Readings

I always greatly enjoy this Question Box sermon, and again this year I have received more questions than I can address. So, if yours is not among them, and you want to follow up, please let me know, and we can find time to speak or get together.

(1) For our first reading for today’s Question Box sermon, I turn again to words of Rainer Maria Rilke, the Austro-German poet, essayist of the early part of the twentieth century, who helps set the theme for this morning:

First of all... have patience... I beg you to be patient to all the unsolved problems of your heart and to try to love the questions themselves. Do not search for answers to be given; if given, they would be of no use, for you could not live them (another’s answers).

For the present, it is a question of experiencing everything.

Live in the questions, and little by little and almost unconsciously you will enter the answers and live them too.  *Letters to a Young Poet*

(2) There is a question about evil, and as a prelude, I turn to words of Barrows Dunham. Our 1993 hymnal, the gray one we use, is a rich resource, yet it does not include a wonderful affirmation, confession, that was a part of the 1964 hymnal. Barrows Dunham, a philosophy professor at Temple and martyr for academic freedom who in 1953 was fired because he refused to “name names” in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, wrote:

"Now, therefore, since the struggle deepens,
Since evil abides and good does not yet prosper,
Let us gather what strength we have, what confidence and valor,
That our small victories may end in triumph,
And the world awaited be a world attained."

(3) The third reading is a poem by Billy Collins, who is a distinguished professor of English at Lehman College and has served as our nation’s Poet Laureate. It serves
as a partial response to a question about Transcendentalism, a powerful historic strand in our religious tradition.

This Little Piggy Went to Market

is the usual thing to say when you begin
pulling on the toes of a small child,
and I have never had a problem with that.
I could easily picture the piggy with his basket
and his trotters kicking up the dust on an imaginary road.

What always stopped me in my tracks was
the middle toe -- this little piggy ate roast beef.
I mean I enjoy a roast beef sandwich
with lettuce and tomato and a dollop of horseradish,
but I cannot see a pig ordering that in a delicatessen.

I am probably being too literal-minded here --
I am even wondering why it's called "horseradish."
I should just go along with the beautiful nonsense
of the nursery, float downstream on its waters.
After all, Little Jack Horner speaks to me deeply.

I don't want to be the one to ruin the children's party
by asking unnecessary questions about Puss in Boots
or, again, the implications of a pig eating beef.
By the way, I am completely down with going
"Wee wee wee" all the way home,
having done that many times and knowing exactly how it feels.

“Living Into Life’s Answers”

The larger theme for this morning has two parts: First, Living in the questions…
“Holy curiosity,” as Albert Einstein described it, is something too many traditions discourage, while here we know, we truly know, that to live in the questions helps us to wrestle with worthy choices and to explore life’s complexity, chaos and beauty.

We celebrate the holiness of curiosity.

Then, the second part is that by doing so, we live into our own answers. We live with greater authenticity, honor and integrity.
And we share the journey in a lonely world!

I begin with a question that turns to a transcendent evolutionary step in the development of our free-thinking religious faith.

Where did the name "transcendentalism" come from? That is, what exactly is being transcended? I've been reading about transcendentalism on the web, but I haven't been able to get a clear answer to this question. Maybe you can help me.

As an introduction, I return to the poem by Billy Collins from our readings… “This Little Piggy Went to Market.” Collins reports,

By the way, I am completely down with going "Wee wee wee" all the way home, having done that many times and knowing exactly how it feels.

The point in part is that literal-minded rationalism has not only its uses, but also its limits, and deep appreciative awareness …. the “Wee wee wee all the way home”… is essential in our lives.

Transcendentalism has to do with this intuitive grasp of experience as well as joy in the moment.

In the 1830s, a group of Unitarian ministers and others began to study and embrace elements of European idealism… philosophers and writers, such as Kant and Coleridge. With great risk of simplification, these thinkers spoke of our innate, internal, intuitive, subjective apprehension of time and space…. The American recipients began to focus on “heightened self-awareness” and “the primacy of self-consciousness,” of immediate experience. (American Transcendentalism: A History, Philip Gura, p. 8)

Many academics of that day initially scoffed at these Unitarian leaders and in derision labeled them and gave them the name Transcendentalists. It was not a compliment.

Notwithstanding the mocking, it was in Concord, Massachusetts that “like-minded thinkers” would gather occasionally for discussion. These included Ralph Waldo Emerson, but they did not claim the name Transcendentalist for themselves until 1836 with one of his essays.

The Transcendentalists were an intellectual movement, some with socialist views and others more apolitical and individualistic.
And why is this of interest? Foremost, Emerson and the Transcendentalists focused on human experience, intuitions of the divine within each of us, and a spirit of the divine that transcends human culture... all of which transcended Biblical revelations about Jesus as a singular savior and path to the human salvation.

Emerson emphasized naturalism... natural religion... personal experiences of wonder, majesty, and mystic moments, and he emphasized transcendent universal values. As Transcendentalist thought emerged in the 1830s and 40s in Boston and the nation, Emerson and others moved Unitarians beyond an exclusive foundation in Biblical Christianity. Reason was important, but also to be supplemented by appreciation for the divine spirit within us and around... soul, spirit, and original experience.

Foremost, what were they transcending? Specific revelations attributed to Jesus, or any other religious leader.

They said, “Trust your divinity as part of nature that transcends the everyday mundane realities....” And this, all this is alive and well with us today, without discarding reason. Such an approach, they argued, will also help us transcend rationalist temptations to despair.

Another Billy Collins poem, titled “Despair”, might or might not have pleased Emerson. Collins writes,

So much gloom and doubt in our poetry -
flowers wilting on the table,
the self regarding itself in a watery mirror.

Dead leaves cover the ground,
the wind moans in the chimney,
and the tendrils of the yew tree inch toward the coffin.

I wonder what the ancient Chinese poets
would make of all this,
these shadows and empty cupboards?

Today, with the sun blazing in the trees,
my thoughts turn to the great
tenth-century celebrator of experience,

Wa-Hoo, whose delight in the smallest things
could hardly be restrained,
and to his joyous counterpart in the western provinces,
Ye-Hah.  (Ballistics, 87)
Wa-Hoo... and Ye-Hah... these speak of the deep, universal religious experiences that bless our lives.... More about delight and joy and love shortly....

I have several questions of both political and theological import.

One member writes:

**What are some of the cultural damages done by 400 years of British and US colonism in Africa, India and elsewhere?**

Then he identifies his core concern:

**How can Unitarians repair the damage... disappearance of indigenous cultures?**

Briefly and totally inadequate: We need to begin with lamentation – the awareness of cultural imperialism and the untold suffering with the so-called progress of western cultures.

Answers? ... Stop doing it. Wake up. Work with international agencies and NGO's and others.... Quit exploiting natural resources of others.... The list goes on and on in terms of finding political and personal ways to think globally and to work. And all these are not enough....

Another question:

**I count 40 light bulbs powered most likely by burning coal burning in the sanctuary. Global heating and climate change are real. What more can we do to save the future?**

Again, what to say? Acknowledge the reality that consumerism and materialism are profoundly seductive and destructive. Chris Hedges a few weeks ago in speaking here seemed to invoke only individual action as the path to resistance to the concerns lifted up by Occupy Wall Street. In the session afterwards, he began by also invoking the Unitarian Universalist social ethicist James Luther Adams of Harvard Divinity School as one of his mentors.

Adams was one of the giants in his teaching, writing and influence for nearly 50 years. Each of us, he argued, has a spiritual calling that includes working for justice, witnessing and making a difference in ways small or large... doing whatever we can do. Hedges, however, did not note one of Adams’ primary teachings, which had to do with the role of what Adams called “voluntary associations” in society.
Adams said, “By your groups you shall be known.” What groups do you support, participate in? They define your faithfulness to values that you say you honor according to James Luther Adams. … And such groups truly are countervailing sources of power over against social inequities.

A small step… by the way… one that makes a difference: almost all the lightbulbs in all our buildings are energy-saving compact fluorescents (except for some in the ceiling here.) A step… only a step… that witnesses to awareness and potential value shifts in our society.

Another broader theological question…

What is evil? Who or what is responsible for it? Is responsible the right word? Is evil the right word? What do you do in the face of it?

Evil is whatever undermines, destroys, thwarts, or impedes caring community; evil is whatever obstructs, destroys, or impedes creativity or creative, caring communication… whatever violates our UU values. There are a host of other definitions but none for us has to do with supernatural forces, or Satan, or the like.

To be clear, evil is what we humans do to one another. It is, as Columbia Professor Andrew Delbanco has offered, too often ignored or diminished in our culture. And yes, “evil” and “responsibility” for how we contribute to it are for me “right” words.

In the face of it, we are to resist evil as creatively as we can…. Denounce it. Seek to build community. Restore creative, healing options. Engage in constructive creative communication and creative interchange.

As one approach, I again turn to theologian Henry Nelson Wieman, who identified the highest good, the holy in our midst, as creative events and especially creative connections with one another that arise out of deep sharing. The opposite of this highest good that enriches us, changes us, empowers us, and sustains us – the opposite of the creative good is whatever harms us, breaks us apart, isolates us, and undermines connections among persons.

Wieman described evil in terms of five kinds of destructive, bad, wrong-headed, hurtful communication.

Those five are Manipulative communication; Deceptive communication, Muddle-headed communication (yes, we are responsible for clarity and completeness); Other-directed communication that seeks only to please another (the bulk of political discourse that so often seems inauthentic); and fifth, Reiterative communication…. Repetitive statements with little content, feeling, caring,
connecting…. Empty complaining for example, or worse, e. g., repetition of Big Lies… and truthiness, patently false statements with no regard for verifiable truth.

So, when we do these things or otherwise hurt others, or diminish human dignity and worth, whenever we violate our Unitarian Universalist principles and values, it is ok to understand the behavior (not ourselves, but the behavior) as evil, or wrong, or bad.

And then what? We should … well… shouldn’t we stop it? Take responsibility; apologize; reach out to another; take positive, restoring action…. Restorative justice…. as so powerfully emergent in the South African experience of the Truth and Reconciliation process.

With Barrows Dunham, we can in faith say,

… the struggle deepens…{and}
Since evil abides and good does not yet prosper,
Let us gather what strength we have, what confidence and valor,
That our small victories may end in triumph….

A related question, about human responsibility and human nature:

When I think of all the atrocities committed by mankind throughout the ages, I ask myself what is mankind? Do we consist mainly of sophisticated savages?

My own perspective is that we are filled with potential for both good and evil, and despite all the atrocities, there is an arc of decreasing violence through the history of our civilizations. Harvard psychologist Stephen Pinker, whom I spoke about a few months ago, in a thoroughly documented, provocative and compelling argument, makes this case in his book The Better Angels of our Nature.

Certainly, the reptilian part of our brain is preoccupied with fight or flight responses… too often to fight… and this undergirds aggression. Nonetheless, what Stephen Pinker calls the “escalator of reason” has been and continues to be a powerful force in the overall decline in human violence, along with our innate sense of empathy, moral codes and self-control.

Two more questions… the first is another vast topic:

My question is Pilate’s. What is truth? This is something with which I have struggled in my life. Thanks.
For me, the question reflects some of the slippery dimensions of our lives. To be sure, there are objective facts. Some things happened, like the Holocaust; some have not, like President Obama being born in Kenya.

Yet, agreeing upon the facts does not always happen. Peter Benchley, author of the novel *Jaws*, wrote: “*Jaws* was entirely a fiction…. Sharks do not target humans, and certainly don’t hold grudges. There’s no such thing as a rogue man-eater shark with a taste for human flesh. In fact, sharks rarely take more than one bite out of people, because we’re so lean and unappetizing to them.” Benchley became a shark protectionist and was “incredulous that the public couldn’t distinguish fiction from truth.” (*Zip Lines…*, Rzepka, 53)

Psychologist Howard Gardner reports studies indicating how susceptible we are to other people’s opinions, so much so that we embrace falsehoods with alacrity, at times against the evidence of our senses and minds. (22) And sadly, too much of political discourse trends toward truthiness, as comedian Stephen Colbert has helped us understand.

Truth also raises questions of
- historical subjectivity and relativism,
- concerns about socially constructed truths (like many religions) that may not be objective factually,
- post-modern analysis that reminds us that history is written by the powerful, and
- partial truths…

All this *complexifies* truth, yet truth vs. falsehood remains something to pursue, just as we affirm as Unitarian Universalists when we affirm “the free and responsible search for truth.” This questing spirit includes faith that we can expand in knowledge and wisdom, with truths that guide us, perhaps not final truths… but evolving truth.

I’ll have to take this up in detail at another time, and for now, I commend to you Howard Gardner’s *Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed*, which acknowledges certain complexities and different truths in different domains or fields. Still he argues we humans are showing progress in that we are drawing “truer pictures of the world than those who came before us”… {we are} “moving steadily in the right direction.”(37) Nor, as he reminds us, is everyone’s conclusion as valid as anyone else’s (148).… Truth, it must be made clear, is not a question of bias or gut instinct; it consists of carefully-arrived-at conclusions on the basis of cool and consistent review of the evidence.” (153)

Finally, to paraphrase a long question, like linguist Noam Chomsky’s description of “an innate universal grammar” behind all languages, “is it possible that there exists an innate, universal religious or spiritual notion that similarly is triggered by experience
producing many religions? Could this possibly explain why religion survives the incredible advance of reason and science?”

This brings me back to the Transcendentalists. I do believe there is an innate, universal religious sensibility… spiritual aliveness that awaits us… an innate universal possibility. There are human intuitions of connection… in the mystics to be sure, or in the luminous beauty of love… but also the ordinary experiences of wonder, awe, majesty, which then get ritualized… or not, and sometimes become organized religions. With stories added, or poetic mythologies, or heroes and moral exemplars, much is positive, but also there may be creeds or dogmas that unfortunately too often become rigid, even if comforting….

Or, as in our tradition, stories, heroes, and rituals are open-ended… inclusive… every expanding to help us grow our souls in different seasons of our lives.

It does seem as if one goal of religion has often been security or comfort or receiving God’s favor or rewards…. These are human needs, which we sometimes project into an often wild, rambunctious and wounding world… with the result that some religions sometimes propitiate, beg, or seem childish….

Yet also, at the very best, in some of the religious paths, like ours for me, we find
- comfort in service to others,
- security in embracing Life’s unruliness, and
- rewards in embracing the universal impulse toward compassion.

Religious historian and guide, Karen Armstrong, for one, argues for the universality of compassion in her book the 12 Steps to a Compassionate Life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed the innate spiritual sense over and over again…. And that is one of the good things we Unitarian Universalists continue to affirm again and again… unities and universals, one family of humanity…. Our obligations to each other… salvation by compassion rather than creeds…, compassion transcending creeds.

For possible summer reading, I commend to you Paul Harding’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel from 2009. It is titled Tinkers, and the narrator at one point describes the goal of his minister father – the goal for all his father’s sermons: "The goal is: “the deep and secret yes.”" Or perhaps you want to join Billy Collin’s sages named “Wah-hoo” and “Ye-hah” “whose delight in the smallest things … [can] hardly be restrained” … also part of “the deep and secret yes.”

Where we here take flight in our faith differs from almost all other pots for the religious seed within each of us…. Where we soar is risk-taking… being open to new ideas… New adventures… Thinking clearly…. Seeking the truth…. Living the
questions... Accepting differences as opportunities for growth... Telling our stories, listening, really listening to others in wounds and wonder.... Walking together... laughing together... crying... and helping each other up when we fall, and holding hands and sharing somehow amid the craziness of it all... sharing “the deep and secret yes”... within ourselves and within the mystery of this glorious Life and Creation.

Our bittersweet lives, embracing the questions, living into our own answers, and our curious quest to serve and build community....

Finally this morning, as we embrace the questions and live into our answers, I leave you words of the poet Mary Oliver:

What I loved in the beginning, I think, was mostly myself.
Never mind that I had to, since somebody had to.
That was many years ago...

... I have become the child of the clouds, and of hope....

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?
Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.


“Love yourself: Then forget it. Then, love the world.”