"Spiritual Wisdom: Awareness, Curiosity, and Kindness"

A sermon Delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of
The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist,
Sunday, November 13, 2011

Readings

(1) From the wisdom literature of Judaism’s sacred scripture come these words from Proverbs:

Get wisdom; get insight;
Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
Love her and she will guard you.
The beginning of wisdom is this:
Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight;
Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;
She will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a fair garland;
She will bestow on you a beautiful crown. (4:5b-9)

(2) “Candle lighting time at Grano Trattorio” – Karen Ethelsdattar

It's 5:00 o'clock, dusk,
at a favorite small restaurant of mine,
especially for one or two people.
Grano's on Greenwich Avenue,
in New York City.
February 22, 2005.
I've finished my carrot & turnip spiced soup
& arugula salad with grilled mussels.
I'm waiting for espresso with a twist of lemon
& the complimentary biscotti.
A young slim blond waitress,
in black, of course, makes her way
from table to table .
with a tray of lit candles.
I fancy she's saying,
"Here's a little bit of light for your life,
& yours & yours & yours,
& even for you, empty tables."
It's ceremonial, this giving of lit candles,
it consecrates our food,
it connects us all in a special joy.
It's like Sweden's Santa Lucia Day every evening.
City lights & candle lights
making a winter's night seem sacred.

"Spiritual Wisdom: Awareness, Curiosity, and Kindness"

From Proverbs:

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….if you embrace her…
She will bestow on you a beautiful crown. (4:5b-9)

Wisdom – Spiritual Wisdom is my theme – a weekly theme. It arrives from many places, including the classroom at times. Not quite five years ago, for various reasons, I ended up attending a lecture at Harvard University that was focusing on the fourth and fifth chapters of James Joyce's epic, controversial 1922 novel, Ulysses. (It's also very long – 600 to 1000 pages depending upon the edition.)

It was bitter cold outside, yet I had been enjoying the urban landscape punctuated by the surrounding academic ebb and flow. I had a cup of Dunkin' Donuts coffee to fortify me in a warm, mid-size lecture room a little over half full with 60 or 70 students. Three young men sat in the front row – dead center, no more than five feet from the professor Philip Fisher… I don't recall being quite that eager and intent, sitting in lecture halls, usually taking notes, but sometimes with a wandering mind….

And then this world-class scholar began to speak, and I was swept up … pulled in…

On the 2nd floor of Emerson Hall in Harvard Yard, the professor spoke rapidly for nearly an hour with just a few glances at his notes.

He spoke about Joyce’s’ encyclopedic narrative, his evocation of life through the small, tiny, discrete events of one man’s life on a particular day – the ways in which Joyce embraced a grand naturalism with appreciation of the cycles of life, decay, and new life… A naturalism that transcends the tragic….

He spoke about how Joyce built up recurring images of various natural bodily functions, of themes of reading and writing, which are forms of breaking experience down into smaller units, digesting experience, and turning it into new insight…. He
spoke of Joyce’s use of smells – of perfumes and excrement, and above all, he kept returning to the themes of kindliness and curiosity in Joyce’s epic.

*Kindness and curiosity* as essential degrees of human freedom and essential elements of the meaning-making that we weave out of the ever cascading moments, memories, encounters, if only we are fully aware of its sensuous presence…

Describing a horse eating oats, or imagining what a cat might think of us as tall as towers, or what a cat might think of us based on daily interactions with humans…, evoking the various letters that characters write to each other and the betrayal of Leopold Bloom by his wife and attending a funeral… The theme of the day was kindness and curiosity as among the ultimate human virtues…

Kindliness and curiosity that enable us to enter into empathy, connections with others…… and musings upon the concrete daily events, which for Joyce, for this lively teacher, and I realize, for me, are among the entryways to wisdom.

The day before in reading the *Boston Globe* sports pages – and life is like that …James Joyce’s *Ulysses*… and the Boston Bruins… all in the midst of celebrating a 35th anniversary, as Kay and I had gone to Cambridge to walk along a small portion of the Charles River…. We were honoring old memories and delighting in the present moment, with a bit of wistfulness for a future we hope contains many more adventures, all of it held with mindfulness and deep gratitude for being lucky in love and committed to the adventure for the long haul…

Reading the *Sunday Globe* sports section, I came upon a series of articles about family memories of childhood events of present-day Boston Bruin ice hockey players. One father, Gerard Cleary, spoke about his son, Patrice Bergeron-Cleary as he thought “back to … (his) son’s initial hockey steps at that rink in Quebec City."

“It was the most crazy thing. Patrice was 5 years old when we first took him, and all he did – for two months! – was sit in the net (during practice, and he wasn’t a goaltender). That was it. Twice a week, for one hour, he went to the rink, we sat in the stands, and all he did was sit there.”

According to …. (his father), the coach repeatedly came over to Patrice and asked him to stand up and join the rest of the players. Quite content, Patrice politely told the coach, “No, I’m having fun here,” and continued to watch.

Up in the stands, Mom and Dad began to think of other sports their son could try…. 
“Eventually, I said to … (his mother), 'It's over, we will not come back here.'... We get in the car, and we are driving home and we tell Patrice, 'Look, if you want to do something else, that's OK. No problem. You are not obligated to play hockey.'"

“He looks at us and says, 'No, I love that. I love what I … [did] this morning. I want to go back'. So, OK, we go again, and he sat there in the net the whole time long. He sat and looked at the other guys. And never, never, never skated.”

Finally, after some eight weeks and 16 hours of sitting there, Patrice one day got out of the net and into the game. From that first stride, recalled his father, he skated well, and quickly became the best skater there.

“He was learning,” said … (his father.) “Patrice has always been learning by looking. So, I am sure he was sitting there and learning how to skate. In his mind, [when] he knows how to do it, he [does] it. Yes, unbelievable, but it’s Patrice. He is always the guy that wants to learn, who wants to be the best. And I think he is doing well.” (“Father Knows Best,” Kevin Paul Dupont, C10, March 4, 2007)

At age 20, Patrice Bergeron-Cleary led the Bruins in scoring. Now age 26, he earns $5 million per year…. He’s doing well…

A curious learning style… sitting (in the goal net)… mindfulness… watching… taking it all in… following his own best style…

Another musing comes from a colleague David Rankin who offers with compact clarity what he calls “Natural Theology”:

Is there such a thing as God?

I saw a sunrise at Jackson Hole.
I fell in love many years ago.
I caught a tear in my father’s eye.
I watched a lily bloom.
I saved a boy from drugs and death.
I touched the hand of Martin Luther King, Jr.
I feel the warmth of children.
I laugh almost every day.
I hold the hem of hope.

The only God I can possibly know is the God of life – and life is endless.
(Singing in the Night, ed. Mary Benard, UUA, 2004, pp. 17-18)

Spiritual wisdom... Seeking and Finding... I’ve introduced all but one of the themes of this morning with these musings on a Harvard lecture, a walk around a river, a Boston Bruins hockey player, and the encounters with God lifted up by a colleague:

Wisdom includes Mindfulness to encounters of the day, sometimes called Appreciative Awareness, with elements of reverence, gratitude, and wonder

Wisdom reflects active curiosity and exploration.

Wisdom honors kindness.

There is one other element of wisdom that I shall come to, along with some products of wisdom, but I want to summon these three first. And I return to these in the spirit of Islam that reminds us that original sin is not depravity, but forgetfulness... the ease with which we may forget what our hearts, souls and minds know....

Appreciative Awareness

Like David Rankin, I find God in Life, in Nature, in the miracle of the ordinary, in the human touch, a look, friendship, and in the stars as well as in your and in my stardust.

Whether named God or not, the richly felt experiences of wonder... of connection, in the here and now seem holy... what Martin Buber described as those moments when we glimpse spirit is present, barely describable moments...

Almost 40 years ago with fresh snow falling, Kay and I made snow angels near the chapel on the MIT campus after having heard a poet who among other things evoked a man who had a pig on a leash with the refrain, “and the pig wasn’t singing.”

With the Quakers, I offer a brief prayer, “For all blessings, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten, I give thanks.” Gratitude arising from awareness of all our gifts, even amid the wounds and challenges...

Appreciative awareness... The Buddhists call it mindfulness – being present in the moment.

Cultivating that discipline and its grace strikes me as an ingredient toward and a measure of wisdom.

A colleague writes about her heartache in visiting her brother in a hospital...
where he lay dying….  He spent days in the intensive care unit while members of her family, including her mother, sat for many long hours on chairs in the hallway outside his room. Among the visitors who came to share the vigil was a member of our church.

“How are you doing?” the friend asked.

My mother was too exhausted to tell anything but the truth. “I'm tired,” she said. “I'm very, very tired. I'm too tired to even pray any more.”

“But don't you see,” her friend replied, “your very presence here is a prayer.”

(“Your Very Presence,” Jane Ellen Mauldin, Singing in the Night, p. 102)

And so it is… our presence, whatever gift of being present we can muster… in hard times, and in joy… is a prayer… a connection… sacred….

… And that simple appreciative awareness, whatever its form, seems to me to be a measure of wisdom…. It connects us with one another, the natural world, and potentially into a global consciousness and compassion, all of which are deeply rooted in our liberal religious faith going back to the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller.

Be Aware. Be appreciative. Be present.

Curiosity

A second element… Be Curious…. Curious about yourself… your strengths and your growing edges… to know yourself… your joys and your wounds… all this in addition to being curious about others and curious about the world that leads to learning and knowledge – all this opens us to greater wisdom.

James Joyce in Ulysses reflects in his descriptions the gift of curiosity, the moments, the insights, the growth, the change and the satisfaction of the soul that is part of this mystery of wisdom…. And the lively professor speaking rapidly with hardly a glance at his notes with extraordinary erudition – a scholar whose curiosity has served generations of students and readers – embodied his subject with wisdom as he wove strands evocative of spirit… even in someone who had not read the text under discussion…. Evoking bits of my own best self, best insights…. I had put my coffee aside and didn’t return to it until well into the lecture, enraptured as I was…

Be Curious … honor the mind … explore yourself and the world, and you make connections far beyond ourselves… with others … into deeper awareness and consciousness… and wisdom….
Then, there are the matters of the heart... of kindness, caring, love, and justice to further open us to live with wisdom....

Like Appreciative Awareness and Mindfulness, and like Curiosity – to speak of Kindness is something we all know, and once again I invoke the prophet Micah who asked, “What is required of thee, O mortal?”... and responded “except to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly.”

Or as Henry James once wrote, “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind.”

From Lao-Tzu, whose Taoist teachings have touched billions:

Kindness in words creates confidence.
Kindness in thinking creates profundity.
Kindness in giving creates love.

E. B. White offers a few lines that reflect the heart, and the heart of our faith, as he writes about a spider. The poem is titled, Natural History, also known as The Spider's Web:

The spider, dropping down from twig,
Unfolds a plan of her devising,
A thin premeditated rig
To use in rising.

And all that journey down through space,
In cool descent and loyal hearted,
She spins a ladder to the place
From where she started.

Thus I, gone forth, as spiders do
In spider's web a truth discerning,
Attach one silken thread to you
For my returning.

Wisdom includes those silken threads by which we connect to one another most deeply and then find our ways in heart's returning, despite any distances of time or space, even of grievance or hurt... a kindness to self that means forgiveness rather than poisoning ourselves... a kindness to others when repentant, so that mutuality and right relationship are regained even after too much pain....

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Kindness – another door to wisdom and its measure.

**Balance**

Early on, I allowed as how there was something else – and indeed there are many other ways of adding to and reflecting wisdom – but there remains one especially that I turn to with Robert Frost’s help.

The poet speaks to the too much stuff I carry at times, and he writes,

> For every parcel I stoop down to seize  
> I lose some other off my arms and knees,  
> And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns -  
> Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,  
> Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.  
> With all I have to hold with, hand and mind  
> And heart, if need be, I will do my best  
> To keep their building balanced on my breast.  
> I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;  
> Then sit down in the middle of them all.  
> I had to drop the armful in the road  
> And try to stack them in a better load.

So, among the many elements of wisdom, I focus on seeking Balance…. Balance is blessing… I return too to this enduring theme….

A life of wisdom surely involves commitments… deep passions and commitment to other persons, to causes, to Life, to God, or to one’s sacred self… yet wisdom also requires the ability to know how to hold firmly but not so tightly that we become fanatics, the ability to honor those times of letting go…. when outcomes are uncertain… when we have done our best… and we must simply be patient and let go.

How do you find wisdom, grow your soul?

What moments, experiences, mentors, barely describable encounters with Spirit guide, teach, challenge?

For me, doors to wisdom to walk through and measures of wisdom include…. (1) **Appreciative Awareness** – **Mindfulness** of being, (2) active, searching, seeking **Curiosity**…. (3) every manifestation of **Kindliness** to self, to others, to the world, that also emanates in justice… and (4) then finally **Balance**.
Be Kind, be Curious, be Aware and find Balance... and the gates of wisdom are close at hand... and humor helps....

One of my spiritual disciplines includes reading... as Joyce says, breaking down ideas, thoughts, images, digesting them, and receiving nurture and new insights...

In closing these words from Ann Lamott:

“You don’t always get what you want; you get what you get,” (Plan B, 81) so, “Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe.”

And I would add if you give yourself to something bigger than yourself, you may just get what you need.

Finally, Lamott suggests that there is grace in aging... rather than something to fear. “I rest as a spiritual act. ... I have grown old enough (about my age),” she says, “to develop radical acceptance.” And then she adds, “I have survived so much loss, all of us have by our forties – my parents, dear friends, my pets. Rubble is the ground on which our deepest friendships are built. If you haven’t already, you will lose someone you can’t live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and you never completely get over the loss of a deeply beloved person. But this is also good news. The person lives forever, in your broken heart that doesn’t seal back up. And you come through, and you learn to dance with the banged-up heart. You dance to the absurdities of life; you dance to the minuet of old friendships.” (174)

Seeking and finding wisdom throughout our pilgrim days, we dance balancing Mindfulness, Curiosity, and Kindness.