

Live by the Love of What We May Never Know
the Rev. Beth Miller
Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church
March 4, 2007

READING I

THE DREAMER, THE TREE AND ME

from *Dream of the Universe*, Kathy Sherman, Sisters of St. Joseph, LeGrange, IL

Narrator: I walked one summer morning under a water-coloured sky,
when I beheld a full and lovely tree;
I ate from her bough the date she offered me,
and to my surprise she spoke to me:

Tree: Would you like to hear the story of how I came to be?
I was a seed full of promise,
but I would take some 80 years to grow;
so I needed a dreamer to plant and to risk,
a dreamer who believed it could be so.
Now the dreamer must have known that it was doubtful
that I bear fruit before the dreamer died,
but great love for the dream-seed made it worth it anyway,
others after me will know the reason why.

Narrator: *Yes, I've always known that we must live by the love of what
we may never see, Yes... (repeat)*

I listened as I sat in her wisdom and her shade,
I sensed that there was more for her to tell;
I nestled closer still for our talk had made us friends,
and I begged of her: Please tell me more,
for your story is beginning to echo in my soul.

Tree: The dreamer gathered me in hand and blessed me,
then placed me in the earth where I could grow,
and each day I was watered with tears and laughter too,
protected when the icy winds would blow.
Now the seasons came and went, while I grew stronger,
and before too long, my dates would ready be.
But the dreamer who had planted died before my dates were ripe,
so the feast I gave, the dreamer did not see.

Narrator: *Yes, I've always known that we must live by the love of what
we may never see, Yes... (repeat)*

The tears I now was crying fell gently at her knees;
I ate her dates, they fed my hungry soul. She said,

Tree: You now enjoy the fruit of the dreamer's love for me!

Narrator: And her gift was truth, now my heart could see,
that there's a dreamer, and a planter, and a seed inside of me.
So I will plant a seed full of promise,
for I believe that dream-seeds live to grow;
and I will gather all the dreamers
who will plant and who will risk,
and together we will live the truth we know.

*Yes, I've always known that we must live by the love of what
we may never see.*

Narrator and Tree:

*Yes, I've always known that we must live by the love of what
we may never see.*

*Yes, I've always known that we must live by the love of what
we may never see.*

Narrator:

*Yes, I've always known that we must live by the love of what
we may never see.*

READING II

So Much Happiness

Palestinian American poet, Naomi Shihab Nye.

It is difficult to know what to do
with so much happiness.

With sadness there is something to rub against,
a wound to tend with lotion and cloth.
When the world falls in around you,
you have pieces to pick up,
something to hold in your hands.

But happiness floats.
It doesn't need you to hold it down.
It doesn't need anything.
Happiness lands on the roof of the next house,
singing, and disappears when it wants to.

You are happy either way.
Even the fact that you once lived in a peaceful tree house
and now live over a quarry of noise and dust
cannot make you unhappy.

Since there is no place large enough
to contain so much happiness,
you shrug,
you raise your hands,
and it flows out of you into everything you touch.

You are not responsible.
You take no credit,
as the night sky takes no credit for the moon,
but continues to hold it,
and share it,
and in that way,
be known.

SERMON

Live By The Love Of What We May Never Know
the Rev. Beth Miller
Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church
March 4, 2007

The poet, Naomi Shihab Nye, says:

*With sadness there is something to rub against,
a wound to tend with lotion and cloth....*

*But happiness floats.
It doesn't need you to hold it down.
It doesn't need anything.*

How true. How easy it is for us to react, to get ourselves caught up in whatever sadness, anger, fear, or anxiety comes our way. We so readily feel life's irritants, and they make us squirm. We are compelled to rub against them, to rail against them, to engage our sense of agitation. We nurse them. We nurse our sadness. We nurse our grudges. We nurse anxiety. We give those unhappy feelings much of our energy.

We are encouraged to do this. I am often amused at the media's use of language around this. Reading the newspaper you find that people are rarely upset or irritated or angry about something they don't like. They are "furious." They aren't concerned or unhappy about a decision they disagree with -- they're "outraged." They aren't displeased or disappointed with bad news. They are "devastated." And if they aren't, they will be probed and prodded until they are.

But happiness.... happiness, as the poet says, just floats. It doesn't need us to hold it down. It just is. And because it floats and it doesn't chafe us or poke or prick us, it is quite possible – often even likely – that happiness goes unnoticed and unattended. Unacknowledged. Un-nursed. Uncelebrated.

So very human of us. To notice and respond to what hurts us, what grates at us. It is so very human. To fail to notice that which simply floats, leaving us comfortable and un-bothered, that, too, is so very human.

Now I want to acknowledge that you as a congregation are dealing with a hurt, a sadness, a sense of betrayal and loss. Your feelings are probably all over the map: anger, frustration, sorrow, guilt, impatience, whatever. Words like *outraged*, *furious* and *devastated* may fit for some of you. Others may be confused. Some may be ready to move on while others need more time to process. I doubt that you are all of one mind or one heart about your minister's departure and the events that brought about his resignation. There is probably some anxiety about that, too. Perhaps some conflict, or some fear of conflict.

I am here today because the Unitarian Universalist Association wants to support you. I am with you in response to your difficulty. My presence, however, can't fix anything. I'm just here to help you tend this wound. Perhaps, as the poet says, I can be lotion or cloth or something to rub your sadness against. Perhaps I can, in some small way, help you pick up some of the pieces.

But it will take a long time. And you have other things to do besides tend this wound. You have a church community to be together. Being a church community is about support and healing and tending wounds, yes. But it is also about helping each one of us to be and become the best that is in us. It is about building up our ability to live lives of love and justice. Acknowledging and understanding that there is a wound, and knowing that it will take time for it to heal, I want to suggest that you shift perspective. I want to suggest that you turn the poet's idea upside down and let the sadness just float. Shift your focus to the strength and vitality and happiness of your congregational life and tend to that more intentionally.

How would your faith community be, and indeed, how would your personal life be, if you were able to not notice - at least not quite so much - the sadness and fear and anger, and noticed more consciously - your happiness? Think about how we human beings would be different if we nursed our happiness as much, or more than, we nurse our sadness and anger and anxiety and fear.

The poet points us toward being happy with what is. Even if our circumstances are reduced, she says, *happiness flows and we take no credit, as the night sky takes no credit for the moon*. Have you noticed the moon this week? Skies have been cloudy much of the week, so you may have missed it, but there was a total lunar eclipse and the moon was full and lush. What if? -- suggests the poet -- What if we decided to live our lives as the night sky does? Consider how it would be to live as the moon shines when it's full: Effulgent. Brilliant. Brimming. Abundant.

What if we were to live our lives in such an overflowing manner?

*It is difficult, says the poet, to know what to do with so much happiness.
Since there is no place large enough
to contain so much happiness,
you shrug,
you raise your hands,
and it flows out of you into everything you touch.*

If we paid more attention to that, we would live lives of abundance. Life overflowing. If we focus on happiness, if we tend and nurture it, it naturally overflows and we find ourselves living out of a sense of plenty. I can't promise you material wealth, but I know that there is an abundance of love and an abundance of spirit.

Think about seeing your life as overflowing with blessings and as an opportunity to bless the world with your great good fortune; to give of yourself freely out of that deep well of abundance. All it would require is that you turn your attention away from whatever unhappiness rubs against you and toward the happiness, the love, the spiritual presence that is always available.

Surely you know what I'm talking about. Surely you have had moments -- fleeting though they may have been -- moments when you felt filled to overflowing with life's blessing. Moments when you were caught up and filled with the beauty and the graciousness of the world. Recall such a time, if you can, right now.

It can be the smallest thing that triggers it:

a stranger's smile on the street,
a special call on birthday,
a lover's hand on your shoulder,
the face of your child or grandchild sleeping,
a glimpse of the full moon at bed time.....

And suddenly - you feel it. Unlike so many times of happiness that simply float, unnoticed, there are moments when you feel the fullness of life's blessings...

And you know that you are blessed...

And you know that you can share that blessing with others.

How would it be to live much more of our lives in this light, to live out of that sense of abundant blessing, and to share it extravagantly?

So right now maybe you're thinking, "hmmm, abundance; share extravagantly.... Oh yeah, it's canvass Sunday; here's where she's going ask us to give more money." Giving more is great if you can do it, but that's not what I'm talking about this morning. I'm talking about a much larger notion of abundance. If you as individuals and you as a church community cultivate an abundance perspective, there will be enough money. An abundance perspective knows that there is always enough - enough and more - to do what you believe is worthwhile and what you truly want to do together. I'm more concerned today with how such an attitude feeds us than with what you give to your church.

Living with an attitude of abundance is living with a sense of the basic generosity of the universe. It means living in the knowledge and expectation that the world is generous to you. Being generous with one's own resources is an act of faith and gratitude.

But you know what? It has gotten more difficult to hold on to this optimism. I've noticed that the abundance perspective has been eroding. The terrorist attacks of 9/11, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, corruption and deception in our government, increasingly tense polarization socially, natural disasters and global warming, the list goes on. It has gotten harder to maintain an abundance perspective. It is, after all, a very optimistic point of view.

Maybe our optimism, our abundance perspective, isn't eroded so much as covered over with the dust and rubble of those deeply disturbing things in our society. They do wear on us. Like the sadness the poet called our attention to, we rub against them - every day in subtle ways and in very stark and shocking ways.

But, you know, when it is hardest to do, that is precisely when we most need to call ourselves back. We need to call ourselves back to optimism, to noticing happiness, to dwelling in joy and meaning. Being furious, outraged and devastated doesn't give most of our lives meaning and purpose. You can't make a positive difference in the lives of others from that place. Rubbing against the wounds, as real as those wounds may be, won't make the world a better place.

Our story of the tree and the dreamer, says so well what I'm trying to say: *I have always known that we must live by the love of what we may never see.*

Sometimes we lose sight of this, but it is truly our calling as people of faith. We may never see our world free of terrorism, especially those of us who are older. Some of us will not live to see our country at peace again. Still: *we must live by the love of what we may never see.*

The dreamer planted a seed full of promise, the seed of a date tree. He blessed it and watered it and tended it and protected it from icy storms. He died before the tree bore fruit - but he knew that he probably would. He planted the tree because he was an optimist. Out of his sense of abundance and blessing, he knew, deep in his heart that *we must live by the love of what we may never see.*

So it is for us. *We [too] must live by the love of what we may never see.* We live this way so there will be dates down the road for someone else, yes. But also, we live this way because that is how we make our own lives meaningful.

I told you a moment ago that our optimism and our abundance perspective has eroded or been covered over with rubble of late. I know that's been true for me. It seems so much more difficult than it did a few years ago. With such turmoil and threat in the world, it is a spiritual struggle to maintain a balanced perspective and an optimistic outlook. I have to keep bringing myself back:

to my deep belief that we do live in a gracious universe;
that love and justice are what life is all about;
and that they will prevail;
and that it is important, critical, even, to put what weight, what energy, what blessings I have out into the world in positive ways.

It is hard to keep the optimism and it is hard to believe that it matters. But it does matter. Gravely.

I sometimes find myself turning inward, hunkering down and taking care only of myself. But

you know what? It is impossible to give much of anything from a hunkered down position. It is impossible to *live by the love of what we may never see* when our eyes are cast inward. I know because I experience it -- and then I remember what I know -- and pull myself back out of it again. My Unitarian Universalist faith helps me pull out of it again. I hope it helps you pull out of it too.

I suspect this hunkering down has been happening to many of you over these past few years, too. And it makes life even harder because it rubs off on other parts of our lives. When that happens (which it inevitably does) it isn't just about politics and war and global warming and international affairs. It is about our families and our relationships and our jobs and even our health. All parts of our lives are affected.

When we lose our optimism, we suffer. When we lose our abundance perspective we lose much of our power, our potency, to make the world a better place; to increase love and justice in the world; to *live by the love of what we may never see*.

And yet, that is what the world so needs in order to be made right: people who believe in the possibility and who are willing to put their love and energy out to make it true.

I'll go back to the questions I started with:

- What would our lives be like if we learned not to notice - quite so much - our sadness and fear and anger, and noticed more - our happiness?
- What if we nursed our happiness as much as we nurse our sadness and anger and fear?
- What if we decided to live our lives as the night sky does? Effulgent. Brilliant. Brimming. Abundant.
- What if we were to live our lives to overflowing?

How do we do those things?

There are a couple of spiritual principles that can help. One of them is acceptance of what is. Not resignation, but acceptance and a willingness to engage with what is. Acceptance leads to generosity of spirit and the ability to participate in making a positive difference.

And another spiritual principle seems to be: give what you need, and you will get what you're giving.

Now, if this sounds just a little too far out for you, just try it:

You want love? Give love.

You want peace? Bring peace wherever you go.

You need money? Be generous with the money you have.

This is a theology of abundance.

Practice abundance...spiritual abundance.

Pay attention to those things that have the potential to bring moments of happiness. Nurse them.

Abundance. Ample sufficiency. The belief that there is enough money, time, friendship, love, grace. Cultivate abundance.

Yes, I've always known that we must live by the love of what we may never see.

One more question: what have you got to lose? I cannot guarantee you that a belief in abundance will bring you abundance. But I do know for sure that a belief in scarcity will not bring you abundance. So why not cultivate beliefs that are optimistic, positive, life-affirming, and that have the power to bless the world? You cannot bless yourself or the world from a perspective of scarcity.

Live by the love of what you may never see. It will make a bigger person of you and a greater contribution to the world.