

The Color Orange¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Look to this day! Attributed to Kalidasa

Look to this day!

For it is life, the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the verities

and realities of your existence:

The bliss of growth, The glory of action,

The splendor of beauty;

For yesterday is but a dream,

And tomorrow is only a vision;

But today, well lived, makes every yesterday

A dream of happiness

And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore to this day.

Lesson For All Ages

Good luck? Bad luck?

I want to tell you a traditional Chinese story, and some of you may have heard this story before, but I think it bears repeating. There was an old farmer whose horse escaped into the hills. When his neighbors learned about his horse running off, they came by to sympathize: We're so sorry your horse escaped, what bad luck for you!

But the farmer replied, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

The next day, the horse returned, and along with the horse came a beautiful wild stallion. This time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck.

His reply was, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

Then, the farmer's son went out to tame the stallion, but of course, since it was a wild stallion it tossed and turned and bucked when the young man got onto his back. The farmer's son fell off and broke his leg. Once again the neighbors came by and everyone thought this was very bad luck.

But the farmer again replied, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

Two weeks later, the army marched into the village and they forced all the young men in the village to join the army. When they saw the farmer's son with his broken leg, they let him off.

Now was that good luck or bad luck? Who knows?

When things happen in our life, we don't always know how it will turn out. Sometimes the things we think are bad luck, turn out to be good. Sometimes the mistakes turn out to be the best things that happen to us. So we should never give up.

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*Readings: Excerpt from the novel, Jayber Crow, by Wendall Berry*²

If you could do it, I suppose it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line—
...But that is not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been
wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circle or a
doubling back. Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had
my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of
mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I have deserved. Often my fairest
hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for
a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led—make
of that what you will.

*Excerpt from the reading, “Last Night, As I Was Sleeping” by Antonio Machado (Translated by
Robert Bly)*³

...Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt -- marvellous error! --
that I had a beehive here inside my heart
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey from my old failures. ...

Sermon

Every year near my birthday the day lilies begin to bloom. There is a glorious riot of
orange color, day after day. It is the color of fire, the color of warning, a color that grabs your
attention. Orange was never a color I could bear too much of. I can only manage to wear this
dress once or twice a year, without feeling too bright. Usually I am too shy to be so orange. But
I saw this dress on a street vendor’s cart in the summer of 1999, shortly after my ordination as a
UU minister, shortly after a search committee had invited me to interview for my first position.
In that time of unexpected blessings, I bought the dress and wore it the Sunday I was called to
my first ministry.

The color orange reminds me of the story of the burning bush that changed the life of
Moses. He may have been perfectly happy being a simple shepherd with his wife and children in
Hebron. But suddenly he catches sight of a bright orange flame leaping out of a bush, burning
but not consuming the bush. It caught his attention. Then the voice of God told him to take off
his shoes, for he was standing on holy ground. God directed him to become the leader of the
Hebrew slaves, and to take them out of Egypt. His former way of life was burnt up, and another
life opened. You have to watch out for the color orange.

I never expected to have a call to be a minister. I grew up Catholic. There were no
Catholic women priests when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life, and there are
none now. Women in ministry are still a rare phenomenon. Among UU ministers, over 50% are
now women but Unitarian Universalism is unique in that proportion. Other denominations are
far behind us.

² Excerpt from the reading, from *Jayber Crow*, p. 133.

³ From *Times Alone: Selected Poems by Antonio Machado*, translated by Robert Bly.

Every year during the ministry days of the UU General Assembly, there is a worship service to honor ministers who have been ordained 25 or 50 years. Sometimes those services make me sad, because I imagine how unlikely it is that I will ever get to the 50-year mark. I was ordained a UU minister on June 20, 1999 in Belmont, Massachusetts at the age of 46. I won't even reach the 25-year mark until the age of 71.

When I was in college, I was a devout Catholic, and I had many male classmates who were seminarians preparing for the Catholic priesthood. The ones who finished were ordained in 1979. Sometimes I look back and wonder if that would have been the year I was ordained, if I had been a man, or if women were allowed to be priests. 1979 was 30 years ago. Instead, 1979 was the year I became a feminist.

It all started with a mistake. There was a large protest against nuclear weapons at an arms bazaar in Chicago, and a small group of us decided to say the *Our Father* as part of our peace witness. One of the women in our group felt she couldn't join in because of that, though I didn't hear about it until later. Even then, I just didn't understand why a woman would be offended by that prayer. She challenged me to read Mary Daly's book, *Beyond God the Father*.⁴ That was when I encountered the burning bush that turned my life around.

It seems strange to say that a book could have that much influence. But perhaps I should say it was the stories in the book. Perhaps I should say it was the stories of the burning of the witches. The color orange again, the color of fire. That got my attention and opened my eyes. I woke up to the horrors that had been done to women over many centuries by the Catholic Church. The burning of the witches was only part of it. The scholars didn't know the numbers, was it 30,000 women, or several million? How many pillars of fire burning and consuming, not wood and underbrush, but flesh and blood?

Our life journeys don't always proceed as we imagine they will go. We are shaped and directed by the rocks that fall into the creek bed. This was a big rock, and the river of my life got turned around. Perhaps it should have seemed like a welcome liberation, but at first I felt broken and betrayed by my spiritual community. In June of that year, I was invited to my friend's ordination, and instead a small group of us held a protest outside the church. Not against my friend—he didn't mind that we were there, because he too was unhappy that only men could be priests. But it was a beginning of finding a voice to say something is broken here in this church: this is a mistake.

In 1979, I felt like the Hebrew slaves out in the desert, following a pillar of orange fire, not sure where they were supposed to be going, or how they were going to get there. The father God who had been at the center of my life was not so powerful or benevolent as I had imagined. I felt like I had lost my footing and leapt out into the emptiness of space.

Daniel Dafoe reflected, "How frequently in the course of our lives the evil which in itself we shun, and which when we fall into it is the most dreadful to us, is oftentimes the very means or door of our deliverance." Looking back from the perspective of thirty years, I can see that 1979 was the beginning of a new journey of coming alive and growing into wholeness.

⁴ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, (Beacon Press, 1973)

As the Spanish poet Machado might frame it, it was a “-- marvellous error! – ... a spring was breaking out in my heart. I said: along which secret aqueduct/ Oh water, are you coming to me, water of a new life that I have never drunk?”⁵

In 1979, my spirituality was transformed and linked in a new way with the work for justice and equality and liberation. The door of my Catholic community was slammed shut, but another door opened into a whole new life. I was touched by grace. So, now I think that perhaps 1979 *was* my spiritual ordination after all, and this weekend *has been* the 30th anniversary of my journey of ministry.

Each of us lives a life filled with events that we cannot foresee or control. Those events shape us and direct the meanings that our lives must fulfill. Think about the story of your own life. The UU author and humanist Kurt Vonnegut used to say that he wrote no minor characters into his novels: each character was fully developed. Just so, there are no minor characters in life—each of us has a story that means something. You are the star of your life story. We live our lives forward, but we make sense of them in reverse. When you look back on your life story, can you identify the turning points? Were there events that started out as mistakes, but then brought you onto a new path of meaning?

What I have learned from the so-called mistakes in my life is that they were often the very place where life got deeper and more wondrous, where new adventures began, and miracles blossomed. Our lives always offer us more than we can plan or imagine. The poet David Whyte, wrote,

In that first hardly noticed moment in which you wake...
There is a small opening into the day
which closes the moment you begin your plans.
What you can plan is too small for you to live.⁶

He doesn't mean that we should have no plans. Part of being human is to make choices, and to carry them through. We try to live by our values, and develop and share our talents. We make promises and try to build our dreams. But we cannot control the outcome of our work. We get into trouble if we become too attached to our planning.

I have learned this through my own experience. And yet, even so, I am amazed that I still find within me an impulse to try to control what happens, or to try to be perfect, or to judge what has happened as good or bad. I am like the neighbors of the Chinese farmer whose horse escaped into the hills. Of course it seemed like bad luck. But the farmer had the wisdom to wait and see. "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

We all have to play whatever cards we are dealt. This is not to say that all mistakes are good for us, or that there are no tragedies—life is full of tragedy. It is tragic when death separates us from those we love. It is tragic when illness takes away our ability to work or threatens our very existence. It is tragic when prejudice and greed rob us of opportunity to utilize our talents.

⁵ From “Last Night, As I Was Sleeping” in *Times Alone: Selected Poems by Antonio Machado*, translated by Robert Bly.

⁶David Whyte, “What to Remember When Waking” from *The House of Belonging*.

It is tragic when love breaks apart. It is tragic when addiction robs us of our good relationships. Some mistakes are deadly and destructive.

But life always continues to offer us new possibilities, and new chances. It is only when we close our hearts in regret for what has happened, or when we worry endlessly over what might happen, that we miss the magic. If we cling to worry or regret, we miss the amazing miracles of life here in the present. It is by being fully present to our lives each day that we become most fully alive.

Regret is looking back on the mistakes of our past, and spinning fantasies of “what ifs?” or “if only’s.” We try to redo the past in our minds, to undo the pain. But we cannot redo the past. All we have is this present moment. Rumi sings, “Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again come.” The only choice is the choice before us now.

Worry is like the regret of the future. Again, we’re filling our head with “what ifs?” and “if only’s.” We try to figure out what might happen and plan for any variable. We try to manipulate and orchestrate what other people will do. Or we jump in to do everything ourselves, because others might not do it right. But we cannot control the actions of others, or even the outcome of our own actions. Somehow, what we are asked to do is to embrace our lives, just as they are, the ups and downs of the past, and the unknowns of the future.

Leonard Cohen sings,
Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in.⁷

If there is a creator, some sort of Goddess mother of the world, she certainly doesn’t go around correcting all the errors and mistakes. (Even if sometimes we wish she would.) She seems to me more like a jazz musician, delighting in multiple variations on a theme, highlighting the unexpected riff, delighting in a new rhythm or sound. When an error happens, she lets it unfold, curious about what new things might come into being. She doesn’t try to control the world, but leaves it wide open to the variety and possibility that expands when individual beings are free to act on their own.

For those of you who don’t resonate with the idea of a divine creator, even of the jazz musician variety, you can see the same theme played out in the realm of nature. Evolution was shaped by small errors in the genetic code, combined with chance encounters and the rough and tumble world of survival. Some of the errors disappeared, but others proved more successful than their originators. Who can say which ones will be lucky?

Joy Harjo wrote, “There is no poetry where there are no mistakes.” If I can for one moment let go of the lens of judging everything as right or wrong, as perfect or imperfect, the world opens up in beauty. If I can let go of regret and worry, I am free to see that beauty.

⁷ Leonard Cohen, “Anthem” on his album *The Future*, 1992.

Every year during the second week of May the bright orange Baltimore orioles return to our back yard. They sing in the trees, and if we put out orange slices on our outside table, they will come right outside our window to sip the sweet pulp. Why do they like oranges? I don't know. But life is like that. It surprises us with the color orange. We delight in the brightness of the orioles, and they delight in the sweetness of the fruit.

You never can tell what the color orange will bring. A burning bush that calls us to a new life. A moment of beauty and sweetness. Good luck, bad luck—who knows? Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”

So be it.

Meditation

I invite you into a time of meditation.

I invite you to think about one regret that you are holding onto... one mistake from your past that haunts you. And let go of it for just one day, today.

I invite you to think about one worry that you are holding onto ... one concern about the future that keeps you fearful. And let go of it for just one day, today.

For just one day, let go of trying to be perfect, live as if there may be magic in the world, live as if some beauty might surprise you just around the corner.

Sabbatical Blessing

Leader: This is our last Sunday of our regular church season. During the summer, we gather in a smaller group each Sunday at 10 a.m., but this is a kind of leave-taking Sunday for our larger community. Next September, Myke will begin a four month sabbatical. So today we want to close our service by wishing Myke well for her sabbatical time and offering blessings to each other.

Myke: I am thankful for my ministry with you and the gift of this time you have given me for spiritual and professional renewal. When I was installed as your minister, you gifted me with this stole that I wear. Since I am taking a time away from direct ministry, I ask that you minister to each other while I am away. I give this stole to you now to keep as a symbol of the ministry which we share, and which always continues.

Leader & Congregation: We will hold steady to our ministry with each other, and to our mission of love and care. We will cherish our diversity, welcome each visitor, and offer respect and compassion to all.

Myke: I know you will, for I have witnessed your great gifts of love and care. I am also leaving you a bowl of polished river stones, for each of you to keep and to carry in your pockets—just in case you need a reminder now and then of the flowing River of Life that carries us all, and the sureness of our values.

Congregation: May you be filled with a light spirit as you study, visit new surroundings, and journey inward for new insights and renewal. May you experience the gift of spiritual growth in your journey.

Myke: May you, too, grow in new ways. May you find new strengths and connections with each other.

Cong: We send you with our blessing. We will keep you in our hearts, knowing that you are part of us, and we part of you. We hope that you return renewed and energized for our shared ministry.

Myke: I go seeking those gifts, and I will always keep you in my heart. I look forward to my return to you, and hope for you growth and blessings during our time apart.

Leader: May this time apart be as refreshing and revitalizing to you as your cherished swims in the ocean. May it provide the calm and serenity of an evening dip in a quiet lake. As you leave, take our love with you, and let it be the gentle current supporting you, moving you to new places, and bringing you home.

All: Blessed Be!

Closing Words

Myke: Now let us rise and all join hands, for our closing words:

Leader: Let us embrace the adventure of each day, awake to its mystery and magic.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.