

**“Yes to Life”
A Sermon by Rev, Laura Cavicchio**

March 29, 2009
Unitarian Universalist Church in Wakefield

READING: “The Invitation” by Oriah Mountain Dreamer

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living
I want to know what you ache for
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.
It doesn't interest me how old you are
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool
for love
for your dreams
for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon...
I want to know if you have touched

the center of your own sorrow
if you have been opened by life's betrayals
or have become shriveled and closed
from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain
mine or your own
without moving to hide it
or fade it
or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy
mine or your own

if you can dance...
and let the ecstasy fill you...

without cautioning us to
be careful
be realistic
to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true...

I want to know if you can live with failure
yours and mine
and still stand on the edge of the lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon,
"Yes."

It doesn't interest me
to know where you live or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up
after a night of grief and despair
weary and bruised to the bone
and do what needs to be done
to feed the children....

I want to know if you will stand
in the center of the fire
with me
and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me [who you know] or where or what
you have studied.
I want to know what sustains you

from the inside
when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone
with yourself
and if you truly like the company you keep
in the empty moments. So ends the reading.

SERMON HYMN: #6 “Just as Long as I Have Breath

SERMON: “Yes to Life” Rev. Laura Cavicchio

“If they ask what I did well, tell them I said ‘Yes’ to life”. For me, the words sing like an epitaph to the life well-lived. They recall me to a time in my ministry when I facilitated an adult enrichment class called Living with Dying. One of the exercises was for everyone in the course to write their own obituary. It is one way of asking yourself – in very concrete terms, how you want to be remembered. Which then begs the obvious “BIG” questions of life -- “Who am I”? “Why am I here”? “What really matters?” I think of Mary Oliver’s well known question at the end of her poem, “The Summer’s Day” in which she point blank asks the reader, “*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*”

Forrester Church, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of All Souls in New York City, has written, “*Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. We are not the animal with tools or the animal with language, we are the religious animal. We know that we must die, and therefore we question what life means.*” (p.5 Life Lines) He goes on to say: “*The purpose of religion is to get a life before we die; to find a center, a center that will hold.*” (F. Church, source unknown)
This is one of the fundamental tasks of religion and our religious lives.

I love that idea – that religion, at its most basic, is about finding a center, a center that will hold. I think it has something to do with saying Yes to life, which is the subject of this sermon. This morning, I am preaching about the word “Yes” with a capital Y. We can say yes to a lot of things, many of which may not serve our true selves or our best interests; that do not support right relationship, that simply are not wise choices, or positive examples for others in our lives.

I am talking about the kind of Yes that is empowering and true in the ways of ultimate good. That affirms that we are part of Creation’s great yes! That is found in the still small voice, and the spark of the divine within us. That calls us to love one another and the stranger as we love ourselves. The Yes that is Love itself.

What we say yes to is another way of saying what we trust in, or put our faith in that is at the center of what holds and sustains us in life-giving ways ~ especially when life demands much of us, when we are most challenged.

In my chaplaincy at Beverly hospital, I visit with folks getting treatment for cancer in the Chemotherapy and Oncology Clinic. Some days, I sit with the folks who choose the treatment chairs by the large, light-filled windows that span one side of the room. Some call it their ‘sun bath’. They tell me their stories, eyes filled sometimes with tears, sometimes with acceptance, sometimes with stoicism or determination or hope, sometimes with gratitude for each day.

Some folks speak of their faith, others do not. But whatever framework or language we may subscribe to, I believe that it is only by saying ‘Yes’ that we navigate life in all its seasons, with its inevitable peaks and valleys, change, loss, decline, and growth. I know my own life has been a series of awakenings and of deaths; of faith lost, altered and found; of grief and reconciliation, brokenness and binding up, over and over

again.

The beloved UU minister Max Coots wrote this in his wonderful book *Seasons of the Self*:

“Death is not one thing, one time, for everyone,

doled out like bargains one to one.

Too many things and times and places die,

for me to be deceived by those

who fear that final time,

For me to think that death comes only

in the Wintertime, or life in Spring. (p. 61)

In the face of these many deaths of the self and the things we love, there are times when saying ‘Yes’ is an act of radical courage, or a prayer audible only in the heart that continues through all adversity, to beat and to love. I once asked a UU parishioner -- a woman with stage 3 breast cancer – what she thought it means to say ‘yes’ to life. She told me about her high power job, how she worked constantly. When she was diagnosed she quit that job and put all her energy into her treatment and living her life, though she struggled at the time with depression. She told me:

“Saying yes to life means getting out of bed in the morning. It means finding what works for you even when it’s hard and you think you have lost yourself. It’s going on when you don’t know who you are anymore. Saying yes to life – sometimes it’s just breathing; sometimes it’s taking a walk in the woods. I believe in the woods. That is ‘yes’ to life.”

I think this dear woman’s words hold truth for any of us in our daily lives – in times of health or not. There is so much that pushes and pulls at us or keeps us up at

night – worries about our own lives or health, or those we love -- fears for our country, the future, this economy – our jobs or retirement funds, our homes, our children’s wellbeing. In times like these, I think it helps to be recalled to what for us is at the center that we hold on to, which as I noted earlier is one of the tasks of our religious lives.

One simple way of saying “yes’ every day is to begin to see even the most ordinary of things as an act of ‘Yes’: getting out of bed in the morning, greeting the day, noticing our breathing, walking in the woods; doing the smallest of things with attention and with gratitude. Noticing what gives meaning for us that is right there in front of us, in the here and now of our lives.

This woman said “I believe in the woods; that is ‘yes’ to life.” Despite her many losses, the trees were the ‘yes’ that affirmed the on-going goodness and value of life and her place within it.

In a poem called “Lost” David Wagoner writes, [in part]:

“Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you....

Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.”

I think that another way to say ‘Yes’ to life is to stand still, and to listen, listen deeply for what finds you. To listen for what in your life says ‘Yes’ to you. This is an important distinction. For saying yes to life is also to pay attention to what in life says

Yes to you. This paying attention, I believe, is a form of gratitude. Gratitude as a regular practice, or discipline.

Studies on happiness have actually documented that people who keep a gratitude journal experience increased well-being over time. It can be as simple as having a notebook in which each evening before going to bed you write down three things you feel grateful for. You can add a sentence to elaborate if you like, but the important thing is to notice -- to summon, recall, and record what is meaningful and worthy of thanksgiving in your life, and to do it every day.

The power of such habitual practices is that they build over time, becoming part of us. We internalize them and our perception of whatever is at the center of the practice – in this case, gratitude, becomes magnified. So that more and more we see the world and ourselves through that lens. That is why, over time, people who practice gratitude report feeling increased satisfaction, connectedness, and hopefulness in their lives.

Life asks a lot of us. In a poem called "Self Portrait" David Whyte asks these questions:

I want to know if you belong -- or feel abandoned;

If you know despair

Or can see it in others.

I want to know

If you are prepared to live in the world

With its harsh need to change you;

If you can look back with firm eyes

Saying "this is where I stand."

I want to know if you know how to melt
Into that fierce heat of living
Falling toward the center of your longing..."

These are questions at the heart of "The Invitation", our reading this morning. According to her own commentary, the author wrote it after attending a party at which she answered and asked the usual questions: what do you do for a living? How do you know the host? Where did you study? She came away familiar, hollow feeling of having gone through the motions, but not connecting. She explains:

"Using a writing exercise given to me by the poet David Whyte, I wrote about the party conversations, what really did not interest me and what I really did want to know about the others, about myself...As the words flowed, I recognized a voice that has always been with me: the voice that passionately seeks life's purpose; the voice of the tired heart that longs for real intimacy and deep rest; the voice that asks me to be fully present with it all – the pain and the joy, the beauty and the sorrow, the inner silence and the noise of the world..."

In 'The Invitation' I wrote what I need to remember, what I need to hear again and again: that life is full of beauty and pain; that the world will break your heart and heal it, over and over, if you let it, and that letting it do both is the only way to live fully; that we are not alone but deeply connected to that which creates and sustains all life."

We have all seen people go through critical illness, loss of a job or a relationship, a serious accident, the death of a loved one, or experienced some of these things ourselves. People do go on to find their way to 'Yes' – often a much different 'yes' than what they expected. But for which they feel grateful and gratified all the same. There

can be in every loss or ending the seed of the new, of transformation, or another way of being. To deny what changes us is to deny ourselves. And it is to deny the very nature of life.

I like the practice of curiosity, or inquisitiveness at the heart of the Whyte and Mountain Dreamer poems. They ask difficult questions, questions that by their example lead us to ask our own – which is another task of religion. Questions that provoke us to look at ourselves. To sort out our values and priorities. To grow as more whole and trusting human beings as we accept with gratitude the gift of life -- with all its wrappings and ribbons, the pain, the uncertainty, the grace and the joy. Religion helps us to witness, to remember, to bless, and to celebrate all of life's passages, beginnings and endings.

Our culture teaches us to define ourselves by exterior things – our work, our accomplishments, our possessions – or what we perceive to be the lack of them.

I think it is important to notice what is at the center of how we know and define ourselves and our purpose and where the Yes is in that. As a minister, I ask myself this question a lot.

It is ultimately about relationship. As my friend and colleague, the Rev. Marie Tulin has written: “Yes is not a word we say to a rock; it is lived out in relationship to a living other. ‘Yes to life’, Yes to love” “Yes to the plant re-emerging in another spring, ‘yes’ to recovery from addiction; “yes’ to valuing life lived free from abuse. ‘Yes’ to conceiving a child, or ‘yes’ to acknowledging reasons not to. And when the time comes, even ‘yes’ to the release of death.” [from her sermon “The Secret Life of Faith”]

I believe we say yes with the affirmation that we are not alone, but deeply connected to one another. I believe we say yes in community, particularly, Unitarian

Universalist religious community. Being in a faith community is being a part of the holy fabric of life. It is being a part of a living, breathing whole where religious personhood and our spiritual truths and values can flower and be nurtured. It is carrying the light of liberal faith to the next generation. It is in the joys and concerns you share and your chalice lighting words, and the sacred music you make. It is looking around the sanctuary and seeing people standing up together in prayerful gratitude.

As a church, you are here to be a place of invitation – to incarnate the Yes of life in beloved community and to put your faith into action. You are here to provide the guidance and care that equips people through all the cycles of life – especially in illness, crisis, pain, and loss – to continue to say ‘Yes’ in meaningful ways, large and small – to life. Church is a place to affirm all that life is, where we strive not to be perfect, but to realize our best, and true selves.

A place to find our center – a center that will hold.

So may it be, amen.

CLOSING WORDS

My friends,
Let us with our lives
And with our love
Say ‘Yes’ to life.
For when we say ‘Yes’ to life,
Life says ‘Yes’ to us.
Go in peace.