart!) And maybe I'll try writing something for publication – the offer has been extended. Or I'll sing in front of the congregation.

You see, Fred Small's words came back to me this year. “You can dream all the day never reaching the end of everything possible for you. ... And he only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're gone.”

Of course, what is tricky about this conversation is that no one of us can prescribe for another what abundant living really is. That which evokes my most creative, passionate impulses won't be the same for you. So... What makes *your* heart sing? That, I think, is

what personal spiritual fulfillment is all about. And that's part of what we're here together to explore and to experience.

We're here that you might have life, and have it abundantly.

You can dream all the day never reaching the end of everything possible for you.

Do you believe those words?

I do.

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life?

Amen.